Fall of Tang and the Return of the Western Manchurian Dynasty

THE QIDAN LIAO OF XIANBEI PROVENANCE

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THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE TANG DYNASTY

The periods of drought in the Mediterranean, North Africa and far to the east into Asia had two high points, between 300-400 and around 800. Many places where agriculture had been carried on with elaborate irrigation networks were abandoned due to widespread drought. The decline and fall of the Tang dynasty began in the middle of the eighth century.

Under the Xuan-zong (713-55), Tang displayed grandeur and prosperity, and yet the Uighur khagans were extracting huge amounts of silk and other gifts from Tang. An Lu-shan, a half Sogdian and half Turk general who had commanded the northwestern frontier army, rebelled in 755, captured Luo-yang, and proclaimed himself emperor of Greater Yan in 756.

Su-zong (r.756-62), who usurped power from his father, appealed to the Uighur Turks to help him in recovering the capital, stating that: “the land and people belong to me; the jade and the silver, the boys and the girls will be given to the Uighurs.” The Uighurs became indispensable allies of the Tang, putting down the rebellion of An Lu-shan and Shi Si-ming in 757.

Rebellion, however, raged across mainland China until 763, and the central power of the Tang dynasty never fully revived thereafter. The Tang owed its continued existence to the Uighur military support. Barfield (1989: 151) notes that:
"When the Uighur empire was destroyed by a more savage Kirghiz Turks in 840, the Tang lost its protection and fell in all but name to the next revolt in China." The fates of Tang and Uighur waxed and waned together. It was the Qidan who could thrust the Kirghiz Turks back to the Yenisei steppes in 924.

RETURN OF THE WESTERN MANCHURIAN DYNASTY

The leader of the Yelu tribe called A-bao-ji had laid the foundation for the Liao dynasty (916-1125) by uniting ten Qidan tribes into a federation, gaining hegemony over the Liao-xi steppe, and establishing control over a number of cities in the Liao River basin. The original core of the Qidan native territory was located on Liao-xi steppe, especially in the basin of the Shira Mören (Xar Moron). This is the region where the Qidan established their Supreme and Central Capitals, and the hydronym Liao became the basis of their dynastic name. A-bao-ji conquered Parhae (Bohai), in 926, just before his death. The Qidan (from whom North China got the medieval European name Cathay) came to occupy Manchuria, Mongolia and the northeastern part of China, and established their western capital at Datong and their southern capital at the border garrison city nowadays called Beijing.

The relationship between the Xianbei and the Yemaek Tungus was, however, close enough for the History of Liao to state that the Oidan Liao, the descendants the Xianbei, had originated from the old Chosun land, having the identical customs and tradition of “the Ki-ja (Ji-ji)’s Eight Clauses of Instruction” as the Chosun. The Liao dynasty also maintained the dual system, recruiting civil administrators through examination, and enlisting tribal troops to constitute the backbone of the army. The Qidan tribes were mobilized to serve in the military units called ordo (from which derives “horde”). It was indeed a dual state: the southern area of three million Chinese in sixteen prefectures around Beijing (compared to 300 in the Song) was governed through the Chinese style bureaucracy, while the northern area of less than one million Qidan people was governed by the traditional tribal law.

Through the dual system, the invaders from the Mongolian steppes or Manchuria attempted to resist

5 From the mid-fifth century, the Qidan tribes had occupied the western bank of the Liao River near modern Jehol. In 696, the Qidan tribes came down through Shan-hai-guan and raided the plain of Beijing. Empress Wu sought help from the khagan of eastern Turks who were able to so thoroughly destroy the Qidan as to eliminate their threat to North China for more than two centuries.


The Qidan had been only semi-nomadic, relying to some extent on agricultural crops, especially millet. See Fairbank and Goldman (1992: 113)

7 遼史 地理志一 遼國其先曰契丹 本鮮卑之地…上京道 上京臨潢府 本漢遼東郡西安平之地…名曰皇都

8 Fairbank and Goldman (1992: 113)

Tao Jing-shen (in Rossabi, 1983: 78) notes that: “Fu Pi … pointed out that the Qidans … had not only adopted Chinese institutions but also had a formidable military machine, which the Chinese did not have.”
9 Koryeo pulled together the fragmented members of the Koguryeo-Parhae dynasties as well as their traditional territory south of the Yalu. Ledyard notes (1983: 346) “Koryeo people themselves debated the historical nature of their dynasty: some considered it to have inherited the tradition and legitimacy of Koguryeo, others believed that it was the true successor of Silla. Koryeo founders doubtless took the former view, as is suggested most directly by their choice of the name of their state.

But socially and politically, Koguryeo’s fortunes were subverted by the host of Silla officials that swarmed north to Kae-gyung, and after the confrontation between the two polar views in the first half of the twelfth century, there was no question but that the Silla tradition had won.” Those Yemaek Tungus who remained in Manchuria became to be thoroughly absorbed into the Ruzhen-Manchu Tungus.

10 Rossabi (1983: 5-6) notes: “Ten Kingdoms, whose monarchs were generally Chinese, ruled South China, and Five Dynasties, whose potentates were usually of foreign origin, governed North China. … The rulers in South China generally did not lay claim to the title of ‘emperor.’ … Only the Northern states competed for control of the whole Chinese empire.”

11 See Barfield (1989: 174). The treaty of 1042 confirmed the brotherly relationship, and increased the annual payments to 200,000 units of silver and sinification. While preserving their own tribal tradition, they let the Chinese people maintain their own way of life, allowing the cultural heritage of Chinese civilization to survive.

