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University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu
The Mongols and Nomadic Identity
The Case of the Kitans in China
Michal Biran

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, and contributed to the Kitan assimilation in China more than "the cohesive force of the Chinese nation" 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. Fascinating as it may be, this phenomenon has yet to attract a thorough investigation. 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 滿 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 Türk 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, Aboji 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, Aboji founded the Liao 漢 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 myths, 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 小, a clan of Uighur origin (with its subclans of Shuli 萨里 and Yaolu 耶律) 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 fore-
fathers migrated to Mongolia. Kitan rule in this realm, especially the unpre-
cedented 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 *Kitai* became the designation
for north China. Moreover, the word *Cathay*—the term for China in med-
eval Europe as well as Western and Central Asia—derived from the ethnic
affiliation (*Kitai*) 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 out-
side 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 re-
mained in north China under the rule of the Jurchen Jin (*Jin*) 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 西遼) 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 acknow-
ledge 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
deserter 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 lan-
guage 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 齊 (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 be-
fore 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 (mengyan maoke 無言謀克) 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
召木. 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 slaugh-
ters and population transfers to the east. These heavy-handed measures
were accompanied by acculturation programs. In the early thirteenth cen-
tury, 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 oppor-
tunity to exact their revenge against the Jin.10

In the meantime, the Qara Khitai managed to build a powerful em-
pire 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 Moun-
tains in northeastern Xinjiang. Until 1173, the state's borders ran even fur-
ther 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 ap-
preciable 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 rela-
tive 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 spices 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. In fact, recent archaeological discoveries and philological research suggest that the Kitan character of the Qara Khitai was more pronounced than previously thought.

**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 Kitan (the Liao Kitans). 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 Mu Ye 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.

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. 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.

The Kitans continued to wax nostalgic for the halcyon days of the Liao and its original center—the land of the pines and deserts (songmu 森木) 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 nunnal 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. 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.

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. 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, Yeli Chucai 耶律楚材, a Kitan from the Jin, collected every bit of information he could find about the Qara Khitai.

On the eve of the Mongol conquest, the Kitans in China found themselves in a unique position. As Rashid al-Din observed, the Kitans were "adjacent to the Mongol nomads, and their language, physiognomy and customs are quite similar." But differently, the two groups shared a resemblance in terms of their nomadic lifestyle, combat tactics, rituals, and language. 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 Ögedei, 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. By so doing, they averted the catastrophe that befell several of their contemporaries—the Tunguts, 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 Yuan shi 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 Ilkhanaate. Some of these individuals are explicitly referred to as Kitans or “Liao people” (Liao ren 濱人), while others have been identified on the basis of their distinctive surnames: Yelü/Yila, Shimo/Shulti, and Xiao. Since the last is also a Chinese surname, if a Xiao is not specifically described as a Kitan or Xiao, s/he was excluded from this survey.

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. 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. Notable exceptions are Yelü Chaucai (1189–1243), Chinggis Khan’s astrologer and Ögedei’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 post-conquest 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. 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. After defeating Jin troops with Mongol help in 1213, his followers (allegedly 600,000 men!) enthroned him as the king of Liao (Liao wang 濱王) in the Kitans’ ancestral land of Liaodong. The new state was called “the Great Liao” (Da Liao 大遼), thereby restoring its name sake 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. 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. 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 順德, 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” (weiliao guo 麻煩國). However, by then, he and his state had lost much of their power. 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 Ögedei 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, Belügei (Bolugetai, 宝魯吉台). In 1233 or 1236, Ögedei formally abolished the Liao entity, adding the Guangning region to Belügei’s appanage. Nevertheless, Liuge’s sons and grandsons continued to serve in the Mongol army and acquired 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.

All the blame for the abolition of the Great Liao cannot be placed entirely on Liuge’s failure to secure an alliance with fellow Kitans, for the consolidation of Ögedei’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 Ögedei 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 Rashid al-Din put it, “was over.” 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, Baqaq Hājib, a scion of the Qara Khitai royal house, founded a Kitan state in Kirmân (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. 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 Öjeüü’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.

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 sharpened Kitan refugees. Many escaped with the Jin court to Kaiyuan in 1214, where they subsequently fought against the Mongols, and a few Kitans migrated to the lands of the Song.\(^{39}\) 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 Yen attended the opening of Transoxania, a position held by his son.\(^{38}\)

At any rate, the prime catalyst of the 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 Ögedei’s reign (1237–1241); the fighting in the Middle East under Hulegu 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 Khatai/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 southerly 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, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangdong, and in Jiangxi.\(^{45}\)

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 Aha and Tuhua originated in Inner Mongolia. Both men joined Temüjin in Mongolia before the Jurchen Nor bardzo (1203) and took part in the early battles against the Jin in north China. Aha accompanied Chinggis Khan to Central Asia and was assigned to administer Transoxania, where he died in 1223. His son Miansige 蒙哥 希吉继承 the post in Samarkand, but returned to China following the Taarib rebellion (1238–1239) and then was appointed as da-rugsbachi (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 賀哥 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 (sister) was a right prime minister, probably in the capital of Dadu (Beijing); Luma 鲁馬, a bittchki (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 tuulun 豐德太子), 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.\(^{46}\)

Aha’s brother, Yelü Tuhua, was in the vanguard of both the first (1211–1214) and second (Mu’ul Glass) waves of Mongol attacks on the Jin. His two sons resided in Shaanxi (陕西) 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 Weijinli 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 (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. Mongudai'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 Tubua and his offspring to be the forefathers of the modern-day Yunnan Kitans. 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.

