

The Khitans: Corner Stone of the Mongol Empire

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The Khitans were a Turco-Mongol clan who dominated China north of the Yangtze River during the early mediaeval period. They adopted and then adapted many of the cultural traditions of their powerful neighbours to the south, the Song Chinese. However, before their absorption into the Mongol Empire in the late 13th century they proved pivotal, firstly in the eastward expansion of the armies of Chinggis Khan, secondly, in the survival of the Persian heartlands after the Mongol invasions of the 1220s and thirdly, in the revival and integration of the polity of Iran into the Chinggisid Empire. Da Liao, the Khitans, the Qara Khitai, names which have served this clan well, strengthened and invigorated the hosts which harboured them. The Liao willingly assimilated into the Chinggisid Empire of whose formation they had been an integral agent and in doing so they also surrendered their identity but not their history. Recent scholarship is now unearthing and recognising their proud legacy and distinct identity. Michal Biran placed the Khitans irrevocably and centrally in mediaeval Asian history and this study emphasises their role in the establishment of the Mongol Empire.

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The Turco-Mongol tribe that first settled the lands of northern China, north of the Huai River and adopted and adapted the cultural traditions of their domineering neighbour to the south, has only recently been acknowledged for their importance to the evolution of mediaeval Asian history, due in large part to the work of Michal Biran of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. However, their central role in the formation of the Chinggisid Empire and the recognition of their often under-emphasised impact on Iran's cultural and political history, from their first appearance in 1141 to their complete absorption into Iran's evolving history circa 1300 needs to be highlighted. The Khitans are a people in their own right with their own history and traditions and many scholars from Qubilai Khan's academy in Dadu or Khanbaliq, the Hanlinyuan, to modern scholars such as Karl August Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng,¹ Denis Sinor,² and more recently, Michal Biran of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem have researched and expanded our knowledge of these influential people. The aim of this study is to throw light on the crucial role they played in facilitating the absorption of Iran and China into the Chinggisid Empire, a role the extent of which has not been fully appreciated until recently and a role which has often been over-looked simply because the Khitans abandoned their ethnic moniker as they assumed a central role in the expanding and encompassing Chinggisid Empire. As Rashīd al-Dīn (d.1318) observed, "whereas before they used to deride this name, now their sons imagine that they have been known as Mongols from long ago ... now ... all that assemblage takes pride in calling itself Mongol."³ And by all, the Persian scholar and leading politician from Ilkhanid Iran meant most of the peoples who made up the multicultural and multi-ethnic Chinggisid Empire.

The Khitans' own state in northern China had been undermined and its leadership scattered to regroup in exile. This paper charts the exile of the Khitan leadership and their re-grouping in Turkestan and their interaction with the Islamic world. Though militarily successful in the west, the Khitans always aimed to return to their perceived homeland in northern China, and therefore they sought accommodation with the Muslim world. With the rise of Chinggis Khan, the exiled Khitans saw a path to their redemption and therefore they cooperated with the Mongols whenever the opportunity presented itself both in the east and in the west. The Khitans were able to exploit their shared Turco-Mongol ethnic roots and offer the Mongol steppe warriors their

¹ Karl August Wittfogel and Feng Cha-Sheng, *History of the Chinese Society: Liao, 907-1125* (Philadelphia: 1949).

² Denis Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³ Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jamī' al-tawārikh*, edited by Moḥammad Rawshan and Muṣṭafā Mūsawī, (Tehran: 1994); Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *Classical Writings of the Mediaeval Islamic World: Persian Histories of the Mongol Dynasties*, vol. III, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 78.

knowledge of urban warfare and advanced armaments and, in return, they were given positions of trust, influence, and power in the ballooning revolution. Their assistance in the early stages of the Chinggisid's advance into northern China was mirrored in their help against the Khwarazmshah in the west and as Chinggis Khan and later his successors began to consolidate their gains and build up their administration and bureaucracy, the influence and role of the Khitans grew exponentially. However, though the role of the Khitans as well as many other non-ethnic Mongols grew and spread within the empire, many of these loyal agents of the generally popular revolution were content to identify themselves as 'Mongols,' which has resulted in widespread confusion as to the nature of the Mongol Empire. Today the term Chinggisid is employed to differentiate between ethnic Mongols and the far more numerous people from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds who recognised the descendants of Chinggis Khan as their head of state.

Finally, this paper explains how the last remaining group to continue identifying themselves as Khitans, the Qara Khitai of Kirman, were instrumental in welcoming Hulegu Khan (d.1265) to Iran, in the creation of the Ilkhanate (1258-1335), and in the establishment of an imperial polity encompassing Greater Iran, China, Yunnan, and Tibet. During their exile in China and in the Islamic world, the Khitans had assimilated with the local people and institutions so that when Chinggis Khan arrived needing practical help in establishing administrative and military control over these lands, the Khitans were able to offer him experience and knowledge unavailable elsewhere and in return he was able to offer a share of his power and even of his name, which they gratefully received.

