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# A Political Time Rewritten: Revisiting the Founding Year of the Khitan Empire

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## Abstract

Materials dating from the Liao dynasty usually record the founding year of the Khitan Empire as 907; this was done deliberately, rather than it being caused by the negligence of historians. The official history records of the Khitan Empire contain two completely different narratives of the founding year: the account of “Junji Taiyi deity Repeatedly Appearing” from the “Biography of Taizu” in *Liaoshi* reflects the original appearance of the history of the empire foundation period in the first year of the Shence era (916). Other records were reworded by later historians, which caused the contents of these originally clear records to become completely blurred and concealed. This rewriting process may have been completed in the thirteenth year of the Zhongxi era (1044) during Emperor Xingzong’s reign; the records advance Emperor Taizu’s rise to the throne to the year that the Tang dynasty was destroyed. That year was essential in reconstructing the founding history of the Khitan Empire and a narrative showed a strong tendency to orthodoxy in the late Liao dynasty. This article offers further reflection on the portrayal of a political epoch in historical records from a dynamic and productive angle.

## Keywords

Khitan – founding year – Abaoji – Junji Taiyi – political era

## 1 The Origin of the Problem

Not only is the founding year of the Khitan Empire a central issue to scholars of Liao (907–1125) history and of Northern Chinese history in general, it is also

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the focus of a long-term debate. Available literature has always presented a number of different views on this issue, mainly focusing on the first year of the reign of Emperor Taizu of Liao 遼太祖 (i.e. the first year of the Kaiping 開平 era of the Later Liang, 907). The “Taizu ji” 太祖紀 (Biography of Taizu) in *Liaoshi* 遼史 indicates that Yelü Abaoji 耶律阿保機 (r. 907–926) ascended the throne and founded the empire in 907, and he established the new regnal year Shence 神冊 in 916. Books such as *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 or *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 (Records of the Khitan Empire), on the other hand, state that the empire was founded in 916. Following nearly a century of debate and discussion, scholars of Liao history have reached a consensus: Abaoji had become khan in the first year of the Kaiping era, and in the first year of the Shence reign he declared himself emperor and officially established the empire.<sup>1</sup> However, the discussion does not end here. If Abaoji had only become emperor and proceeded to establish the Khitan Empire in the first year of Shence, why does the “Biography of Taizu” in *Liaoshi* set the founding date of the country nine years before that? Liu Pujiang 劉浦江 (1961–2015) believes it is this way because these events happened very long ago and there would have been mistakes in oral accounts of what happened, which then led to inaccuracies in historical records. In my opinion, it is likely that the issue is not this simple.

According to *Liaoshi*, “Abaoji ordered a Khitan script to be created, and in recognition for doing so, Lubugu 魯不古 was given the task of supervising the compiling of the national history records.”<sup>2</sup> This shows that during the reign of Abaoji, specially-assigned persons were already in charge of recording history, which suggests that later generations would not have had to depend completely on oral accounts. The recently discovered Stele of Taizu’s Virtues (*Taizu jigong bei* 太祖紀功德碑)<sup>3</sup> in the Liao Ancestral Mausoleum at Guifu 龜趺 Mountain was erected in the early years of Emperor Taizong’s 太宗 reign (927–947). Most historical events recorded in surviving materials from the Abaoji era are consistent with the current version of *Liaoshi*, which suggests that the way of recording historical events at the time was already quite established. As a key event for any dynasty, the founding year is often linked to the dynasty’s legitimacy and core beliefs, and as such they are an important time politically. I believe that information on the founding year in the Liao dynasty

1 See *Liaoshi* 遼史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), 114. For a review of related academic history, see Liu Pujiang 劉浦江, *Song Liao Jin shi lunji* 宋遼金史論集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 28–30.

2 See *Liaoshi*, 76.1375.

3 See Dong Xinlin 董新林, Tala 塔拉, and Kang Lijun 康立君, “Neimenggu Balin zuoqi Liaodai zuling Guifu shan jianzhu jizhi” 內蒙古巴林左旗遼代祖陵龜趺山建築基址, *Kaogu* 考古, no. 8 (2011), 3–12, 113, 97–98.

records is not a result of negligence, but rather of intentional alteration by historians at the time. This process and its development and background are well worth researching in depth.