**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." 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 Yao Li (姚里氏, i.e., "of the Yao clan," a subclan of the Xiao), Liuge's widow and successor. Upon the emperor's return from Central Asia in 1225, Yao Li, 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 sons, Shange 督哥, 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 Khwāzam, 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] Badashu [八燕魯 = Bagatur or Babadar = Brave]. I cannot part with him; let Shange inherit his father's post instead."

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 qurultai or during the Mongols' initial assaults against the Jin, where the Kitans' efforts were particularly valuable. Early defectors from the Jin were treated as nökör (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.

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 Yuanbi, in addition to high standing under the Liao or Jin, if there was any. 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 Özbeg. 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. 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. 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.

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 Yeli Abai a Mongolian wife to compensate him for the Jin's detention of his original family after he crossed over to the Mongols. Shimo Yexian, another early defector, had multiple spouses; a Mongolian, who was his principal wife; a Chinese woman from the Xiao clan (not the Kitan Xiao); and a member of the Kitan Yeli clan. Yexian's son and one of his great-grandsons married Qonggirad Mongols. Yeli Zhu 叶律珠 (1221–1285), the son of Yeli Chucai, had six Mongolian wives (two from Chinggis' Kiyat clan), a Christian spouse (who might
have been also a Mongol), and another of indeterminate ethnicity, though not a Kitan. Two of his sons also took Mongolian wives. Unlike Yexian and Ahai, Zhu eschewed the Kitan custom whereby royal Kitans marry women from the Xian clan.62

All the above does not mean, however, that, at this stage, the Kitans were eager to shed their identity or neglect its Chinese component. However, Yelü Zhu embodies the nuances of “Kitanness” during his age. Besides his six Mongolian wives, Zhu was born in Chinggis Khan’s camp in Central Asia, grew up in Ögedei’s guard in Mongolia, won fame as a rider and archer, and possessed a Mongolian nickname (Tughus, i.e., peacock). Moreover, thanks to his close ties with the khan, he played an important role in selecting the location of the imperial capital, Qaraqorum. His Mongolian bona fides notwithstanding, when Zhu was sent by Möngke to collect land taxes from Yanjing, he issued the following request: “All my ancestors read Confucian books; Confucian scholars (rushi 儒生) dwell on the Central Plain. [Therefore,] I would like to take along my son to Yanjing so he can study with a distinguished teacher.”63 Mongke duly granted Zhu his wish. Both father and son (the latter, Yelü Xiliang 閻裡希安, was born to a Mongol woman and married a Jalayird Mongol) enjoyed illustrious careers in the Yuan civil administration and wrote Chinese literary collections.64 By virtue of such expertise in Chinese language and culture, Kitans served as intermediaries between the Mongols and the Chinese. Many were given administrative positions in China. What is more, quite a few Kitan figures are credited with talking their masters out of destroying Chinese cities.65

It stands to reason that those Kitans who consorted primarily with Mongols, be it their fellow soldiers in the invading armies or their associates in Manchuria and eastern Inner Mongolia (parts of which remained under Mongol rule after the Yuan collapse in 1368), gradually assimilated into Mongol society. A reference from Qubilai’s time (1284) indeed notes that, unlike “ordinary” Kitans (and Jurchens), those “who were born in the northwest and do not speak Chinese” should be treated like Mongols.66 The appearance of the surname Yelü in Mongoljijn and Jiu Uda (areas of Inner Mongolia near the Kitan homeland) indeed reinforces this argument.67 Similarly, the language of the Dagurs (Daurs) — a Mongol-speaking minority currently inhabiting northeast Inner Mongolia and Manchuria — resembles Kitan. According to the Dagurs’ tradition, their ancestors were the progeny of these same Mongolized Kitans.68

From Mongols to Chinese

Once the empire stabilized, and certainly after the conquests, the Mongols were less in need of the Kitans’ above-mentioned services as soldiers and intermediaries, so that their willingness to accept the Kitans (and others) as full-fledged Mongols gradually declined. As a result, the Kitans turned to Chinese society as their target for assimilation. More than anything else, three Mongol policies are responsible for this development: their military reforms; the transfer of Kitans to South China; and, above all, the Kitans’ classification as Hanren (Northern Chinese).