Prestor John and the Qara Khitai

They were known as the Qara Khitai though more usually, outside of Iran, as the Khitans or Da (great) Liao Dynasty (907-1125), and they faithfully served both the Mongols and the Persians and were integral to the political and cultural success of the alliance between Yuan China and Ilkhanid Iran. They appeared in the mid-twelfth century as seemingly unstoppable invaders but chose integration rather than subjugation and within decades were being celebrated as exemplary rulers in a popular *Mirror for Princes*, citing their loyalty and respect for their Muslim subjects as laudable traits. "Now his justice had no bounds, nor was there any limit to the effectiveness of his commands; and, indeed, in these two things is comprised the essence of kingship."⁴ They were also thought to be harbingers of Prester John, the mythical Christian patriarch (*presbyter*), residing in the fabled 'East,'

⁴ See Nizāmī-i-'Arūḍī of Samarqand, *Chahār Maqāla*, trans. by E.G. Browne (London: CUP, 1921), 24-25.

who would appear and then rescue the Christian world at the most opportune time. In 1221, Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre, returned from the disastrous Fifth Crusade with good news: King David of India, the son or grandson of Prester John, had mobilised his armies against the Muslims. He had already conquered the Khwarezmian Empire and was moving, reputedly marching on Baghdad. This descendant of the great king who had defeated the Saljuqs in 1141 planned to reconquer and rebuild Jerusalem. The Khitans were many things to many men.

Their appearance on the battlefield of Qatwan in 1141, ranked before the Saljuq armies of Sanjar (r.1118-57), marked a turning point in the history of Iran as the glories of the Saljuq⁵ years began to fade into the past. The battle-hardened cavalry warriors of steppe-trained Khitans swept Sanjar's troops before them to a quick and decisive victory. However, the Liao leader, Yelü Dashi's aim was not subjugation or annihilation and with victory in his grasp he sued for peace and sought accommodation with his defeated foes. According to Ibn al-Athir [d.1233],⁶ it was the Khwarazmshah, Atsiz [r.1127-56], who encouraged the exiled Turco-Mongols to attack while al-Ḥusaynī's *Akbbār al-dawla al-Saljuqiyya* acknowledges that Atsiz initially took full advantage of his nominal overlord's dire predicament but emphasises that on Sanjar's homecoming, the Khwarazmshah returned the looted royal treasure chest with the sultanal seals and "dismounted in full view of the Sultan, kissed the ground and made the obligatory acts of obeisance."⁷ The Khwarazmshahs⁸ were to bide their time before fulfilling their lofty ambitions.

Sanjar's prestige was irrevocably damaged and though he survived with his life, the ignominy of captivity from 1153-56 at the hands of discontented Turkoman tribal leaders who viewed the Saljuqs as renegades and traitors to their Turkish heritage caused his health and standing never to recover and he died in 1157. Though the Saljuqid dynasties continued to rule regional thrones, the Great Saljuqs effectively died with Sanjar. However, officially Saljuq princes continued to claim an empire and sovereignty over Khorasan until 1194 when Sultan Toghril III was killed in battle against the Khwarazmshah, Tekish [d.1200]. Toghril III "was a just and poetic ruler"⁹ to whom "a kingdom had come unhoped-for" and who "put on the robe of the sultanate without striving for

⁵ The Great Saljuqs ruled Iran from Toghril Beg's arrival until Sultan Sanjar's demise, 1037-1153.

⁶ Ibn al-Athir also intimated that the Caliph al-Nāṣir (r.1158-1225), contacted Chinggis Khan and encouraged the Khan to attack the Khwarazmshah, 'Alā al-Dīn Mohammad.

⁷ Clifford E. Bosworth, *The History of the Seljuq State*, a translation of the *Akbbār al-dawla al-Saljuqiyya* (London: Routledge, 2011), 66.

⁸ The dynasty is generously claimed to have run from 1077-1231; the Khwarazmshahs exercised imperial powers from 1156-1220.

⁹ Zahir al-Din Nishāpūri, *The History of the Seljuq Turks from the Jami' al-tawārikh*, trans. Kenneth Allen Luther (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 155; Rashid al-Din, *History of the Seljuq Turks; volume II of Jami' al-tawārikh*, ed. Ahmad Ātesh (Tehran: Donyā-ye Ketāb, (1361)1982), 427.

it ... without the toil of seeking it.” The chronicle paints a tragic and blameless figure whose dynasty opened with a Toghril and closed with a Toghril “the bird of [whose] fortune came into the snare without bait.”¹⁰

The Khwarazmshah Tekish sent the Caliph, al-Nāṣir, Toghril’s head to join the head of Basāsīrī in Baghdad’s armoury¹¹ and sought the Caliph’s recognition as sultan of the former Saljuq Empire. When al-Nāṣir refused, Tekish reciprocated and withdrew his recognition of al-Nāṣir’s caliphal authority and the unprecedented situation arose with the infidel Khitan regime representing the Caliph’s interests in the east. With the final collapse of the Saljuq Empire, power in the eastern Islamic world was divided between the Khwarazmshahs and the Qara Khitai. The infidel Qara Khitai regime had not only come to a mutually agreeable accommodation with its Muslim subjects who were free to practice their faith unmolested and who joined and cooperated with the Khitan administration and army, but also with the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad and most of the Islamic world for whom the Khitans were prepared to act as their ‘Wall,’ a barrier against the forces of instability beyond in the *Dār al-‘arb*. “The people of Khitai were in truth the Wall of Zul-Qarnain.”¹² “[The Gurkhan] was a great wall behind which there were terrible foes.”¹³ The Qara Khitai had come a long way since their ignominious expulsion from their homeland in northern China circa 1130.