The most reliable record on the founding year of the Khitan Empire can be found in “Biography of Taizu” of *Liaoshi*.<sup>4</sup> It clearly states that at the end of the third year of Tianyou 天祐 (906) of the Tang (618–907), the last khan of the Yaonian 遙輦 tribe died, and left an order that Abaoji become the new khan. The next year, Abaoji proclaimed himself emperor, thereby starting a new dynastic era. At the same time, measures were put in place for empress dowagers, empresses, and other honourable titles to be put on record. Era names, however, were not announced. The “Biography of Taizu” adopts this rare method of chronicling without marking era names for the following ten years, resorting instead to calling each year the First Year, Second Year, Third Year, and so forth. It was not until the first year of Shence that an era name emerged, and at that time Abaoji was given his honorary title once more. In the same book, the beginning of the section “Shuo kao” 朔考 of “Lixiangzhi” 曆象志 covers the first ten years of Taizu, and for almost every year the words *yelü yan* 耶律儼 or *yan* 儼 appear, which indicates that the source for this material was *Huangchao shilu* 皇朝實錄 compiled by Yelü Yan at the end of the Liao dynasty. This shows that the practice of not marking era names used in *Liaoshi* comes from official historical records of the Liao dynasty. If we say that Liao historians mistakenly recorded Abaoji’s title incorrectly as emperor while he was still a khan, how can we explain the existence of chronological records without era names and other supporting documentation surrounding this misrepresentation?

Looking at *Liaoshi* in its entirety, it is particularly noteworthy that what is recorded in the “Biography of Taizu” is not an isolated example, but connects to many other records within the book, e.g., in the “Biography of Queen Chunqin” 淳欽皇后傳, “Biography of Yelü Helu” 耶律曷魯傳, and “Biography of Yelü Xiadi” 耶律轄底傳, which all echo one another, forming a systematic historical narrative. The point that the state was founded in the first year of Taizu Abaoji’s reign is consistently made throughout *Liaoshi*, and it then, as one might expect, also emerges in *Huangchao shilu*, the official historical records of the Liao dynasty. This text is clearly the result of careful polishing and planning, with historians highlighting the same point repeatedly in different parts of their records. So, is this historical narrative truly flawless? I have noticed a remark in the “Biography of Taizu” that was previously overlooked, which may shed light onto the original story of Abaoji founding the empire. It is quite different from the above-mentioned, clearly altered chronicle of

4 See *Liaoshi*, 1.2–3, 10–11.

the founding year. The strong contrast between these two texts suggests that studying the issue of the founding year of the Khitan Empire may yet resolve some unanswered questions.

## 2 Evidence for the Founding Year of the Khitan Empire: The Incident of “Junji Taiyi Deity Repeatedly Appearing” Recorded in the “Biography of Taizu”

In the “Biography of Taizu” of *Liaoshi*, there is one such brief but quite intriguing record about the end of the ninth year of Emperor Taizu’s reign (915): “In this year, the Junji Taiyi deity appeared many times, (and Abaoji) issued an order to paint his image.”<sup>5</sup> In the final chapter of the same book, the historians of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) wrote in the *Guoyu jie* 國語解 (Commentary on National Language): “(Junji Taiyi is) the name of the lucky god. In the country upon which the lucky god descends, the monarch may ascend the throne and gain the trust of the whole country, so peace reigns over the land, and the people will enjoy blessings.”<sup>6</sup>

The name “Junji Taiyi deity” (Junji Taiyi *shen* 君基太一神) is found only in this instance in Liao dynasty literature. It refers to one of the ten gods of the Taiyi 太一/乙 system. The so-called Ten Taiyi Deities are Junji Taiyi 君基太一, Chenji Taiyi 臣基太一, Minji Taiyi 民基太一, Wufu Taiyi 五福太一, Tianyi Taiyi 天一太一, Diyi Taiyi 地一太一, Sishen Taiyi 四神太一, Dayou Taiyi 大遊太一, Xiaoyou Taiyi 小遊太一, and Zhifu Taiyi 直符太一. Some of them stand for good and some for evil, and their ways of operating are also all quite different. Each Taiyi is found in a specific area of the sky, which may indicate that the deity of the corresponding geographical location will appear and bring either misfortune or good fortune; this can be predicted through astronomical estimations. The Taiyi’s celestial position is used to check the national affairs of the corresponding geographical area. The trajectory in the sky is not obtained through visual inspection, but rather through mathematical calculations. Because the “Taiyi method” (*Taiyi shi* 太乙式) related to the Ten Taiyi Deities was a theory used to predict good and bad luck in various locations, it could easily cause social unrest; therefore, in the early Tang dynasty, this practice was only allowed within relevant state departments, and its use among ordinary people was prohibited.

5 Ibid., 17.

6 Ibid., 116.1692.

After the An Lushan Rebellion (*Anshi zhiluan* 安史之亂, 755–763), the state's control over the region declined, this ban was lifted, and social instability gave this method the soil and reasons to thrive. In the Late Tang and Five Dynasties (907–960) eras, this gradually became the way of expressing mainstream consciousness, turning into a cohesive regional force and a means of integrating local power, becoming popular to varying degrees across the country.