As discussed above, the army played a key role in identity change. While the military indeed constituted a melting pot that forged an imperial identity, especially for those Kitans in the Mongol guards or those scattered among different Mongol units, it concomitantly served as a framework for preserving the ancestral identity of those in Kitan units that remained intact or were commanded by fellow Kitans. In any event, within the framework of Chinggis Khan’s reforms, military units replaced most tribal units as the lodestone of identity.69 Quite a few of the early Kitan leaders of the anti-Jin insurgency joined the Mongols with their retainers, many of whom were probably Kitans. At least at the start, these figures continued to preside over their troops.70 In fact, the modern-day Yunnan Kitans, a group consisting of approximately 150,000 people, claim to descend from the Kitan troops who arrived in the region under the command of Yelü Menggudai, Tuhua’s grandson, in the 1280s.71 Yuan sources also mention several units that featured a massive Kitan presence: naturally “the Kitan army” (Qidan jun 襲丹軍), as Liuge’s troops were sometimes called; the Black army (Hei jun 黑軍), a unit comprised of 12,000 “top soldiers,” which was led by Shimo Yexian and his heirs; and the Jiu army (Jiu jun 九軍, Mongolian Jüyin).72 The literal meaning of jiu is “mixed” or “merged.” Accordingly, the Jiu army consisted of a wide array of ethnicities (including Kitans, Jurchens, Tatars, Tanguts, and Onqugs). Living along and beyond the Jin frontier zone, they worked for the Jurchens as border patrol troops. In essence, the Jiu were comprised of several groups, which were primarily distinguished by their location along the border areas (e.g., the Jiu of the Northwest, etc.). Some of them, Kitans included, rebelled against the Jin as early as 1207, whereas others were incorporated into the Mongol army at various stages of the empire’s conquest of the Jurchen realm.73

At any rate, these units were gradually disbanded. In addition, the lion’s share of the Jiu army was dissolved and its troops were allocated to various Mongol units. For instance, upon defeating the “Juyin troops of the Qara Khidat and the Jurchen” in around 1214, Chinggis Khan divided them among his trusted allies Muqali and Bo’urchu.74 A significant portion of Liuge’s forces eventually underwent a similar process. As already noted, some fifty years later, his descendants would lose their command posts in the army of Guanning (where the Kitan army’s troops had settled). Likewise, the
Black army was dispersed between 1295 and 1311, "for these were days of peace."

In parallel, the standing of the Kitans' hereditary military leaders was compromised by the reforms of Ögedei and, above all, Qubilai. As the conquest of China proceeded, the number of non-Mongols, especially Chinese, in the imperial army swelled. Most of the Kitans were incorporated into the Han army, which Ögedei set up in the aftermath of his victory over the Jin. Nevertheless, some of the hereditary families still fought under the command of Mongol princes. However, after putting down the rebellion of Li Tan, a Chinese military leader who betrayed his new lords in 1262, Qubilai introduced his above-mentioned reform: military and civilian power were separated; the officers of relatives were stripped of their military positions; authority over the conscription of troops and supplies was delegated away from the commanders; and the latter were placed under the direct supervision of imperial guards. In so doing, Qubilai substantially reduced the power of the non-Mongol hereditary lords, Kitans or otherwise.

With the end of the conquest, the shared Mongol–Kitan military experience was significantly reduced. Following the defeat of the Song, the empire transferred its Mongol troops back to the north and stationed units of the Han army and the newly conquered army (Song troops) in the south. By then, most of the Kitans already belonged to the Han army, so that many were garrisoned in south China, especially Jiangnan, where they could not practice nomadism. The steady decline of the Yuan army between the late thirteenth century and early to mid-fourteenth century further eroded the Kitans' military roles and diminished their contact with the Mongol brass. From Qubilai's time onward, the symbiosis between the Kitans and Mongols in the imperial army steadily gave way to a Kitan–Chinese bond.

The Mongols transferred not only military personnel to the south, but administrative officials as well. The only relatives that accompanied these officials to their new locations were their nuclear families, and these Kitans rarely came back north. Because south China was inhospitable to nomadism, most of these administrators (like their fellow Kitan soldiers) were forced to give up their nomadic way of life, which was a major facet of their Kitan identity. In addition, this trajectory ratcheted up their contacts with the Chinese, who vastly outnumbered all the other ethnic groups in the south. As demonstrated above, these policies also dispersed Kitan communities, thereby making it difficult for individuals to find a wife from the same background. Consequently, Kitan intermarriage with Han women skyrocketed toward the mid- to late Yuan period.

A no less significant factor in the Kitans' absorption into Chinese society was their classification as Hanren. In the wake of the Song's elimination, the Yuan state divided its subject population into four classes: 1) Mongols; 2) people of various categories (Semures, Tatars; 3) northern or northern Chinese (Hanren 南人); and 4) southerners (Namren 南人). The Kitans were classified as Hanren, together with the Jurchens, the Northern Chinese, and the tribes of Yunnan and Sichuan—all of which fell under the Mongol yoke before Qubilai assumed the throne in 1260. Most of the other steppe peoples, such as the Uighurs, Tunguts, Khwarazmians, and Qipchaqs, fell under the heading of Semures—a more privileged class than that of the Kitan. Put differently, the Kitans' official status was lower than that of the Mongols and Semures. Although this division was not always clear-cut or rigorously enforced, many senior-level posts were now less accessible to Kitans. The state's official hierarchy thus hindered their assimilation into the Mongols' ranks. In fact, from Qubilai's time onward, the number of Kitans that are mentioned in Yuan sources consistently drops.

On the other hand, the Kitans' acceptance into Chinese society was bolstered by their familiarity with the Chinese language and culture as well as the diversity of Mongol-ruled China. Furthermore, their integration was buoyed by their ability to retain Kitan age-old social norms, such as levirate marriages and the elevated status of military officers. Historically speaking, these norms were incompatible with Chinese traditions, but during the Yuan era they were partially cointegrated thanks to Mongol influence. Documented references to the Kitans as filial sons or chaste wives, that is, exemplary Confucians, also attest to their smooth assimilation into Chinese society.