Da Liao

The Khitans or Liao were originally Turko-Mongol nomads roaming the vast Eurasian steppe lands bounded by the Urals in the west and the barren Tundra in the northeast.

Residing in the Great Desert (大漠 - dà mò), where there is much cold and much wind, they had livestock tending and fishing as food source, fur as dress and migrated with the seasons. Their specialty was carts and horses...In the old Khitan custom, their wealth was horses, their strength was soldiers. Horses were released all through the open country and demobilized soldiers

¹⁰ Nishāpūrī, *The History of the Seljuq Turks*, 151; Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 422.

¹¹ Nishāpūrī, *The History of the Seljuq Turks*, 153; Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 426; Basāsīrī [d.1059] was a mamluk in the pay of the Buyids who entered the service of the Fatimids to fight the encroaching Saljuq forces besieging Baghdad.

¹² ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, ed. Mīrzā Moḥammad Qazvīnī (Leiden & London: E.J. Brill, 1912), vol. II, 80; ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juwaynī, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World-Conqueror*, ed. and trans. John Boyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, (1958)1997), 347. Zul-Qarnain (‘He of the Two Horns’) was an epithet applied to Alexander the Great, who was said to have constructed a wall of brass and iron to keep out Gog and Magog.

¹³ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. II, 89, (Persian text); Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 357 (English translation).

were spread throughout the people. When a matter of importance or battle arose they were called to arms. If the order was given at 5 am they would all assemble forthwith at 7 am. Horses followed water and grass. People relied on milk and kumiss. They bent the powerful bow and shot animals for their daily use. They had dried food and fodder. This was their Way (道 - dào). On account of this, they maintain victory and wherever they look they encounter no opposition.¹⁴

They established their kingdom in 916 and gradually assimilated with the sedentary Chinese culture, which prevailed throughout the region, until 1125 when following protracted military conflict with the Jin rulers of the Jurchen, the Liao ruling elite were forced into exile and those of their people who remained became second-class citizens and subjects of the conquering new-comers from the north. Yelü Yi, Abaoji, posthumously known as Emperor Taizu of Liao (872-r.907–926), is credited with founding the empire in northern China in 916 coinciding with the fall of the Tang dynasty (618-907). From its founding, the Khitans pursued a policy of aggressive expansion accommodating Korea [Goryeo] and in 1005 signing the Chanyuan Treaty with the Northern Song (960-1127), which established peace, mutual respect, and recognition between the two neighbours. Throughout its history, the Da Liao were divided over cultural identity, with Chinese sedentary traditions sitting uneasily with nomadic steppe practices, but the administration of a growing state and an evolving urbanised elite along with a healthy, expanding economy ensured that traditional Chinese governmental models prevailed, especially among the non-Khitan population. Initially, Abaoji established two systems, one in the northern regions where Khitan customs were followed for the predominantly Liao population, while in the south Chinese practices prevailed among the non-Khitan majority.

Differences between Chinese and Khitan society included gender roles and marital practices, echoing differences which were to define the contrasts found later when the Khitans assimilated into Persian society: the Khitans took a more egalitarian view towards gender, in sharp contrast to Chinese cultural practices that segregated men's and women's roles. Khitan women, just like their Mongol sisters, were taught to hunt, managed family property, engaged in politics, and held military and administrative positions. Many marriages were not arranged, virginity was not a requirement for first marriage, and women had the right to divorce and remarry. Another basic difference between Khitan and Chinese society was the idea of primogeniture, a practice favoured by the Khitan kings but not by their subjects who preferred the steppe tradition of tanistry,

¹⁴ "History of Liao," *Liaoshi*, Chinese Notes, last updated February 21, <http://chinesenotes.com/liaoshi.html>; vol. 32 and 59.

where a successor was either the popularly chosen candidate or the politically or militarily strongest aspirant. Steppe tradition believed very much in the first among equals and the equal division of inheritance between siblings. Both Chinese and Persian culture and tradition encouraged the great ruler, the divinely inspired emperor, the Shahanshah, King of Kings, touched by God.

The Jurchens had been one of the minority peoples living under Khitan domination in the north. Their ancestral lands were in the far north of Manchuria and for many years they had borne the indignities of their Khitan overlords, which included the rape of both married and unmarried Jurchen women by Liao envoys as a right.¹⁵ As their numbers increased, both within Liao-controlled territory and without, so too did their aspirations and sense of grievance and humiliation. In 1115 the warlord, Aguda, proclaimed himself king by founding the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) and led an invasion and rebellion against the Liao regime for which he sought an alliance with the Song emperor in the south. However, the Song armies did little to help the Jurchens oust the Khitans from their strongholds, but their vain efforts revealed clear military vulnerability to Aguda who, immediately upon ousting the Khitan armies, turned his forces on his Song allies. On 9th January 1127, the Jurchens ransacked Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty, capturing both Emperor Qinzong and his father, Emperor Huizong, who had abdicated in panic in the face of the Jin invasion. When Kaifeng fell, the Song emperor Qinzong, the former emperor Huizong, and all members of their retinue were seized as hostages and mockingly awarded new titles such as “Muddled Virtue” (Hun-te) and “Double Muddled” (Ch’ung-hun) designed to humiliate and antagonise, and then in 1128 they were forced to endure ritualised condemnation as war criminals. The new Jurchen Jin emperors grew fat on the wealth of their royal prisoners and they distributed the possessions and affluence of their Song subjects and citizens of Kaifeng and other Song cities to their victorious, hungry armies and grateful families.