Existing records on the Ten Deities, the Taiyi system, and its calculation methods are mainly found in *Taiyi jinjing shi jing* 太乙金鏡式經 written by Wang Ximing 王希明 (fl. 723) of the Tang dynasty, *Jingyou Taiyi fuying jing* (景祐) 太乙福應經 written by Yang Weide 楊惟德 (fl. 1054) in the early Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), and the Yuan dynasty document *Taiyi Tongzong baojian* 太乙統宗寶鑑.<sup>7</sup> Based on these three sources, it can be said that in a time of national unity, when Junji Taiyi appears, the emperor should make a show of conciliation in the corresponding location. In a time of national division, however, the image of Junji Taiyi to the separatist regime is a symbol of a ruler, which means the emperor will come from the place where the regime is located. After that, different strategies and measures the emperor implements will result in different outcomes, but the basic tendency is that the emperor will be a good ruler.

Through the calculation methods of Junji Taiyi recorded in these three sources, we can in turn verify the authenticity of the statement about the end of the ninth year of Taizu's reign in the "Biography of Taizu" of *Liaoshi*. The results of this comparison show that, regardless of which method and what kind of divination system is used, Junji Taiyi was far from the region of Khitan at that time.<sup>8</sup> In addition, as mentioned earlier, the theory of the Ten Taiyi Deities is a system entirely based on mathematical reasoning. There are records of the appearance of the Ten Taiyi Deities, but *Liaoshi* claims that "the Junji Taiyi deity repeatedly appeared," and even features an image of this deity, which is inconsistent with other related theories. We can see that this record is by no means the true record of Junji Taiyi's tour to this region but should

7 Wang Ximing 王希明, *Taiyi jinjing shi jing* 太乙金鏡式經, in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 810: 5.891–92; also, Yang Weide 楊惟德, *Jingyou Taiyi fuying jing* (景祐) 太乙福應經, Yingyin Mingshuo Jianshanju chubanshe, 2002), 1061: 14b; also, Xiaoshan Laoren 曉山老人, *Taiyi Tongzong baojian* 太乙統宗寶鑑, in *Xuxiu Siku quanshu*, 1061: 6.443.

8 For the specific calculation process, see Miao Runbo 苗潤博, "Bei gaixie de zhengzhi shijian: zailun Qidan kaiguo niandai wenti" 被改寫的政治時間：再論契丹開國年代問題, *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲, no. 6 (2019).

clearly be regarded as an auspicious sign deliberately created to suit political purposes.

This is the last entry of recordings about the ninth year of Taizu's reign in the "Biography of Taizu," and the next chronological entry is about the second month of the following year when the Shence era was founded: "On the first day of the second month of the first year of Shence, Abaoji was in Longhua 龍化 Prefecture. Yelü Helu 耶律曷魯, the leader of Dielie 迭烈 clan, led officials to request that Abaoji become emperor. Abaoji only agreed after the request was submitted to him three times ... He granted a general amnesty and founded the Shence era."<sup>9</sup> This time, the founding of the era was the actual time when Abaoji founded the empire and declared himself emperor, and the symbol of a ruler, the Junji Taiyi deity, happened to appear on the eve of the founding. The correlation between this auspicious rumor and the political reality shows the two are intrinsically related. Apparently, the appearance of Junji Taiyi deity at the end of the ninth year of Taizu's reign implied that Abaoji's accession to the throne was in accordance with the mandate of Heaven, thus preparing for his becoming emperor and founding of the empire in the second month of the following year.

Naturally, this rumor is not the suggestion of Abaoji himself, or of other Khitan people. The influence of the Ten Taiyi Deities on the people at local level happened in the late Tang dynasty. It was Emperor Xianzong of Tang 唐憲宗 (r. 805–820) who first used the Ten Deities in the first year of Yuanhe 元和 era (806) to predict the good and bad of a region and wrote "Wufulou Ji" 五福樓記, and this theory then reappeared in the literature around the second year of the Guangqi 光啟 era (886), whereafter it was gradually used more and more frequently. This increase in influence even showed in the first year of the Tianyou era (904) when Zhu Wen 朱溫 (r. 907–912) forced Emperor Zhaozong of Tang 唐昭宗 (r. 888–904) to move the capital to Luoyang 洛陽. Clearly, in terms of the overall situation in the early tenth century, the theory of the Ten Taiyi Deities was put into practice in the Central Plains by the Han people for a relatively short period of time, and it was a complex theory. Obviously, it was not possible for the Khitan people, who lived far outside the Great Wall and had not been heavily sinicized by that time, to have mastered it.

Judging from the above-mentioned situation, rumors of the Junji Taiyi deity appearing on the eve of Abaoji's proclamation as emperor were possibly fabricated by Han advisors around him. *Tongjian kaoyi* 通鑑考異 quotes Zhao Zhizhong's 趙至忠 (fl. 1041) *Luting zaji* 虜廷雜記 as saying: "Han Zhigu 韓知古, Han Ying 韓穎, Kang Mei 康枚, Wang Zaoshi 王奏事, and Wang Yu

9 *Liaoshi*, 1.10.