The most conspicuous sign of Kitan inroads into Chinese society was the adoption of local surnames. As opposed to their experience under the Jin, this transpired without any external pressure. Taking a Chinese family name was a shortcut to acceptance into Chinese ranks, for it negated the most glaring sign of otherness—a multi-syllabic surname. In some instances, the name change had more to do with personal circumstances. For example, a Kitan surnamed Shimo was orphaned at the age of seven. Raised by a Chinese family, he took the name of his adoptive parents, Zheng. More often than not, Chinese surnames were chosen with historical or phonetic considerations in mind. The most popular Chinese family name among Kitans was Liu, on account of its vocal similarity to Yeli and its prestige as the surname of Han dynasty emperors. Other popular choices were Li and Wang. While the former was the family name that Tang rulers had conferred upon the elites of their Kitan vassals, Wang literally means king.
or prince, so that it preserved the memory of the Kitans' royal ancestry. Most families with the name Xiao 蕭 simply held on to this appellation, for it is also a Chinese surname. Some Xiao who had changed their name to Shimo or Shuli eventually reverted back to the original. In Yunnan, the name Yelü 余烈 was usually changed to Alu 阿律; thereafter, it was pared down to A 阿, in deference to the first character in the name Aboji, the founder of the Liao dynasty. 86 At the outset of this symbiosis, the Kitan and Chinese family names were often used simultaneously, but the latter eventually supplanted their antecedents. 87 From the standpoint of the present study, the most important trend is that, with the exception of the Yunnan case, the surnames that the Kitans adopted rendered them indistinguishable from the Chinese. In contrast, the Uighurs adopted rare Chinese characters, such as Xie 亜 or Lian 椎, as their Chinese surnames, which continued to serve as ethnic markers. 88 For the Kitans, though, the use of Chinese surnames was both a sign of assimilation and an incentive to continue along this path. It also meant that the Kitans became almost intransitive in late Yuan sources. In fact, Ming sources (1368–1644) treat Kitan identity as a past affiliation that was no longer in force. 89

Two cases of Kitans who retained their ancestral identity until the end of the Yuan era promise to shed light on the multicultural identities of Yuan society. The first is Shimo Yisun 石末宜孫 (d. 1359). His great-grandfather Shimo Yexian was one of the northern Manchurian Kitans who refused to acknowledge Jin rule and wasted no time in switching his allegiance to Chinggis Khan. Yisun inherited his father's Black army post as Yanhai sheng fu wanchu 滇海上副万户 (the vice-commander of 10,000 of the coast), before being transferred to Chuzho 荣州, Zhejiang. In addition to his military pedigree, Yisun was famous for his erudition in all that concerned Chinese culture. He evidently acquired this learning from his father, also known as a general and scholar, who was well versed in, among other things, classics, astronomy, and geography. Moreover, both father and son had a Chinese-style name (zi 子). The younger Shimo was a talented poet, prolific reader, and close friend of preeminent Confucian scholars, not least Song Lian 宋濂 and Liu Ji 劉基. Beginning in 1351, Yisun took an active and highly commended part in repulsing a litany of anti-Yuan insurrections in the Zhejiang and Jiangsu regions. Unlike his Confucian friends, he refused to desert the Yuan for the emergent Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, who eventually founded the Ming dynasty. When Ming troops conquered Chuzhou in 1360, Yisun escaped to Fujian, where he sought to recruit an army with which to retake the city. Upon realizing that his efforts were in vain, the commander returned to Chuzhou where he was killed in defense of the Yuan cause. By virtue of his loyalty, Yisun was honored posthumously by none other than Zhu Yuanzhang himself. 90 In sum, Shimo Yisun was a scholar-general who was proud of his Liao descent, expressed his allegiance to the Mongol cause both in Confucian terms and on the battlefield, and was well-versed in Chinese literary tradition.

These same characteristics also apply to our second example, the Kitan general and poet Shuli Jie 述律傑 (d. 1357), who went by a handful of other names: Shuli Duoezi 述律朵兒只 or 郇爾只, a Kitan surname that he used in concert with a Mongolian first name; Shuli Cundao 述律存道, Shuli Zundao 述律通道, or Shuli Congdao 述律從道, which feature his Chinese-style name (Cundao with the variants Zundao and Congdao) instead of his Chinese or Mongolian first names; and, mostly among Chinese scholars, as Xiao Cundao 尙存道, a purely Chinese name, or in his literary name (hou 侯), Heye 鵷野. In any event, between 1332 and 1340, Jie uncharacteristically changed the family name Shimo back to Shuli, an act that bears witness to abiding feelings for his Kitan origins.