Exile and Assimilation

The Jurchen invasion and occupation of northern China established two irreconcilable camps and two deeply humiliated foes whose pain became an integral part of their national identity. For the exiled Liao, the Qara Khitai of Central Asia, whose ties to their new lands in Turkestan and respect for the Muslim subjects was deep,¹⁶ this historical hurt ensured the preservation of their unique culture and can explain their

¹⁵ Hoyt Cleveland Tillman and Stephen H. West, eds., *China Under Jurchen Rule: Essays on Chin Intellectual and Cultural History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 27.

¹⁶ Michal Biran, “‘Like a Mighty Wall’: The Armies of the Qara Khitai (1124-1218),” *JSAS* 25 (2001): 44-91.

resistance to religious conversion to Islam.¹⁷ The Khitans never embraced the prevalent religion of their adopted land as they had Chinese culture because they resisted and never aspired to full integration and they always envisaged a return eventually to their homeland. However, the Khitans forged intimate partnerships with their host cultures, with the Muslim world just as with the Chinese. The *Liaoshi* claims that in 1115 the Khitan leader, Yelü Dashi [1087-1143], had been made a fellow of the *Hanlin Academy* with the title *linya* [professor].¹⁸ When he sought accommodation with the defeated Muslim armies, they submitted not solely from fear but with respect for an educated and cultured man.

“Ta-shi [Dashi] with his army rested in Samarqand ninety days. The king of the three million Hui (Mohammedans) came to offer his submission and brought products of his country as tribute. ... all his officers, civil and military, assembled and proclaimed Ta-shi emperor.”¹⁹

Prince Yelü Dashi (r. 1124/31-43) had received both a Khitan and a Chinese education, customary for an aristocrat of his standing at that time. He excelled as a mounted warrior gaining experience from military encounters with the southern Song Dynasty’s patrols, but more valuably from repelling the attacks of the northern enemy, the Jurchen, a constant existential threat to the Khitan dynasty. The final confrontation between the Khitans and the all-powerful Jurchen invaders saw Yelü Dashi as a clever statesman, a valiant warrior and fighter, and a decisive and pragmatic leader. In 1124 he proclaimed himself king (Wang) and led the remnants of his army and the political leadership into exile in the unknown West.²⁰ He was proclaimed Gürkhan (Universal Khan) at Emil in 1131.

The exiled Khitans’ *raison d’être* was the return and reclamation of their homelands in northern China. It was not the occupation or subjugation of Muslim Turkestan. Their occupation of eastern Turkestan was tactical and ‘temporary.’ Whenever the time was right and conditions favourable, the Qara Khitai would lead their armies back

¹⁷ Michal Biran, “True to their Ways,” in *Mongols, Turks, and Others*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Brill: Leiden, 2005), 175-99.

¹⁸ From *Liaoshi*, see Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, (1910)1967), vol. I, 211. The prestigious Chinese academy, the *Hanlin Academy*, operated from the Tang until 1911. Qubilai expanded and encouraged its activities. See Abolala Soudavar, “The Han-lin Academy and the Persian Royal Library-Atelier,” in *History and Historiography in Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 467-83.

¹⁹ From *Liaoshi*, see trans. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches*, 214-15.

²⁰ István Vásáry, “QARĀ KĒTĀY,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, last Updated: December 17, 2013, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/qara-ketay>.

eastward and they would settle once again in the flourishing towns, cities, and pastures of northern China. It was for this reason that they resisted assimilation with their loyal subjects. The Qara Khitai retained their ancestral customs and traditions and did not, initially at least, adopt Islam.

However, though cultural assimilation had been resisted, the Qara Khitai had become intimately absorbed into the political shenanigans of the region played out between the Khwarazmshah, ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad, the Caliph, al-Nāṣir, and the Gürkhans from their capital, Balasagun. Following Turco-Mongol steppe tradition, the Qara Khitai allowed their subjects complete religious freedom and Muslims felt no restraints or pressures, unlike their fellow Sunnis to the west who were experiencing the Khwarazmshah’s wrath at the disrespect visited upon him by the Caliph. The Khwarazmshah, who “deemed all the monarchs of the world to be his servants, nay he considered Fortune herself to be his handmaid,”²¹ had already declared a local shaykh, Sayyid ‘Alā al-Mulk Tirmizī,²² the true leader of the Faithful and those among the ‘ulema who failed to follow his direction suffered accordingly. Al-Nāṣir’s name was no longer mentioned in the *keḩḩba* nor struck on Khwarazmi coinage and a fatwa issued by compliant local ‘ulema declared the caliph was unworthy of such an exalted office.²³ Uncooperative shaykhs and imams suffered accordingly. The father of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi, Bahā al-Dīn Walad, a theologian, jurist, and Sufi, fled Turkestan for Anatolia in the west after encountering the vengeful anger of the Khwarazmshah following religious disputes at the royal courts.

