CHAPTER FIVE

THE KITAN LARGE SCRIPT

Shence, fifth year: spring, first month, yichou day: work began on the creation of the Kitan large script. Ninth month, renyin day: the large script was completed. It was implemented by imperial edict. - History of the Liao Dynasty, Annals of Taizu.

By the reign of Abaoji, several smaller neighbouring states had been subdued and annexed. He employed many Chinese, who taught them how to write by altering characters in the clerical script, adding here and cutting there. They created a script of several thousand characters, replacing the contracts made by making notches on wood. - New History of the Five Dynasties. Appendix on the Four Barbarians.

5.1 The nature of the Kitan large script

Almost all research on Kitan has been done on the texts in the small script. The Kitan large script has been even more impenetrable. The underlying language is the same, and the general contents of the inscriptions are the same. Progress in reading inscriptions in the small script, and recent archaeological discoveries, have provided certain insights into the large script. The large script is often said to be “logographic”, but it appears to be much the same mixture of logographs and phonograms as the small script. The major difference is that the large script has a separate graph for every syllable in the language, whereas the small script analyses the syllables into two parts. So the graph 国, derived from 国 guo (also written 国), represents the Kitan syllable *gur ‘country, state’. This is written with two separate graphs in the small script: 九. Similarly, 人 «ceu» in the large script is written *ceu in the small; 日 «gon» in the large script is written 日 e in the small. 午 «iri» ‘name’ in the large script is written 午 e in the small. Some graphs in the large script are similar to small script graphs, but have different meanings or readings. 午 «iri» ‘name’ in the large script resembles 午 (of unidentified sound and meaning) in the small; 鬼 «pu» (perhaps [fu]) looks like the small script 鬼 of unidentified sound and meaning in the small script. 冬 «u’ul» ‘winter’ is clearly from Chinese 冬 ‘winter’, and is written in the small script with two symbols: 冬 u’ul. However, *u’ul also meant ‘to marry [of a woman]’, and this word is also written with the large graph 冬. *namur ‘autumn’ is written 冬 in the large script (derived from...
Chinese 秋 (‘autumn’), and can be considered a logograph: the corresponding form in the small script was written with phonetic graphs: 公乃 安 〈n.am.úr〉. Some of the large graphs were used in the Jurchen script: 元字 ‘dragon’ and Jurchen 玉 卉 mudur ‘id.’; 赤 ‘year’ and Jurchen 玉 aniya ‘year’. Both ‘father’ and ‘year’ are written 赤 in the large script, as both are written 安 in the small. It is probable that there are more logographs in the large script than the small. The inspiration for the more analytical nature of the small script may have come from Uighur “technologists of writing”, or from the Chinese rhyme tables.

5.2  Sources

According to Liaoshi 64, the large script was invented in 920 and the small script in 924 or 925. The earliest extant text in the large script is the Epitaph of Yelü Yanning 耶律延寧墓誌, dated 987. The inscriptions discovered so far are:

(1) Jing’ansi 靜安寺. The Jing’an Temple Stele 靜安寺碑 (1072). This stele has an inscription in Chinese on one side, and a damaged inscription in the Kitan large script on the other. The Chinese text was published in 1881, and edited in Yamashita 1935. Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949:243 noted, “No illumination can be gained from an inscription, Ching-an Ssŭ Pei, which seems to be composed in Ch’i-tan… The symbols used are simpler than those found in the Liao imperial mausoleums, but the epigraph as a whole is too seriously damaged to admit of any definite conclusions”. Those comments are still valid.

(2) Gutaishi 故太師. The Gu Taishi Inscription 故太師銘石記 (1056). This was discovered in an antique shop in Shenyang (Inaba 1939).

(3) Xigushan 西孤山. The Xigushan Inscription, also known as the Epitaph of Xiao Xiaozhong 蕭孝忠墓誌 (1090). Liu Qian 1956; Yan Wanzhang 1957.