Shuli Jie was the grandson of Shimo Anzhi, another early backer of Chinggis Khan. The family moved to Sichuan during Mongke's reign, and Jie inherited his father's post as commander of 10,000 in Baoning 保寧, Sichuan. Falling under his jurisdiction was the city of Chengdu 蘆都, where he built his home with his Yelü wife, established an academy for classical learning, and assumed responsibility for the imperial examinations that were conducted therein. After years of suppressing rebellions and getting involved in the succession struggles that roiled the area's capital cities of Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan, he was dispatched to the Yunnan in 1340. There he served as commander in chief (Yunnan duowan shuai 云南都元帥) and was subsequently delegated administrative duties as well. While coping with yet another mutiny in 1356 (this time in Shaanxi), Jie perished on the field of battle. Apart for his military career, the Kitan nobleman was a highly regarded poet who was well-versed in Chinese literature. Lastly, Shuli Jie was on close terms with a wide array of distinguished Yuan scholars (e.g., Su Tianzhe 苏天爵, Yu Ji 胡騫, and Huang Jin 黄溍), many of whom referred to him in their writing. 91

While retaining some ancestral characteristics, the late Yuan Kitans were deeply assimilated into Chinese society and culture. Accordingly, the modern-day Yunnan Kitans, who claim to derive from their Yuan namesakes, are presently classified as Hanren in China, rather than a separate minority. 92

CONCLUSION

In summation, the Kitans embraced cultural pluralism long before the rise of Chinggis Khan. Upon first encountering the Mongols, they exhibited a
well-defined identity, with one leg in the Chinese world and another in the steppe nomadic realm. Imperial policies were the key factor behind the direction of Kitan assimilation. While some Kitans were pulled into the Mongols' ranks, most of those in China eventually immersed themselves in the local society. By dissolving the Kitans' state in Manchuria and their special military units; by dispersing Kitan troops in various Mongol military units throughout Eurasia and transferring their civilians all across China; and, last but not least, by classifying them as Hanren instead of Mongols or Semuren, the empire essentially pushed the Kitans into the bosom of the Chinese. However, it bears noting that this development was facilitated by the legitimacy of Kitan social norms due to the penetration of Mongolian customs into Yuan China. All told, these developments eclipsed the Kitans' ethnic identity and led to their full absorption into Chinese society.

On the other side of the steppe, most of these factors—the dissolution of a Kitan political framework, the collectivity's geographical dispersion, and the similarities between Kitan and Mongol social norms—also prompted assimilation into the surrounding sedentary population, as the Kitans were subsumed by the Turco-Iranian Muslims, a fate also shared by the Mongols in West Asia. At any rate, the examples cited throughout this chapter demonstrate that the Mongols were indeed agents of cultural change in all that concerns Kitan identity.

Notes

This study was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 818.03); I would also like to thank Yang Qiao and Andrei Gomulkin for their research assistance.


4. For the fate of several leading Uighur families under the Yuan see M. Brose, Subjects and Masters: Uighurs in the Mongol Empire (Bellingham, WA, 2007).


7. For more on the Qara Khitai see M. Biran, The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World (Cambridge, 2005) and Wei Liangtuo, Xiliao wuzhe shi, Xi Liao shi (Beijing, 2010), pp. 204–383. For the Qara Khitai as meaning the Liao see D. Kane, "The Great Central Liao Kitan State," in Perspectives on the Liao, ed. V. Hansen and P. Louis (New Haven, CT, 2010), p. 7. Professor Kane convincingly suggests that the Mongolian term "qara-khitai" was a derivative of the Kitan "xariqkh{"{i}tai}," the Chinese equivalent for the Liao Kitans. Additionally, this was how the Kitans referred to themselves on the eve of the Jurchen conquest. Since "Qara Khitai" is the word for "black" in Mongolian and Turkish, the name was understood in both the Muslim world and Yuan China as meaning the "Black Kitans." Kane's interpretation implies that the Liao dynasty in China and Yelu Dashi's Central Asian polity went by the same name (both Rashid al-Din and The Secret History of the Mongols indeed used the same name for both entities).


9. S. Song Lian, Yuanzhi (Beijing, 1976), ch. 149, p. 3512; ch. 149, p. 3529; ch. 150, p. 3541 (hereafter cited as YS); and Jagchid, "Kitan Struggles," p. 166.


12. For more on the Kitans in West Asia see Biran, The Empire, passim.


15. For more on the Qara Khitai see Franke, "The Forest People," pp. 405–406; and Tuotuo, Liao shi (Beijing, 1976), ch. 30, pp. 356, 357 (hereafter cited as LS). For more on the Jin Kitans see YS, ch. 149, p. 3512.

16. The Kitans language and scripts have attracted a great deal of scholarly research, especially on the part of Kane, The Kitan Language, passim; and Kane, "The Great Central Liao Kitan State," pp. 5–56. A large-scripted Kitan book was unearthed in Kyrgyzstan and recently published by V. Vazeyte, "Ruloksi"nisa kniga," pp. 130–150.


19. For the place of Chinese culture in the Kitan identity see, inter alia, Feng Ji, et al., Qidan zu wenhua shi (Heilongjiang, 1994); and the references in n. 5 above.

20. For instance, when Qara Khitai spies were spotted in Jin border markets in 1177, the Jurchens closed the markets for three years and exiled the Kitans living in the area to the east. Moreover, they severed the relations with the Torres for presumably allowing these spies to enter the Jin through their lands. See, inter alia, JS, ch. 50, p. 1114; ch. 134, pp. 2870–2871; R. Dunnell, "The Fall of the Xixi Empire," in Ruler from the Steppe, ed. G. Shean and D. Marks (Los Angeles, 1991), pp. 161–162; and Biran, The Empire, p. 57.


23. Rashid al-Din’s assertion to the similarities between the Kitans and Mongols is backed by modern linguistic and other sources. See Biran, The Empire, pp. 145–148; and YS, ch. 149, p. 3151.