It was in this febrile political atmosphere, that the Khitan Gürkhan forged an alliance with the Caliph and conducted protracted and inconclusive warfare with his neighbour, ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad Khwarazmshah. Land and cities were conquered and surrendered, men and governors swore fealty and submission, armies fought on one side and then the other. Turkestan was a political quagmire of shifting alliances and short-lived loyalties not helped by the seemingly irreconcilable partisan divide at the heart of the Khwarazmian Empire between the Queen mother, Terkan Khatun, with her loyal following of Qipchaq Turks, sons of the steppe, and her despised son, ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad who sought loyalty from his Persian commanders and the urban elite. Circa 1209, the Gürkhan of the Qara Khitai was enjoying a period of strength and confidence whereas his foe, the Khwarazmshah, had been militarily humbled and forced into paying his rivals, the infidel Khitans, an annual tribute. Though the envoy of the Qara Khitai, Maḩmūd Tai, was received with honour by the Queen-mother, Terkan Khatun, and the correct tribute paid, he reported back to the Gürkhan that

²¹ Juwaynī, *Tarikh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. II, 90; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 358.

²² Juwaynī, *Tarikh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. II, 97; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 365.

²³ W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, E.J.W. Gibbs Memorial Trust (London: Luzac & Co. Ltd, 1977), 374-75.

upon his arrival ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad had absented himself from the court rather than “abase himself and fawn before any mortal or humble himself in any way”²⁴ and that in Maḥmūd Tai’s opinion, the sultan would be unlikely to honour the terms of his submission or pay tribute again.

The royal dowager’s courteous and respectful treatment of the Gürkhan’s envoys was not indicative of her son’s attitude to the Khitan Khan since Terkan Khatun had tribal connections to the Qara Khitai being a daughter of a Qipchaq Khan, a Qangli,²⁵ and a member of the Bayawut clan of the Yimāk, links not claimed by her son.²⁶ Shihāb al-Dīn Nasawī, ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad Khwarazmshah’s secretary and biographer, describes the rebellion against the sultan by Qara Khitai forces in 1218-19 as a rebellion by his maternal cousins (*min bani akhwalibi*), implying that the Khwarazmshah’s mother was a Qara Khitai, while the Syrian historian, Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, defines Terkan Khatun as a Qara Khitai.²⁷ Such ‘identity politics’ account for much of the enmity and disunity which undermined the Iranian resistance to Chinggis Khan’s attack on the Sultan’s lands. While the Khwarazmshah was avoiding the Gürkhan’s envoy, Maḥmūd Tai, and growing ever resentful of the humiliation he felt subjugating himself before an infidel king within the borders of the Dār al-Islām who was enjoying the support of the usurper of the caliphal throne in Baghdad, grand events were shaping the world beyond his borders and even his imagination.

Kuchluq Khan

In 1206 Temujin, an ambitious and determined Turco-Mongol warlord had been declared leader of the, until now, disunited tribes of the “people of the nine tongues” and “of the felt-walled tents.” These nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes had called a great quriltai where they hoisted a white standard with nine tails and proclaimed a new leader who they awarded the title of Chinggis Khan (Fierce or Hard Khan) and charged with leading their confederation, *Yeke Monggol Ulus* (Great Mongol Nation) to universal victory. Most of the tribes and their leaders endorsed Chinggis Khan, who had won his throne after much blood, gore, and sacrifice, and pledged their allegiance and undying loyalty to the Great Khan. However, one prince had resisted and in the course of his

²⁴ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. II, 90; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 358.

²⁵ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. II, 198; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 465.

²⁶ See Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144; Shihāb al-Dīn Nasawī, *Sirat al-Sultān Jalāl al-Dīn*, ed. Mudjabā Minuvī (Tehran: Scientific & Cultural Publications Company, 1986), 38.

²⁷ Cited Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144, no.103.

resistance his father, Tai-Buqa (Tayang Khan) the ruler of the Naiman, had fallen and he, Kuchluq Khan, chose exile rather than surrender and escaped to the west.

Kuchluq's appearance in the lands of the Qara Khitai circa 1208 coincided with a sharp decline in the fortunes of the Gürkhan. In the west, the Khwarazmshah was increasingly active while in the east tribal rebellions echoed the disruption that Chinggis Khan's 'revolution' was causing. In 1210, the Idi-qut of the Uyghurs proved their military loyalty to the Chinggisids rather than to the Qara Khitai, followed up in 1211 by a meeting with the Great Khan by the Kerulen River. In the same year another of the Gürkhan's vassals, the Qarluq Arslan Khan, switched his allegiance, and the pressure on the Khitan ruler mounted. Some sources claim that Kuchluq was seized by a Khitan patrol, while others insist that Kuchluq sought out the Gürkhan and voluntarily offered his services.²⁸ Rashīd al-Dīn relates a story that Qonqu, the daughter of the Gürkhan's chief wife, Gürbäsü, saw the Naiman prince awaiting an audience with her father and immediately fell in love with him. The strong-willed princess not only insisted that she be allowed to wed the prince but that rather than the traditional *boghtaq* headdress, which Turco-Mongol ladies traditionally donned upon marriage, she chose to sport the Chinese *niksa* instead and further insisted that her new husband abandon Christianity and adopt 'idolatry' in keeping with her own Buddhist beliefs.²⁹ All the sources agree that the naive Qara Khitai ruler acted impulsively and over-hastily in so readily accepting such a powerful and wilful political actor into his court at Balasagun. For the Gürkhan, Kuchluq's unexpected arrival offered a military and political bounty against the growing threat of the Khwarazmshah, since the Naimans had been vassals of the Qara Khitai until 1175 when they had surrendered to the Jurchens, and those relations, the *Liao Si* suggests, had survived.³⁰