王鬱 were all Chinese, and they advised Taizu not to agree to be replaced.”<sup>10</sup> It is not difficult to see how Abaoji changed the original tribal alliance system in the first year of the Shence era to become emperor and founded the empire. To a certain extent, he was influenced by Han advisors, who played an indispensable role in the detailed preparations for this process. Among them, Han Zhigu (898–930) deserves special attention. Back then, he was someone highly regarded by Abaoji. The recently revealed tombstones of Han Zhigu’s descendants provide relatively clear evidence for our judgment. Until the sixth year of the Yuan dynasty (1269), the tomb was owned by Han Rui 韓瑞 (d. 1269), a descendant of the Yutian 玉田 Han 韓氏 family. This source traces the development of the family during the Liao and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties in detail, and its records of historical events are of unique value. In it, it is recalled how the earliest ancestor, Han Zhigu, was called the first ancestor Linggong 令公, and was in ancient times “deeply involved in the study of the astronomical calendar and mathematics,” and had “returned to the Khitan Empire, served Abaoji in the Yaonian 姚輦 tribe, and assisted while Abaoji was emperor; the country was then called the Great Liao.”<sup>11</sup> Special mention is made of Han Zhigu’s deep study of celestial phenomena, a detail not found in other historical sources. This information very probably comes from a family genealogy handed down within the Han family. This is truly worthy of attention. Not only was Han Zhigu well-versed in astronomy, but he was also valued by Abaoji. Judging from the situation at the time, it is likely that these auspicious rumors about the Junji Taiyi deity came from Han Chinese advisors represented by Han Zhigu. Only they would adapt this information to the advantage of Abaoji to facilitate him turning his homeland into an empire.

Han Zhigu and those who like him were knowledgeable in astronomy, may have been aware of the fact that, at the time, Junji Taiyi was not at all close to the Khitan Empire, and they would have understood that this system of counting and measurement had very little to do with actual astronomical phenomena, let alone the appearance of a deity. However, considering the political situation at the time, what Abaoji needed was simply a useful result that would prove that he was destined to be emperor: the selection of an element that best connected with reality, from the original, extremely abstract and complex system of the politics and culture of the Central Plains in the Ten Taiyi deities, its transformation it into a specific and visible image of a deity, the drawing of its image, and passing that image on to the people. To a certain extent, this

10 Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 266.8678.

11 Chang’an bowuguan 長安博物館, ed., *Chang’an xinchu muzhi* 長安新出墓誌 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2011), 340–41.

was in conformity with the Khitan people's original faith in shamanism, and it magnified the credibility of rumors, laying the groundwork for the political action to follow – I even suspect that the reference to a “deity” (*shen*) in Abaoji's regnal name “Shence” may refer to the one deity that appeared repeatedly on the eve of him becoming emperor, namely Junji Taiyi.

We have now finally revealed the truth about the mention of Junji Taiyi in the “Biography of Taizu” of *Liaoshi*. This record is, in fact, an auspicious rumor that was created by the emperor's Han advisors in order to justify Abaoji becoming emperor and founding the empire in the first year of Shence. There is an obvious discrepancy between the political era in this source and that in the above-mentioned series of historical narratives, in which the date Abaoji was proclaimed emperor was given as 907. This contradiction shows that in the official historical writings of the Liao dynasty, at least two distinct narratives of the founding year have appeared successively. One account points to the first year of Shence as the year when the Empire was established and Abaoji was proclaimed emperor. In line with research findings, this is a version generally recognized in academic circles today and is closer to the original historical reality of the time. It would have originated in the beginning during the founding of the empire, and it would then have been retained for a long time thereafter. The other narrative clearly ties the founding year of the Khitan Empire to the first year of Taizu's reign and refers to the khan as emperor. This is far from the real situation back at that time, and should be reconsidered and reviewed.

### 3 The Rewriting of the Founding Year and the Origin of the Khitan Dynasty

The analysis so far shows that the whole set of meticulous records related to the founding of the Khitan Empire in the first year of Taizu's reign mentioned at the beginning of this article were reshaped by later generations, and they do not correspond to the original reality of the Abaoji period. So, when did the version of the founding year of the Khitan Empire as seen in today's *Liaoshi* take shape? In other words, when was it rewritten? Naturally, the answer must be sought in the establishing process of the official historical narrative of the Liao dynasty.