25. Yao Jingjun’s index of the Yuanshi (Yuanshi ren ming suoyin [Beijing, 1982]) includes 34 Yelü (p. 94), 20 Yila (p. 175), 35 Shimo (p. 57), and 30 Xiao (p. 282); and de Rachewiltz and May Wang’s Repertoire of Proper Names in Yuan Literary Sources (Taipei, 1998–1996) includes 87 Yelü (vol. 3, p. 2293–2298), 22 Yila (vol. 1, pp. 972–973), 37 Shimo (vol. 2, pp. 1679–1680), 1 Shudi (vol. 4, p. 567), and 151 Xiao (vol. 1, p. 744–746), only three of whom can be positively identified as Kitans or Liao (though more appear as Kitans in the YS). Combined with those mentioned in the Yuanshi and subtracting those appearing in both indexes along with those known by multiple names, our final tally is slightly over 200 names. This includes a few Kitans with other surnames (Wang, Liu, and Li—see below) or without a name.
49. This observation was made by Rashid al-Din, who expounded on this thought: "Now [presumably the early fourteenth century] it has come about that the people of Khi-tai, Jurchen, Nan-liao [i.e., southern China], Uighur, Qipchaq, Turkmen, Qaraq, Qalaj, and all the prisoners and the T'ajik races that have been brought up among the Mongols are also called Mongols. All that assemblage takes pride in calling itself Mongol." Rashid, ed. Al-rithah, vol. 1. pp. 163–164; and Rashid, tr. Thackston, vol. 1. p. 44 (also see Lane's chapter in this volume). Cf. the similar Kitanaiza process that the Chinese underwent during Liao rule; P. Crossley, "Outside In: Power, Identity and the Han Lineage of Jinhao," in Perspectives on the Liao, ed. V. Hansen and F. Louis (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp. 121–155.


51. The Yuanhui text reads Hemi 賀力, which might be referring to Hami in Eastern Xinjiang. I am following Tu Ji, Mengwu shi ji (Taipei, 1962), ch. 31, p. 294, who changed Hemi to Heliji 賀立吉, that is, Qorunbachi—the Mongolian name for Khwarazm. This version dovetails smoothly with the chronological and geographical context. For Qorunbachi as Khwarazm see I. de Rachewiltz, tr. and annot., The Secret History of the Mongols (Leiden, 2014), vol. 2, p. 962.

52. YS, ch. 149, p. 3154. After Yoali Shi explained that, unlike her son Shange, Xuedu was born to Yeli Liuge’s principal wife and thus deserved the post, Chinggis Khan granted her request. Liuge’s family members who accompanied Yoali Shi on her visit remained in the Mongol army.


54. See, inter alia, YS, ch. 146, p. 3455; ch. 149, pp. 3511, 3529, 3532, 3534; ch. 150, pp. 3541, 3554, 3548; ch. 151, pp. 3576, 3578; ch. 152, pp. 3603; ch. 154, pp. 3640; ch. 155, pp. 3645; and YS, ch. 174, p. 4064. This source—the biography of the eminent Confucian Yelü Youshang—only mentions his family’s relation to the Liao royal house.

55. A noteworthy example turns up in the biography of Shimo Mingli, a cook whose family had already joined the Mongols by Chinggis Khan’s time and later served Tolui’s household. Qubilai assigned Mingli to his heir apparent Zhenjin (r. 1243–1285). Some time later, the khan asked his son to choose ten loyal servants who deserved a reward, and Mingli was among them. Qubilai remembered the chef and elevated him to a higher place on the list. Responding to Qubilai’s query, Mingli said that “Mingli’s grandfather Mingli shi 萬立 was served Chinggis Khan, Tolui, and me and my brothers. Where were you people at that time?” YS, ch. 169, p. 3976. Also see Huang Jin, Jinhao xiangxiang wenzu, Sibiu congguan ed., ch. 27, pp. 5ff. (hereafter cited as “Huang Jin”).

56. For instance, Yelu Chucai was called Uru Saqi, “long beard,” by the Mongols; Wang Xun was dubbed Qara Yuanshuai 蒼頭元帥, “the black general-in-chief” (the second word is Chinese) (YS, ch. 149, p. 3535); Yila Nier merited the title Yeke Biliichi, “grand scribe”; YS, ch. 149, p. 3529; both Yelu Xuedu and his brother Shange were promoted to bagatarshabatur (YS, ch. 149, p. 3514, 3515); and the Mongol title of Yeke Noyan (also Yeke Noyan, “grand noble” or “grand commander”) along with the Chinese titles Zongling 宗林 and Taichuan 太順 were conferred upon Yelu Tuhua (YS, ch. 149, p. 3532). Furthermore, every Kitana biography in the Yuanhui contains a wide range of Chinese titles that were imparted to Kitanas.
57. e.g., Yeli Ahai named his elder son Mangutai 乌尔格 (Mon: Mangghudui, "he who is Mongol") (YS, ch. 150, p. 3548), and Mongolian names were popular in the families of Yeli Tuhus, Yeli Liuge, and Shimo Minggan (Minggan itself is a Mongolian name, meaning "a thousand"). As noted, it was common for the same person to have both a Mongolian and Chinese or Kitan names. For instance, Liuge's grandson Shougwons(注 羽囊西) took the name Shula stimulate (i.e., Shira, Mongol for "yellow"); Shimo Yexian was also known as Mangduai (Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 5b); and Tuhus's descendants Tuuenda'er (Tuunenda, a Mongol name) was also known and Mangduai also went by the Chinese names of Yuntong 茵童 and Baojian 貝蒼, respectively (Zhou Qingshu, "Yuan Huanzhou Yelu," pp. 528–532). Also see, inter alia, Feng Jiujin, "Qidan ren xing ming," p. 110; YS, ch. 101, p. 1995; ch. 179, pp. 4156–4157, ch. 197, p. 4446; ch. 200, p. 4492; Yu Xiu, Zhihun Zhenjung zhi, ch. 15, p. 2820; and Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 5b.