Kuchluq was an experienced commander and he proved loyal to his new master and popular with the troops. His popularity with the Qara Khai soldiers placed under his command was due to his relaxation of the Gürkhan's strictures on looting and plunder. Kuchluq imposed no such restrictions as he campaigned nominally in the Gürkhan's interests throughout Qara Khitai territory, adding captured prisoners and rebels to the ranks of his army. When Kuchluq offered to seek out and round up his own dispersed Naiman troops, "My people are many; they are scattered throughout the region,"³¹ which he would then pledge to the Gürkhan's cause, "If I receive permission, I will collect them together and with the help of this people will assist and support the Gür-khan. I shall not deviate from the path he prescribes and as far as in me lies,

²⁸ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 46; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 62; Igor de Rachewitz, *Secret History of the Mongols* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2006), 126, 731, no. 198.

²⁹ Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 461.

³⁰ *Jin Si*, 121/2637 see citation in Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai*, 76.

³¹ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 46; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 63.

I shall not twist my neck from the fulfilment of whatever he commands.”³² His offer was gratefully accepted, “the Gürkhan was such a simpleton that he believed these words and gave him leave to depart,”³³ and in recognition of his services the Gürkhan “bestowed upon him the title of Küchlüg Khan, [whereupon] he leapt forth like an arrow from a strong bow.”³⁴

Kuchluq had soon realised that his new master was fighting a losing battle against advances by the Khwarazmshah in the west, defections to the Chinggisids in the east, and rebellion throughout his shrinking empire to a weak and indecisive ruler. He soon came to an understanding with the Khwarazmshah and they began to coordinate their military strategies. Any political capital the Gürkhan had acquired during his reign had been squandered in the same careless manner he had wasted his military advantages and victories, and Kuchluq was able to usurp his throne initially with the support of various powerful regional players. However, once he felt secure, Kuchluq’s true agenda became clear and any support he had once enjoyed rapidly evaporated. In particular, his love for the Khitan princess Qonqu is said to be responsible for his most infamous policies, which ultimately cost him his life.

With thy idol-like face thou hast made me thy worshipper,
and hath charmed me who didst formerly raise up troubles for me.
‘Tis no wonder that the fire of heaven consumeth my liver³⁵

Once secure in his position, Kuchluq initiated a campaign of oppression and terror against his Muslim subjects. The practice and any outward manifestation of the Islamic faith were forbidden, and Muslims were ordered to convert either to Buddhism or Christianity and to don the garb of the ‘Khitayans.’ Rashīd al-Dīn details the tyranny rained on his Muslim subjects including the burning of crops, blatant corruption, the aggressive quartering of troops in Muslim households and villages, and the constant harassment of religious leaders and any who openly practiced Islamic rituals. So swelled was Kuchluq with arrogance and pride that he challenged the ‘ulema and other Muslim spokesmen to a public debate³⁶ so that he might humiliate them and justify his harsh treatment of the community and the forced conversion he had decreed. The public debate had long been a widespread forum and form of entertainment popular with the Turco-Mongol tribes and with the Chinggisids in particular.³⁷ All the Mongol khans

³² Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. I, 47; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 63.

³³ Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 463.

³⁴ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. I, 47; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 63.

³⁵ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. I, 48; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 65.

³⁶ See George Lane, “Intellectual Jousting and the Chinggisid Wisdom Bazaars,” *JRAS* 26 (2016): 238-39.

³⁷ Lane, “Intellectual Jousting,” 235-247.

had organised grand debates and religious contests between various sects and religions, which were particularly popular and became more so as the Chinggisid revolution spread across Asia. Both Rashīd al-Dīn (d.1318) and Juwaynī (1226-83) record the debate held outside the gates of Hotan between ‘Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad Khotānī and Kuchluq Khan himself, witnessed by ‘3000 illustrious imams’ and multitudes of “all that wore the garb of science and piety”, both Muslim clerics and Christian monks.³⁸ According to Juwaynī, the debate quickly descended into verbal abuse on both sides but when the Imam of Hotan addressed the Naiman prince as accused, loudly proclaiming before the gathered masses, “dust be in thy mouth, thou enemy of the faith, thou accursed Kuchlug !”,³⁹ his fate was sealed.