Looking at existing materials, it seems that the Liao dynasty did not systematically process and compile the history of its founding in the early years. The Stele of Taizu's Virtues discovered at the Liao Ancestral Mausoleum at Guifu Mountain is currently the most recent document dating from the founding



year of the Khitan Empire, and as such it represents the official historical narrative. Perhaps due to excessive damage, academics did not pay enough attention to it in the past. Recent research findings show that this stele would have been erected in August (or October) of the second year of the Tianxian 天顯 era (927), and that it narrates the military exploits and achievements of Liao Taizu Abaoji in chronological order. It has been confirmed that this can be called the essential version of the “Biography of Taizu” in *Liaoshi*.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that, even though the content of this stele is mostly found in handed-down documents, there is a key detail on it that contradicts the current records of *Liaoshi*. A fragment of the stele contains the sentence “this is the region located in Longhua Prefecture” (see the third row from the left in Figure 1). Although the above-mentioned sentence is not fully readable, it can be roughly understood from the context and from the meaning of the text. This is likely to be a description of the story of Abaoji becoming emperor and founder of the empire. The recorded founding date of the empire is the first year of Taizu’s reign in “Biography of Taizu” of *Liaoshi*. In the first year of the Shence era, the location where the Yuan dynasty was established, and the title of honor which was given, was indeed Longhua Prefecture.

Following the discussion in the previous section, we can now clearly see the truth and falsehood: in 907, Abaoji was khan in a meeting of kings, and in 916, he became emperor in Longhua Prefecture. The Stele of Taizu’s Virtues has preserved real historical information, but the current *Liaoshi* has been changed. This can be seen from the fact that in the early years of Emperor Taizong’s rule, the Liao dynasty had not yet recorded its founding year, something that was also written on two other steles erected during the same period.

As mentioned above, there was an official historian in the Liao Taizu period, and the fact that the contents of the Stele of Taizu’s Virtues and *Liaoshi* correspond with one another shows that the way of recording history at that time was already relatively established. However, this way of recording history is probably still mainly a record of important events on a national level and of the emperor’s daily life, and it is limited at the level of official archives. The first historical book of this dynasty that was systematically compiled in the Liao dynasty only appeared as late as Shengzong’s 聖宗 reign (983–1031), in the ninth year of Tonghe 統和 era (991), and was compiled into a twenty-volume *Shilu* 實錄 (Veritable Records). It has not been possible yet to obtain more information about this *Veritable Records*, and it is therefore impossible to judge

12 Dong Xinlin 董新林, Kang Peng 康鵬, and Wang Ying 汪盈, “Liao Taizu jigong bei chubu zhengli yu yanjiu” 遼太祖紀功碑初步整理與研究, in *Sui Tang Liao Song Jin Yuan shi luncong* 隋唐遼宋金元史論叢 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2022).



FIGURE 1 A fragment from the Stele of Taizu's Virtues

whether it includes the history of the founding of the empire. Thereafter, the Liao dynasty produced three more historical accounts: one was written by Xiao Hanjianu 蕭韓家奴 (fl. 1055–1078) and others in the thirteenth year of the Zhongxi 重熙 era (1044), *Yaonian Khan zhi Zhongxi yilai shiji* 遙輦可汗至重熙以來事蹟 (Deeds from Yaonian Khan to the Zhongxi Era); the second is by Emperor Daozong of Liao 遼道宗 (r. 1055–1101), written in the third year of the Da'an 大安 era (1085), and was called *Taizu yixia qidi shilu* 太祖以下七帝實錄 (Veritable Records of the Seven Emperors after Taizu); and the third is Yelü Yan's *Huangchao shilu* 皇朝實錄 (Veritable Records of the Imperial Dynasty) compiled during the Qiantong 乾統 era (1101–1110). The aforementioned scholar Liu Pujiang has correctly pointed out that the history of the founding of the empire recorded by historians of the Liao dynasty, as seen in *Liaoshi*, may first be found in the *Veritable Records* of the 9th year of Tonghe, and no later than the book compiled in the thirteenth year of the Zhongxi era. That is to say, the latest point in time for forming the narrative of the founding of the empire as now seen in *Liaoshi* should be the Zhongxi era.

Recent research further proves that the sinicization of the Liao dynasty gradually deepened from late in Shengzong's reign to early in Xingzong's 興宗 reign (r. 1031–1055), and a trend of legitimization gradually emerged, reaching its peak in the middle of the Zhongxi era. Internally, this was meant to solve the dynasty's own legitimacy problem through an official revision of history books. In the eleventh year of the Zhongxi era (1042), the Liao dynasty took