59. YS, ch. 150, p. 3548.


61. Huang Jin, ch. 27, pp. 7a–8a.


63. YS, ch. 130, p. 4159; and Yeli Zhu, Shuangxi zuoyin ji, Siku quanshu ed., ch. 2, p. 7a.


65. e.g., YS, ch. 149, pp. 3529, 3548; and Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 5b. The most celebrated example is that of Yeli Chucui, who supposedly persuaded Qogetel not to convert all of north China into pasturage.

66. YS, ch. 13, p. 268.


68. For more on the Dagurs and their connection to the Qidan see, inter alia, Sun Jingji and Sun Hong, Qidan minzhu shi (Guilin, 2009), pp. 267–270; Janhunen, Mandchuria, pp. 144–148; Batubayin et al. (eds.), Daw ur ur xuan ya Qidan lun (Beijing, 2011), passim. That said, the Dagurs are only portrayed as a distinct group in the seventeenth century, and their current status and identity has much to do with China's twentieth-century minority policies.

69. See Biran, Chinggis Khan, pp. 41–42.

70. e.g., Yeli Tuhus and his son defected to the Mongols in 1214, along with 30,000 men (YS, ch. 193, p. 4382); Shimo Aixin, also known as Shimo Xiyian, led 12,000 men over to the empire (ibid., ch. 152, p. 3603); Yila Ni'er joined Chinggis with over a hundred men (ibid., ch. 149, p. 3529); and Wang Xun surrendered on behalf of his 100,000 troops, though those troops, coming from Xun's prefecture, were not necessarily Kitan (ibid., ch. 149, p. 3534).

71. For more on the Yunnan Kitan see Meng Zidong, Yunnan Qidan (Beijing, 1995), passim. Some researchers cast doubt on their "Kinnamness," noting that the lion's share of Menggudai's force was Chinese or, at best, mixed (Zhou Qingshu, "Yuan Huanzhou Ye", pp. 536–540; Sun Jingji and Sun Hong, Qidan minzhu shi, pp. 263–666). That said, it seems plausible that a group in a relatively secluded place like Yunnan, where some nomadism was possible and other Kitan commanders were stationed, would embrace their commander's identity and call themselves Kitan. Whether these same people, if they actually existed, were indeed the forefathers of the modern-day Yunnan Kitan is a different matter.

72. For data on the Kitan army see YS, ch. 98, pp. 2508, 2509; ch. 118, p. 2931; and ch. 149, pp. 3511, 3513; and Hsiao Ch‘i-ch‘ing, Military Establishment, pp. 74, 174. In any event, the Yuanshih's terminology is rather ambiguous. For the Black army see Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 5a; YS, ch. 152, p. 3603; and ch. 150, p. 3542. There are several contradictory accounts regarding the provenance and composition of the Black army. Some believe that it was comprised of retainers, with whom Shimo Xiyian defected to the Mongols. Others claim that it was a unit of elite soldiers who were recruited immediately following the Mongol conquest of Zongdu in 1215 (Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 5a). Lastly, there are scholars who contend that the army mainly consisted of the troops of the Kitan commander Zhang Jie, a defection who subsequently mutinied against his new lord. Jie's insurrection was put down in 1215 by Shimo Xiyian (and other Kitan), who then appropriated the rebel troops (YS, ch. 150, p. 3541).

73. Cai Meibiao, "Jia yi jiu zhi yan bian," Yuanshih Luncong, 2 (1983), pp. 1–22, esp. p. 13f. He also discusses the various Jiu groups. Some of the Kitan commanders that switched over to the Mongols also belonged to this group.


75. Huang Jin, ch. 27, pp. 4b–5a.

76. For more on the Han army see esp. Sun Kekuan, Mengyu Hanjun ji Han wenhua yanjiu (Taipei, 1958).

77. e.g., Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing, Military Establishment, pp. 12–14; Rossabi, among others, examines the rebellion of Li Tan, a Chinese commander in M. Rossabi, Kubilai Khan (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 62–67.


81. For a recent criticism of the perceived wisdom surrounding Yuan classification see Funada Yoshiyuki, "Samaren ya Yuan da zhidu, shushu: Zhongxing tansao Menggu, Semu, Hanren, Nanren huaren de zhidu," \textit{Yuanshi hengsong}, 9 (2004), pp. 162–174. Funada claims that the division was not initiated by the Mongols, but was the hardwork of their Chinese advisers. Moreover, he concludes that it was not tightly kept until the early fourteenth century. The most glaring example that he cites is from the Nanjing gazetteer of 1290 in which both Kitan and Mongols\(^1\) are classified as Semu, another subdivision of northerners (Beiren \(^2\)); the other subdivision of northerners is called Hanren (ibid, p. 174) and Zhang Xuan, \textit{Zizheng jinling xinshi} in \textit{Song-Yuan difang zhi congshu} (Taibei, 1980), vol. 6, pp. 5a–12b. Regardless of the system’s provenance, it was clearly used by the Yuan administration from the 1320s onward. For example, the quotations for examination candidates were divided according to these classifications. Also see the references in n. 80 above.