The venerated shaykh was imprisoned naked and chained in a dungeon and alternately tortured and plied with promises and temptation. If he renounced his faith the rewards would be generous and bountiful, but instead, his refusal to capitulate to his torment earned him crucifixion on the gates of his seminary. But according to Juwaynī his martyrdom had divine repercussions and “God Almighty, in order to remove the evilness of Kuchlug, in a short space dispatched the Mongol army against him.”⁴⁰ The Persian historian was not the first Muslim to see God’s secret intent in the rise of Chinggis Khan. Prince Kuchluq’s actions against Chinggis Khan and his treachery against his host and saviour, the Gürkhan, had unforeseen and completely unexpected consequences as the strands of history and the threads of unfolding events culminated in eastern Turkestan, circa 1218, with the complete political, social and cultural transformation of the region as it entered the world’s first experience of globalisation.

The infidel Qara Khitai regime had ruled Muslim Turkestan with a soft hand and their subject people had accepted their political domination while enjoying the entrepreneurial mercantile economy with its tentacles stretching both east as far as the Chinese market and west through the bazaars of Iran and into the complex thoroughfares of the Islamic world. The Khitan rulers had enjoyed a reputation for exemplary and just rule and the Caliph in Baghdad, al-Nāṣir, was confident in his allegiance with an infidel ruler of whom was said, “now his justice had no bounds, nor was there any limit to the effectiveness of his commands; [for], indeed, in these two things is comprised the essence of kingship.”⁴¹ Under the rule of the Qara Khitai, the Muslims of eastern Turkestan had enjoyed complete religious freedom and no restrictions had been placed on the practice or propagation of their faith.

However, following Kuchluq’s seizure of power, harsh restrictions and regulations were introduced all of which grew in application and severity as his power increased.

³⁸ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 53; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 70-71.

³⁹ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 54; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 71-72.

⁴⁰ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 55; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 73.

⁴¹ Nizāmī-i-‘Arūdī of Samarqand, *Chabar Maqala*, 24-25.

The Naiman prince “compelled the inhabitants to abjure the religion of Mohammed ... The muezzins’ call to prayer and the worship of monotheist and believer were broken off; and the schools were closed and destroyed.” Hatred of the Naiman usurper of the Khitan throne was widespread as was ill-feeling towards the Khwarazmshah who had facilitated Kuchluq’s rise and encouraged his coup d’état. Past and present coalesced in 1218 and for at least two, briefly, major figures it was a final reckoning. While consolidating his victories over the Jurchens in Northern China, Chinggis Khan had returned his attention to the west and the unfinished business of his own rebels, namely the Naiman fugitive, Prince Kuchluq. Though it would be 1234, after the Great Khan’s demise, before the leader of the Jin dynasty actually surrendered, by 1218 Chinggisid forces, their numbers greatly inflated firstly by Khitans who saw the Mongol-led invaders as liberators and then by Chinese and even Jurchen who recognised that a ‘revolution’ was sweeping the country, were firmly in command of the north and its administration.

Chinggis Khan needed finance and a steady source of revenue and he realised that he had to break the traditional reliance of the steppe nomads on booty and slaves. Temujin had not been a beneficiary of traditional steppe practices and he was determined to learn the skills and confidence of ‘foreigners’ and to deny his wives and off-spring none of the luxuries of the outside world.⁴² Among those wives and offspring was Sorghaghtani Beki (1190-1252), married to his youngest son, Tolui Khan (d.1232), who versed her exceptional sons in ways of the sedentary world and a love of learning and knowledge. His commanders also needed schooling, or ‘cooking,’ in the art of taxation since their initial experiments amounted to phased robbery and, like unchecked plundering, also resulted in mass exodus of the peasantry and the workforce. Qubilai Khan (d.1294) in particular benefited from his mother’s influence in the management of his own lands and estates in China. ‘Cooked’ Khitan officials and former Jurchen administrators trained a new generation of Turco-Mongol steppe warriors in sedentary and urban bureaucracy. To further swell his coffers, Chinggis Khan turned to another traditional steppe practice, mercantile caravans, and the promotion of international trade. The Silk Road operated only with the protection and cooperation of the Eurasian Turco-Mongol tribes. However, before initiating contacts with the rulers of the Islamic world, Chinggis Khan first had to consolidate his position in his western provinces and ensure that his allies on the borders of the *Dar al-Islam* were united behind his strategy and he perceived Kuchluq’s persistent presence as an impediment to his approach.

⁴² See Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 585: “After us, our offspring will wear gold-brocaded robes and eat sweet and fatty tidbits ...”

Savior and Liberator of the Muslims of Eastern Turkestan

To rid himself of this troublesome figure, Chinggis Khan dispatched Jebe noyan (d.1223), his leading Commander of 10,000, with 20,000 troops. Despite fielding an army of 30,000, Kuchluq was quickly routed, defeated, and executed, and his head paraded around his former domains. Jebe owed his victory to the help he received from the peoples of eastern Turkestan who greeted the Chinggisid noyan as a liberator and saviour. The Chinggisid armies entered the *Dar al-Islam* not as an army of occupation but as an army of liberation and the muezzin proclaimed their welcome and gratitude to the forces of Chinggis Khan from the minarets throughout the country. Kuchluq's timely demise at the hands of an apparent 'force of nature' was an attestation of their own prophecies. It confirmed, "that every creature who brings harm to the Muhammadan religion is soon overcome, and he who propagates and strengthens the Islamic code, even if he be not a follower, will succeed and enjoy greater fortune day by day."⁴³ The historian and future governor of Ilkhanid Baghdad, 'Alā al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juwaynī (d.1283) whose father had served under the last Khwarazmshah and who entered Chinggisid service not long after these events had transpired, wrote that, "whoever molests the faith and law of Mohammed never triumphs, while whoever fosters it, even though it be not his own religion, advances day by day in prosperity and consideration."⁴⁴

