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**INTIMACY OF POWER, ALLIANCE OF KINSHIP:**
**IMPERIAL MARRIAGES AND MATRIMONIAL STRATEGIES OF THE KHITAN LIAO DYNASTY (907–1125)**

**ABSTRACT**

Marriage as primary means of creating alliances between different kinship was common throughout history. In case of imperial marriage, it was then not the wedding together of mere individuals but the creation of an alliance deemed mutually beneficial to the continued fortunes and power of each, in particular the imperial house. This unique role of matrimonial alliances is especially evident in the Khitan Liao dynasty (907-1125). As a non-Chinese people who rose up from the Mongolian steppe by the end of the ninth century, they became the most dominant power in north China for the following two centuries. In order to consolidate their rule, the Khitan monarchs adopted and carried throughout their dynasty an exclusive intermarriage between two predominant clans: the imperial Yelü clan (Khitan) and

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the consort Xiao clan (half Uigur, half Khitan). This unique model of Yelü-Xiao intermarriage, which was retroactively applied to all imperial spouses, cemented ethnic and politic relations within the Liao empire and became a key facet of the Liao rulership. Tracing the origin of this specific matrimonial alliance of the Khitan Liao, this paper examines how generations of Liao rulers used the Yelü-Xiao intermarriage as their efforts to leverage dynastic kinship networks and to support their political power, as well as their endeavour to keep an equilibrium between different forces.

**Introduction**

Marriage as primary means of creating alliances was common throughout history and was shared by nearly all civilizations around the world. In interstate relations, marriage alliances have sealed peace treaties and cemented diplomatic relations in many times and places. In Chinese history, many marriages were arranged between daughters of Chinese nobles and the neighbouring tribal chieftains as far back as the eighth century B.C. Archaeological evidence from the Altaic Mountains at the Pazyryk site in Siberia shows that at least one Chinese wife was entombed with her Altaic tribal chieftain husband sometime in the fifth or sixth century B.C.¹ As early as during the second and first century B.C., under the Chinese Han 漢 dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), the Chinese emperors had already formalized these matrimonial exchanges, known as *heqin 和親*, or ‘peace between relatives’ treaties. Imperial princesses and girls in lieu of imperial princesses were sent to the Xiongnu 畛奴 chieftains on the Mongolian steppe.² One major purpose of such exchanges was to create brotherly

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¹ Rudenko 1970: 191-193. The remains of a woman in Chinese dress was found in the chieftain’s tomb together with a four-wheeled carriage, probable of Chinese manufacture, pulled by four horses in quadriga arrangement, with remains of silk and embroiidered hangings of Chinese origin.

² After being defeated by the Xiongnu in 198 B.C., Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 202-195 B.C.), the founder of the Han dynasty, sent an imperial princess to the Xiongnu chieftain Maodun 冒頓 (r. 209-174 B.C.). In 22 B.C., a famous beauty and lady-in-waiting, Wang Zhaojun 王昭君, was sent in lieu of an imperial princess to another Xiongnu chieftain; see Yu 1986: 386-389, 394-398; Zhao 2008: 32-33. For a detailed account on the *heqin* policy during the Han, see Psarras 2003: 132-143.