Concerning senior-level posts, Qubilai, for instance, dismissed the Kitan, Jurchen, and Han \textit{darugushi} (duluhuobu), local commissioners in 1268, but allowed the \textit{semu} to keep their posts; \textit{YS}, ch. 6, p. 118. Other incidents of this sort pertain to the fact that this rule was not always strictly observed. That said, it eventually had an impact on Kitan mobility, inter alia. Also see \textit{YS}, ch. 21, p. 458; ch. 92, p. 2052; and Endicott-West, \textit{Mongolian Rule}, pp. 79–83, 95, including the references therein.

82. Hu Zhiyu, \textit{Zi shan da quanj}, (Taibei, 1983), ch. 16, p. 3. For discussion on the Kitan’s leviratic customs see, inter alia, Wittfogel and Feng, \textit{History of Chinese Society}, pp. 207, 211; and J. Holminger, "Marriage, Kinship and Succession under the Ch’in-Tan Rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125)," \textit{T’oung Pao}, 52 (1986), pp. 44–91. The levirate among the Mongols in Iran is documented in, inter alia, Rashid, ed. Allâzâdah, vol. 3, pp. 96–98, and Rashâd, tr. Thackston, vol. 3, pp. 515–516 (the marriage arrangement of Abâqa Khan). For the complex denouement of leviratic marriage in Yuan China see, inter alia, Bertine Birge, \textit{Levirate Marriage and the Revival of Widow Chastity in Yuan China}, \textit{Asia Major}, 3rd ser., 8/2 (1995), pp. 107–146. The Kirmanid Kitanas also preserved the group’s traditional marriage patterns. Both the dynasty’s founder, Baraqu Haib, and his heir, Qublai Khan, adhered to leviratic custom, marrying the wives of their predecessors. The same can be said for the two Kirmanid queens, Terken Khutun and Padisah Khanun. The latter also took two "indefed" husbands: Ikhan, Abâqa (r. 1265–1282) and then his son Gaikhatu (r. 1291–1294). Leviratic marriages are forbidden according to Islamic law, and women are prohibited from taking a husband from outside the faith. However, since these are Kitan and Mongol norms, the Kirmanid historians depicted both queens as exemplary Muslims. See Biran, \"Kitan Migrations,\" pp. 94–95.

83. For example, \textit{YS}, ch. 197, p. 4443, 4446; ch. 200, p. 4492; and Huang Jin, ch. 27, p. 7a.


86. Feng Jiun, \"Qidan ren xing ming,\" pp. 106–110.

87. See the example of Shulü jue in \textit{Daxin xiaoshuo} below. A much earlier case involves Yelü Chucai, who in his literary collection refers to the same man as both Yila Zichan 靖時察 and Liu Zichun 劉致春 (Yelü Chucai, \textit{Zhan ran jushi wenji} (Beijing, 1986), ch. 2, p. 38, ch. 3, p. 48; ch. 10, p. 231; cited by Feng Jiun, \"Qidan ren xing ming,\" p. 109).

88. For more on the \textit{Uighurs see Bience, Subjects and Masters}, pp. 122–163.

89. See, e.g., Zhang Tingyi, \textit{Ming shi} (Beijing, 1974), ch. 179, p. 4756; ch. 320, pp. 8279, 8280; ch. 328, p. 8504.

90. An account of Shimo Yisan turns up in the \textit{YS}, ch. 188, pp. 4309–4311; also see J. W. Dardess, \textit{Confucianism and Autocracy} (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 117, 124, 133.

91. For more on Shulü Jie see Fang Linggui, \"Yuan Shulü Jie jiaoyou kaihui,\" in \textit{Mengyuan shi jin ruan shi lu huiyi}, ed. Hao Shiyuan and Luo Xianyou (Beijing, 2006), pp. 242–268; Fang Linggui, \"Yuan Shulü Jie Shiji Jiluo,\" in \textit{Yanshi congkan} (Beijing, 2004), pp. 247–274; and Chen Shisong, \"Yanshi Qiyan Shishu mingjiang Shulü Jie shiji,\" \textit{Xingxia shihui kexue}, 2 (1996), pp. 79, 80–86. There is no biography of Shulü Jie in the \textit{Yanshi}, but he does merit a few mentions therein. See, e.g., \textit{YS}, ch. 44, p. 922, and ch. 183, p. 4209. The main sources on Shulü Jie are to be found in the writings of his associates, esp. Yu Ji, \textit{Daxiya}, ch. 10; Chen Lu, \textit{An ya tang ji}, ch. 6; and the Yunnan gazetteer.

92. See Meng Zidong, \textit{Yunnan Qidan,} pasum; and n. 71 above.

93. For the Kitan in Western Asia see Biran, \"Kitan Migrations,\" pp. 95–97.