advantage of the Song and Xia wars to cross the border and demand a territorial concession in Guannan 關南. The system encouraged the legitimization demands of the Khitan rulers and ministers, demands which were directly reflected in legislation, rituals, history records, and many other aspects. The main achievement in terms of historical records is *Yaonian Khan zhi Zhongxi yilai shiji* (also known as *Guochao Shangshi yilai shiji* 國朝上世以來事蹟, or *Liao guo Shangshi shiji ji zhudi shilu* 遼國上世事蹟及諸帝實錄), which was compiled in the thirteenth year of Zhongxi. The officials in charge of this history revision, Yelü Guyu 耶律穀欲 (ca. 956–ca. 1045), Yelü Shucheng 耶律庶成 (fl. 1032), and Xiao Hanjianu, were all highly sinicized Khitan people. Earlier, they had done a major revision to the history of Khitan before the founding year, and had completely reshaped the face of the founding history: on the one hand, they concocted a series of narrations about Abaoji's seven temple names, shaping that as the starting point of the Khitans' journey from ignorance to civilization, elevating the family's status in the group's development history, and establishing a natural connection with the highest power, thereby providing legitimacy for the Abaoji family; on the other hand, they used elements of Chinese political culture to interfere with and package the process of Abaoji's founding of the empire, making it appear to have no connection with the enthronements of the previous Central Plains emperors.

With an understanding of the above background, we naturally have reason to suspect that the rewriting of the founding year in the official historical narrative of the Liao dynasty is likely to have been done by officials who were revising the history in the thirteenth year of Zhongxi. The following two points prove this directly.

First, in the early years of the Zhongxi era, the almanacs used by the people of Liao and Song did not feature any such chronological term as “a certain year of Taizu's reign” (*Taizu mounian* 太祖某年). *Tongjian kaoyi* quotes Song Xiang's 宋庠 (996–1066) *Jinian tongpu* 紀年通譜 as saying: “Old historical records do not include the original event of Abaoji's rise to power. Nowadays, there is a calendar in the Khitan Empire, and one hundred and twenty years of history have been recorded. In the winter of the third year of Jingyou 景祐, I was sent as an envoy to Khitan and obtained their calendar, so I investigated their way of counting, which was started with the year of Yihai, and the Shence era was established the second year, followed by the year of Tianzan 天贊.”<sup>13</sup> In the third year of Jingyou (1036), or the fifth year of Zhongxi of Liao, what he saw then was the “one hundred and twenty years of Tongji,” which started from the year of Yihai 乙亥 (915) and ended in the third year of Zhongxi (1034).

13 Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 269.8809.

It is worth noting that, in this calendar, the year before Shence was recorded as the year of Yihai, not the ninth year of Taizu's reign. It can be seen from this that the chronology system before the founding of the empire which we see in *Liaoshi* today was not fully formed yet in the early years of the Zhongxi era.

Second, Zhao Zhizhong, who lived in the Liao dynasty and served as an official for a long time, returned to the Song dynasty in the tenth year of Zhongxi (1041, or the first year of the Qingli 慶曆 era during the reign of Emperor Renzong of Song 宋仁宗), and the founding of the Khitan Empire recorded in his *Luting zaji* is quite different from *Liaoshi*. The "Biography of Taizu" in *Liaoshi* states that, in the third year of Tianyou, "Hendejin Khan died, and the ministers asked for the establishment of Taizu according to his will."<sup>14</sup> *Tongjian kaoyi* quotes *Luting zaji* as saying: "Taizu was born wise, and the leaders of the eight tribes admired his bravery, so they let the previous leader return to the Yaonian tribe and crowned him the khan."<sup>15</sup> Once Abaoji ascended the throne, Yaonian Khan retired and returned to his tribe, but had not died. It is particularly noteworthy that Abaoji is called "Taizu" instead of his actual name, which is, in fact, related to the process of compiling *Luting zaji*. It can be seen from the lost texts of *Luting zaji* that are cited in books such as *Tongjian kaoyi* and *Guitian lu* 歸田錄 that the founding emperor of the Liao dynasty is referred to sometimes as "Taizu," sometimes as "Abaoji or Abaojin" 阿保謹; as products of different stages, the former is from an old manuscript compiled by Zhao Zhizhong in the Liao dynasty, while the latter is from a later record after Zhao's return to the Song dynasty. The one cited above belongs to the former. In the narrative of the founding history of the country as heard and seen by Zhao Zhizhong in the Liao dynasty, as Abaoji ascended the throne and the last Khans of Yaozhan were still there, we notice there is no mention of the founding history of the Khitan Empire taking place after it was succeeded by the Song dynasty.

To sum up, the rewriting of the founding year of the Khitan Empire is likely to have been finished in *Yaonian Khan zhi Zhongxi yilai shiji*, which was completed in the thirteenth year of the Zhongxi era. Why did this historical revision advance the founding year from 916 to 907, thus creating a nine-year period without an era name? This is obviously closely related to the legitimization issues of the Khitan dynasty discussed above. The effect of rewriting the founding year is that the year when Abaoji became emperor is exactly the year when the Tang dynasty ended. The legitimacy of the dynasties since the Zhu Liang period 朱梁 (907–923) is thus denied, and the Khitan Empire seems

14 *Liaoshi*, 1.2.

15 Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 266.8677.

to have skipped the Five Dynasties era and was directly descended from the Tang dynasty.