Ledyard (1983: 346) contends that “the defeat of Parhae in 926 was the final blow to Korean pretensions to the territory north of the Yalu … and … its defeat takes Korea out of Manchuria for the rest of history up to the present time.” The Qidans had conquered the Parhae and unified the entire Manchuria, while the Former Yan (349-70) could occupy only the Liao-xi and Liao-dong, without conquering the Koguryeo, before launching their attacks on North China.

THE SONG, THE SELF-CLAIMED HEIR TO THE TANG

The Tang dynasty had been fragmented by rebellions before it was extinguished in 907. The situation of the Five Dynasties in North China (907-60) and the Ten Kingdoms in Central and South China (902-79) following the collapse of Tang was structurally similar to that of the Five Barbarians and Sixteen States (304-439) after the fall of the Han Chinese dynasties, especially to the situation after the southward flight of the Western Jin court in 317 until the unification of North China by the Tuoba Wei in 439. A succession of warlords, usually of non-Chinese origin, claimed the Imperial throne in the north while the south was divided among the Han Chinese satraps. Ledyard (1983: 323) notes: “However, unlike the earlier case, in which the various Yan [Xianbei] states and Koguryeo had ended up in a standoff, the Qidans now quickly disposed of their eastern Manchurian rival, Parhae (926). Thus, for the first time in history, all of Manchurian, east and west, was controlled by a single state.”

After the rapid succession of the Five Dynasties in the north, the commander of the palace guard, Zhao Guang-yin (趙匡胤 Song Tai-zu), under the last of the dynasties (Later Zhou) was elevated to emperor by his troops in 960. Tai-zu (r.960-76) was a highly skilled archer and horseman in his youth, and his forebears had been military leaders under one or another Imperial claimant.

The Qidans had maintained hostile confrontations against the Song, eventually concluding a peace treaty in 1005 which called for the Song to deliver 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000
ounces of silver annually to the Qidans. The Qidan were content to occupy Beijing and Datong. The peace by the treaties of 1005 and 1042 was preserved for a hundred years. The Song court was made to accept inferior status and continue to pay “tribute.”

The population of the Song Empire amounted to about 80 million, while only about five million people lived in the area from Tibet through the Mongol steppes and Manchuria. After 963, the administration of the prefectures began to be transferred from the unruly military to civil officials recruited through the examination system. The century and a half of the Song dynasty (960-1126), with its capital at Kaifeng, became one the most creative periods in Chinese civilization.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Ledyard (1983: 323) notes: “As the self-proclaimed successor to Koguryeo … Koryeo considered the northern territories in Manchuria its rightful legacy. The Qidans, as conquerors of Bohai … obviously had other ideas. Koryeo was ultimately successful in laying claim to and holding the old Bohai lands south of the lower Yalu, which were the bone of contention in a series of Koryeo-Liao wars lasting from 993 to 1018.”

After concluding the peace treaty with the Song in 1005, the Liao launched full-scale campaigns against Koryeo (918-1392), beginning in 1010 and lasting for about ten years, but they gained no real success. The Liao army under the personal command of its emperor invaded Koryeo in 1010, and captured the capital. Fearing that their supply lines might be cut, however, the Qidan suddenly withdrew without gaining any particular advantage. The Qidan invaded again with 100,000 men in 1018, but almost the entire army was annihilated at Kui-ju by the Koryeo general Kang Kam-chan. Every Qidan invasion of Koryeo ended in failure, but in 1020 the Koryeo court promised to abandon its hostile stance against Qidan and thenceforth their relationship was peaceful. The Northern Song court (960-1127), which was thoroughly humiliated by the Liao, admired the vigor of the new Koryeo kingdom and promoted commercial and cultural exchanges.

300,000 units of silk. Jagchid and Symons (1989: 132) note: “stable relations…were maintained only because the Song were willing to annually present vast amounts of Chinese wealth to” the Qidans, and also to the Tangut Xia.

Tao Jing-shen (1983: 69) notes that: A fictitious kinship relationship was established between the emperors of the two states. … On receiving the news of the death of an emperor … funeral ceremonies were held at both courts …” The two states often addressed each other as the “northern dynasty” and “the southern dynasty.”

12 Fairbank and Goldman (1992: 88)

13 In 992, the Qidans sent an invasion force across the Yalu under Xiao Sun-ning. Through the diplomatic maneuvers of Seo Hui, however, Koryeo could not only persuade the Qidan army to make a voluntary withdrawal, but also obtain Qidan consent to incorporate the area up to the Yalu into its territory. The Qidan could not deny Seo Hui’s assertion that Koryeo was the successor to Koguryeo and thus could lay claim to the Manchurian territories formerly under Koguryeo dominion. After all, the Qidans were engaged in a battle against the Northern Song at that time,
The Song and the Koryeo maintained rather irregular relations with each other, partly because of Qidan and Ruzhen interventions, and partly because of the reservation harbored by the Song against the Koryeo. According to Ledyard (1983: 347), “a substantial body of Song opinion, led by Su Tung-p’o, still considered Koryeo tainted with a ‘Manchurian’ character that in their view utterly impaired its usefulness as an ally. But another Song group, for which Fu Pi can serve as the spokesman, seems to have grasped the reality that Koryeo was a valid and credible enemy of the Manchurian forces – in other words, that it was now a peninsular power defending a Chinese style of civilization against northern enemies. But Su’s views largely prevailed.”

Ledyard (1983: 324) further notes: “However ‘barbarious’ were Liao and Jin from a Chinese point of view, their diplomatic and political institutions were of a basically Chinese mold. They founded dynasties, established their own calendars, exchanged ambassadors, and followed ceremonial and protocol procedures of acknowledged Chinese origin.”