

Kara-Khitān Khanate (Western Liao)

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The Kara-Khitān Khanate ruled in Central Asia (1124–1218) up to the Mongol conquest. The multicultural empire combined Chinese, Inner-Asian, and Islamic elements, a blend that served as a precedent for Mongol rule. Due to the lack of internal sources, the history of this polity must be culled from a variety of Chinese, Persian, and Arabic sources written mainly by its neighbors, combined with very few archaeological findings.

The dynasty was established by Liao fugitives who escaped from north China when the Liao dynasty (907–1125) was overthrown by the Manchurian Jurchens. Led by a Khitan prince, Yelü Dashi, they chose to migrate westwards, hoping to return subsequently and restore the Liao in its former domains. In a little more than a decade Dashi set up a new empire in Central Asia that was known there as the Kara-Khitān (Qara Khitai; Khitan: the Liao Khitans, not the Black Khitans as previously thought – see Kane 2015) and in China as Xi Liao – the Western Liao. The dynasty persisted for nearly ninety years, and was finally vanquished by the Mongols in 1218.

At its height, after concluding their conquests in 1142, the Kara-Khitān empire stretched from the Oxus River in Uzbekistan to the Altai Mountains on the Chinese–Mongolian border, and until 1175, even further east into the Naiman and the Yenisei Kirghiz territories. The multi-ethnic empire included, besides the Khitans, who constituted but a small minority in their own

domain, Turks (Uyghurs 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 Khitans themselves) as well as flourishing Buddhist, Nestorian, and Jewish communities.

The most striking characteristic of the Kara-Khitans is that they retained their Chinese trappings (symbols of rulership and vassalage; Chinese language) even in Central Asia. These were retained because they contributed to the legitimation of the dynasty among its diverse subjects, including their substantial Muslim population, among which China was closely associated with notions of grandeur and prestige. Moreover, the institutional means embedded in the Chinese–Liao tradition, such as the elevated position of the emperor and the nomination of successors, helped in overcoming one of the most pressing problems in nomadic states – succession struggles.

Despite the retaining of the dynasty's name and the Liao Chinese trappings – as well as the Khitan identity makers, such as language, scripts, shamanic rituals, nomadic way of life, and the high position of women (two out of the dynasty's five emperors were women, who ruled in their own right!) – Kara-Khitān rule was quite different from the original Liao version, mainly in its lesser degree of centralism: most of the Kara-Khitān realm was administered indirectly and in a rather minimalistic way: the local dynasties – most important among them the Eastern and Western Karakhanids and the Gaochang Uyghurs – mainly maintained their rulers, titles, and armies and no permanent Kara-Khitān army was stationed in the subject territories. The subject kingdoms and tribes

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were expected to provide annual taxes and send auxiliary troops when required. In some cases the Kara-Khitans stationed commissioners (Persian: *shihna*, Chinese: *shaojian*) in the subject territories to supervise the tax payments, but other regions (e.g., the vassal Khwarazm) were only expected to submit annual tribute to the Kara-Khitans emissaries or directly to their court. The multi-ethnic and multilingual administration also included Turkic and Persian elements, such as the use of Turkic and Persian languages and titles side by side with Chinese and Khitan. Even the ruler's title, *Gürkhan* (universal khan), was a hybrid Khitan-Turkic title. Despite this, and in sharp contrast to both their predecessors and their successors in Central Asia, throughout their rule the Kara-Khitans did not embrace Islam, the dominant religion in their new environment. Instead they constructed their identity and legitimacy on the combination of the common nomadic political tradition and the prestige of China in Muslim Central Asia.

Most of the Kara-Khitans period was an era of relative stability and prosperity as well as of growing urbanization in Central Asia, despite the rulers' nomadism. This, combined with the Kara-Khitans' broad religious tolerance, their shrewd use of their Chinese and nomadic cultural capital, and their mostly indirect rule, enabled harmonious relations between the Muslim subjects and their infidel rulers and prompted thriving intellectual activity, both religious and scientific. By the late 12th century, however, this balance began to change due to the weakening of the Western Liao royal house and external upheavals. In 1208 the Naiman prince Güchülüg (Kuchlug)

escaped from Chinggis Khan into the Gürkhan's court. The latter – threatened by the rise of his former vassal the Khwarazm shah and the turmoil in Mongolia – welcomed Güchülüg, and gave him his daughter in marriage. In 1211, however, Güchülüg usurped the throne, enforced an anti-Islamic policy, and eventually brought the Mongol troops to Central Asia. In 1218 Chinggis Khan's generals killed Güchülüg and annexed the Kara-Khitans realm into the Mongol Empire. A scion of the royal family, Baraq Hajib, later established a successor Muslim state in Kirman, in southern Iran. The Kara-Khitans of Kirman persisted for nearly another century (1222–1307), as a vassal of the Mongols and then the Ilkhans, who eventually subjugated the province to their direct rule. Kara-Khitans subjects, especially Muslims and Uyghurs, played important roles in the Mongol Empire, and the *shihna* was a precedent for the Mongol governors (*darughachi*).

SEE ALSO: Karakhanid Khanate; Khitan (Liao) Empire; Khwarazmian Empire; Mongol Empire, Great

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