As to the source of legitimacy of the Liao dynasty, the current mainstream view in academia is the so-called “the Liao succeeded the Later Jin” theory. This statement was first seen in the late Jin and early Yuan period: “Liao has kept the north since the end of the Tang dynasty, the throne was not usurped, and its legitimacy was inherited from the Later Jin dynasty ... it should be recorded in the *History of the Northern Dynasties*.”<sup>16</sup> According to the Jin 金 people, “the Liao people value water’s virtue.” Considering the historical fact that the Liao people make an issue of the imperial seal obtained from the Later Jin 後晉 (936–927), it seems credible that the legitimacy of Liao dynasty is based on that of the Later Jin, and the so-called “water’s virtue” replaces the “gold’s virtue” of the Later Jin.<sup>17</sup> However, in my opinion, there may be room for further consideration.

It should be noted that the “Liao succeeded the Later Jin” theory was proposed by Jin and Yuan people, and there is no historical data from the Liao dynasty to prove this. At present, there are two main reasons supporting this theory. One is that the Jin people say that “the Liao people value water’s virtue,” and the other is the origin of the imperial seal of the Liao dynasty. However, both points can be reconsidered. 1) When the ancients discussed the lineages and moral values of the previous generation, they often speculated, and added contents based on their own perception and needs. Therefore, most of what they said deviated from the actual reality of the previous generation. 2) The imperial seal of the Liao dynasty was indeed offered by the last emperor of Later Jin when his country was subjugated, but a careful examination of the Khitan emperors’ discussions about the imperial seal did not mention the Later Jin dynasty. For example, in the seventh year of Emperor Xingzong’s reign (1038), the candidates for the *jinshi* degree were asked to write an article on the topic “he who inherits the national treasure is considered legitimate.”<sup>18</sup> The Song people recorded a poem written by Emperor Daozong of Liao, “The beautiful treasure made by the Qin dynasty has helped the dynasty prosper for thousands of years. After the fall of the Central Plains, the treasure returned to the North. The descendants of future generations should cautiously guard

16 Xiu Duan 修端, “Bian Liao Song Jin zhengtong” 辨遼宋金正統, in *Guochao wenlei* 國朝文類, *Sibu congkan ben* 四部叢刊本, 45.3a.

17 Liu Pujiang 劉浦江, *Zhengtong yu huayi: Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi wenhua yanjiu* 正統與華夷: 中國傳統政治文化研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 90–92.

18 *Liaoshi*, 57.914.

it, and the kingdom will prosper forever.”<sup>19</sup> These facts only reflect that the Liao emperors attached great importance to the imperial seal and its political and cultural implications, rather than to the direct source of this treasure, so it should not be regarded as evidence for the Liao emperors identifying with the Later Jin dynasty. Furthermore, if the Liao directly succeeded the Later Jin dynasty, then as the founder of the Khitan dynasty, the legitimate status of Abaoji would have become water without a source and a tree without roots. How could such a narrative of legitimacy be accepted by the people of Liao?

Due to the extreme shortage of historical sources, direct records of the Liao people on the origins of the legitimacy of their dynasty are still currently difficult to find. However, we can receive a preview of clues through other related writings compiled by people in that period. In the inscriptions from the Liao dynasty, it is often mentioned that the Liao replaced the Tang. Until the end of the Liao dynasty, when people talked about the origin of their empire, they all traced it to Taizu and even to the Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties, but never mentioned the Later Jin. On the other hand, the extant narratives by the Liao people about the Later Jin all indicate that they themselves were established by the Liao and destroyed by the Liao. The recently discovered epitaph of Shi Zhonggui 石重貴, the last emperor of the Later Jin, from the sixth year of the Baoning 保寧 era (974), expresses this attitude vividly and in great detail: “At the beginning, Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭, the great ancestor of the Later Jin dynasty, started founding the state in Jinyang. He suffered defeat by the army of Li Congke 李從珂, the last emperor of the Later Tang dynasty, and the state was in great danger. Yelü Deguang 耶律德光, Emperor Taizong of the Great Khitan Kingdom, helped Shi Jingtang to overcome the crisis and become emperor in the Central Plains. Shi Jingtang was very grateful to Yelü Deguang and vowed to be the son of the Liao, and so would his future generations. In the sixth year of Tianfu 天福, Shi Zhonggui was led by a traitor into believing that he could ignore such a great kindness, so he broke the agreement and stopped paying tribute. Therefore, Emperor Taizong of Liao showed his military might, overthrew the Later Jin, and moved Shi Zhonggui to the city of Dongjing 東京 in the Liao Kingdom.”<sup>20</sup> This epitaph was written in the Liao dynasty by “Lulong jun jiedu tuiguan, jiang shi lang, shouyou shiyi Niu Cangyong” 盧龍軍節度推官、將仕郎、守右拾遺牛藏用. It can represent the Khitan officials' attitude

