Sino-Khitan Phonology

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1. Introduction

Two functionally distinct scripts, the so-called Greater Script and Lesser Script, were invented by the Khitans in the early part of the Liao dynasty (907-1125) to write the Khitan language. Scholars in general agree that the Greater Script is logographic, representing morphological units, and the Lesser Script is phonetic, representing phonological units. The texts written in the Lesser Script remain basically unreadable, however, many Chinese proper nouns, such as official titles, place names, and personal names, have been convincingly deciphered with a high degree of confidence. The focus of this paper is on the Chinese transliterations, which actually form a phonological system of Sino-Khitan. In the following analyses we would like to show that the phonology of Sino-Khitan can provide valuable information about the northern Chinese phonology of the 11th and 12th centuries or even earlier.

Various proposals have been raised to decipher the basic graphs, the so-called yuanzi 原字 (abbr. YZ), of the Lesser Script. The most influential proposal is Chinggeltai et al.’s *Qidan Xiaozi Yanjiu 契丹小字研究* (*The Studies of the Khitan Lesser Script*, hereafter QXY) of 1985. In this book a table lists the reconstructed phonetic values of 98 YZ graphs1, all of which are used to transliterate proper nouns in Chinese. This table represents a significant step in the decipherment of Chinese words, but it is unfortunate that the decipherment is done in a rather sporadic way and clearly lacks systematic treatment. The same reconstructed values are used in Chinggeltai’s *Qidan Xiaozi Shidu Wenji 契丹小字釋讀問題* (*The Issues of the Decipherment of the

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1 In the *Qidan Xiaozi Yanjiu*, the YZ graphs used to transliterate Chinese words are basically contained in the first table of the reconstruction of the phonetic values of yuanzi (pp. 81-109). Two additional tables, the second table (p. 130) and the third table (p. 146), are provided. In these two tables all the reconstructions are about Khitan words. The contents of these three tables are summarized in a comprehensive table on pages 152 and 153. For the purpose of our study, the first table is most relevant, because it lists all the YZ graphs for transliterating Chinese words.
Khitan Lesser Script) of 2002, in which he examines the reconstructions by various scholars. Thus, a better effort has to be made to analyze all the YZ graphs systematically.

In the study of Chinese historical phonology, scholars have not paid much attention to this body of valuable material so far. Its value to the study of Chinese historical phonology in general and the history of Mandarin phonology in particular has not been recognized. The reason is clearly due to the separation of the research fields. The Khitan script experts are busy working on their decipherments but not focusing on the historical phonology of Chinese. In the Khitan study the information of Chinese phonology is merely a useful tool for the decipherments. Chinese historical phonologists, on the other hand, are not paying much attention to the notoriously difficult Khitan materials. This situation is very similar to what happened in the earlier Tangut study as pointed out by Gong Hwang-cherng (1981: 34).

It is also very crucial that since the publication of the QXY in 1985, many epigraphic materials written in the Khitan Lesser Script, complete or fragmental, have been published (Chinggeltai 2002, Liu 2003). The newly discovered materials exceed the previously existing ones by a ratio of sixteen to nine. These new materials have significantly widened the horizon of the decipherment of Chinese words, providing additional and often crucial evidence for the phonetic values of the YZ graphs in question. With the new materials, it becomes possible to reconstruct an entire phonological system of Sino-Khitan.

In this article, for the first time, we would like to carry out a systematic analysis of the YZ graphs involved in the transliteration of Chinese words. As the result, a phonology of Sino-Khitan will be reconstructed. The significance of our study is two-fold. The phonology of Sino-Khitan, on the one hand, can fill a lacuna in our knowledge of the northern Chinese before the Yuan dynasty; on the other hand, it can provide a solid foundation for further decipherments.

2. The available materials

Below is a list of the source materials to which this article refers. Beside the Memorial to Lang Jun all of them are epitaphs. Among them, nine are included in the QXY of 1985 and sixteen were published afterward. The abbreviations for these materials are as follows: one Chinese character for each of the first nine materials, to keep the labeling convention of the QXY (Chinggeltai et al. 1985: 675), and two characters for each of the remaining sixteen.