

INTRODUCTION

Khitan is the name of the historical people who once formed the dominant local population in south-western Manchuria, a region delimited roughly by the main course of the river Liao 遼河 *Liao He* in the east and the Greater Khingan Mountains 大興安嶺 *Da Xing'an Ling* in the west. With a gradually expanding population, increasing social consolidation and growing military power, the Khitan emerged in the early tenth century as the founders of the Liao 遼 Dynasty (907/916-1125), which during two centuries was the most important political player in East Asia, superior even to the China of the Northern Song 北宋 *Bei Song* (960-1127). At the height of their power, the Khitan controlled a territory much larger than their original homeland, comprising the whole of Manchuria, significant parts of northern China and much of Mongolia. As a result, the ethnic Khitan were ultimately outnumbered by the other ethnic groups of the country. Out of a total population of perhaps less than four million in the empire, the Khitan probably comprised only one fifth, that is, less than one million individuals. By far the largest ethnic group under Khitan rule was formed by the Chinese.

To administer their empire, the Khitan applied a system of five capitals. Two of these, the Supreme Capital 上京 *Shangjing* and the Central Capital 中京 *Zhongjing* were located in the basins of the rivers Shira Muren 西拉木倫 *Xila Mulun* and Laoha 老哈, western sources of the Liao, in the central part of what is today

Inner Mongolia 內蒙古 *Nei Menggu*. The Eastern Capital 東京 *Dongjing*, the Western Capital 西京 *Xijing*, and the Southern Capital 南京 *Nanjing*, were at the approximate locations of the modern cities of Liaoyang 遼陽, Datong 大同 and Peking 北京 *Beijing*, respectively. Archaeological traces of Khitan culture are most abundant in the region of the Supreme and Central Capitals, where the Liao imperial tombs are also located. The ethnic Khitan themselves seem to have disappeared as a separate people by the end of China's Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644), possibly even earlier. In their homeland, they were assimilated by the Mongols, the modern autochthonous population of the region, while elsewhere in the empire they were absorbed into the Chinese ethnicity. With them, the Khitan language also became extinct, and any knowledge of it was lost for centuries until it was rediscovered in the twentieth century in a corpus of written documents.

1.1. THE KHITAN LANGUAGE

Chinese chronicles relating to the Liao period, notably 契丹國志 *Qidan Guozhi* (mid-thirteenth century) and the official dynastic history 遼史 *Liaoshi* (mid-fourteenth century), but also 金史 *Jinshi*, contain some information on the Khitan language, including names, terms and even small glossaries with Chinese transcription and translation. There are also Chinese transcriptions of Khitan poetic texts, including two mixed Chinese-Khitan (so-called 'macaronic') poems. The quality of the Chinese transcriptions is, unfortunately, extremely poor and the total amount of information very limited, allowing only the identification and approximate reconstruction of perhaps a hundred Khitan lexical items. Even so, the information is sufficient to confirm that Khitan was a language that shared a significant part of its basic vocabulary and grammatical markers with the much better known languages of the Mongolic family, although, at the same time, it had features that distinguished it sharply from regular Mongolic.

At the time when Khitan was used as a spoken language, the present-day languages of the Mongolic family were still represented