19 Kong Pingzhong 孔平仲, *Henghuang xinlun* 珣璜新論 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 4.40.

20 For the recorded text, see Qi Wei 齊偉, “Liaoning sheng bowuguan cang Shi Zhonggui muzhiming kaoshi” 遼寧省博物館藏石重貴墓誌銘考釋, in *Liao Jin lishi yu kaogu* 遼金歷史與考古, ed. Liaoning sheng Liao Jin Qidan Nüzhen shi yanjiuhui 遼寧省遼金契丹女真史研究會 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013), 4: 303–4.

towards the Later Jin regime. It is hard to imagine that the rulers and ministers of the Liao dynasty would regard the Later Jin as the source of their legitimacy, since the first emperor of the Later Jin “vowed to be the son of the Liao.”

Naturally, the above-mentioned inscriptions cannot be seen as completely equal to, or as rising to the height of, the ideology of the dynasty, but at least they reflect the true understanding of history by the people at the time. Whether officials or ordinary people, the Liao people have always regarded the Later Jin dynasty as inferior, and I am afraid they would not regard the Later Jin as the source of their legitimacy. In stark contrast to this, ancestors of the Liao people stated that their regime started from the replacement of the mausoleum at the end of the Tang dynasty, thereby intentionally or unintentionally linking the founding of the Khitan Empire by Abaoji with the demise of the Tang dynasty, ignoring the time interval between these two events. This vague idea of history may have been popular only among Han people in the early Liao dynasty, and it then became an undercurrent of legitimacy narrative; during the Zhongxi era of Xingzong's reign, the movement of legitimacy at the centre of the Khitan dynasty was reaching its climax, and the idea that the Liao directly inherited from the Tang was gradually recognized by the ruling elite, thus providing ideological resources for the transformation of the founding history of the empire. The Liao people created a historical narrative that Taizu proclaimed himself emperor and founded the Khitan Empire in 907 by taking advantage of the fact that the Tang dynasty ended in the year that Abaoji became the khan.

#### 4 Conclusion: Political Temporality in Historical Writing

A time that has been earmarked as politically significant due to the occurrence of important events can be regarded as a representative political era. In real history, the temporal relationship between a political era and specific events is usually fixed, and readers of historical resources are often accustomed to observing from a static and ready-made perspective; therefore, right, wrong and authenticity have become the only standards, and a final point of reference, for judging a certain political era. However, there may be another aspect to the problem: at the level of historical memory and writing, many factors such as the rise and fall of power relations, the adjustment of internal structures, and changes in ideology, may lead to the rewriting of a key political time. The meaning and impact of such an era will also change accordingly. In other words, the instability of real politics inevitably creates volatility in recording

political times. Unlike the partial rewriting of historical texts and events that we are familiar with, a whole political era is more complex and systematic, and the cost of rewriting is higher, requiring echoes in, and the cooperation of, a whole set of historical narratives. Once reworded, the era becomes more difficult for future generations to perceive. This may be the reason why traditional political history research rarely examines a political era from a dynamic and productive perspective.

For a long time, scholars of Liao history have tended to regard the issue of the founding date of the Khitan Empire as a systemic difference between the documentation of the Central Plains and sources from the Liao dynasty, believed there to be strong contradictions between the two, and tried to reach an either-or type of judgment. However, this kind of approach ignores the evolution and development of the two narratives, especially the Liao dynasty literature itself. As a result, the historical narrative at the time of the founding of the state by Abaoji has been obfuscated – writing about a political era so close to the time of the actual historical events can best explain the problem. This is also key to the interconnection of different narratives.

The argument in this paper shows that the root of the problem of the founding year of the Khitan Empire is not the incompatibility of different document systems, but the rewriting and transformation of the history of the Taizu era by historians in the late Liao dynasty. In the first year of the Shence era, Abaoji proclaimed himself emperor and founded the empire. The official documentation of the Khitan dynasty has retained the political time corresponding to this historical fact, which aligns with the Central Plains documentation, for a long time. Until the thirteenth year of Emperor Xingzong's Hongxi era, when *Yaonian Khan zhi Zhongxi yilai shiji* was compiled, due to the strong demands for legitimism and legitimacy following the gradual sinicization of the dynasty, historians advanced the founding year of the Khitan Empire to 907 when Abaoji became the khan, and they created a form of chronology without an era name, as well as expressions like “a certain year of Taizu's reign” that had never been used in practice. The original era of the founding of the Khitan Empire was completely altered, and a new political era was formed, along with a set of historical narratives. Thereafter, in the Daozong and Tianzuo eras, the dynastic history was revised twice; all of these revisions have followed this same narrative framework. Later, the Jin and Yuan dynasties revisited *Liaoshi* without making any changes, and it finally became what we see today.

*Translated by Caterina Weber*



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