The unresisted absorption of predominantly Muslim eastern Turkestan into the growing Chinggisid Empire has often escaped scrutiny and its significance downplayed or even ignored, as has the part that Muslim troops played in the invasion of the lands of the Khwarazmshah and the later establishment of the Ilkhanid regime. For most Muslims, life under the Qara Khitai had been good and, for a trading economy, the markets opened by the Khitans in the east were a welcome source of wealth and opportunity. Additionally, the region to the east of the Qara Khitaiyan domains was for the most part already under the sway or control of the Chinggisids, including areas with large Muslim populations. The Caliph al-Nāṣir of Baghdad long had recognised the Gürkhan, while supporters of the despot 'Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad Khwarazmshah were scarce, even in the lands which he directly controlled. The Khwarazmshah had offered support to the rabidly anti-Muslim Kuchluq but had never sent aid or even encouragement to the Muslim resistance and for this reason Jebe's opportune arrival on the borders of Turkestan appeared "as though the arrow of prayer hit the target of answer and acceptance"⁴⁵ and the noyan's promises to "to remove the corruption of

⁴³ Rashid al-Din, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 466.

⁴⁴ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 50; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 68.

⁴⁵ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jabān Gushā*, vol. I, 49; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 66.

Küchlüg and lance the abscess of his sedition⁴⁶ were welcomed with jubilation. Word quickly spread that

permitted the recitation of the *takbir* and the *azan*, and caused a herald to proclaim in the town that each should abide by his own religion and follow his own creed. Then we knew the existence of this people to be one of the mercies of the Lord and one of the bounties of divine grace.⁴⁷

So willing were the peoples of the region to embrace their new masters that when Chinggis Khan called for the formation of an embassy to approach the Khwarazmshah, local merchants and notables immediately responded positively. The initial embassy which Chinggis Khan dispatched to the court of the Khwarazmshah was composed of 450 Muslim merchants and was sent in response to the arrival in the Mongol court of merchants from the Khwarazmshah. The main primary sources are confusing and sometimes contradictory as regards the details of these events but Nasawī, personal aide to Jalāl al-Dīn Mingeberti, records Maḥmūd Khwarazmī's (Yalavach) opening embassy to the Sultan when he delivers a personal message from Chinggis Khan proposing peace, mutual respect and recognition, and the commencement of commercial relations between the two 'world leaders.' "I am the sovereign of the Sun-rise, and thou the sovereign of the sun-set. Let there be between us a firm treaty of friendship, amity, and peace."⁴⁸ The Great Khan assumed the Sultan had heard of his great victories in the east just as he had heard tale of the Khwarazmshah's own triumphs, and he foresaw that their cooperation would be mutually advantageous and pleasing to 'Alā al-Dīn Moḥammad. He concluded his message, "you are a dear son to me, and so also are all Muslims,"⁴⁹ to which the ambassador, Maḥmūd, added, "on a level with his dearest of sons."⁵⁰ The Sultan separated Maḥmūd of Khwarazm, from the other two special envoys, 'Alī Khwaja of Bukhara, and Yusuf Kanka of Otrar, and interrogated him to the veracity of the Khan's claims and then berated the merchant for serving the interests of an infidel and a foreigner. He promised Maḥmūd rewards if he would remain at the Chinggisid court and continue to pass intelligence to him and, as a pledge of his goodwill, he gave the merchant a precious armband encrusted in jewels.⁵¹ Out of fear of exciting the Sultan's ire Maḥmūd chose his words and responses carefully

⁴⁶ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. I, 50; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 66.

⁴⁷ Juwaynī, *Tārikh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. I, 50; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 67.

⁴⁸ Jūzjānī Minhāj al-Dīn, *Ṭabakat-i-Nāṣiri*, translated by H.G. Raverty (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1881), 966, text 103.

⁴⁹ Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saifu Turks*, 473.

⁵⁰ Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad Nasawī, *Sirat-i-Jalāl al-Dīn Mīnkubarnī* (Tehran: S.I.I.F. Publications, 1986), 49.

⁵¹ Nasawī, *Sirat-i-Jalāl al-Dīn Mīnkubarnī*, 50.

and inflated the strength and size of the Khwarazmshah's armies in comparison to the Mongol forces, which placated him, though he continued to complain bitterly of the humiliation of being considered a son by an accursed (*mal'ūn*) infidel. However, on parting the Sultan assured the embassy that he would be willing to sign a peace treaty with the Great Khan.

It was while Chinggis Khan was awaiting the Sultan's response that he sent Jebe to conclude the Kuchluq distraction. It is also probable that he dispatched two sets of envoys at the same time, one carrying his message directly to the Sultan and led by Maḥmūd Khwarazmī, and the other composed of 450 merchants that went via Otrar. The party that went via Otrar was received by the governor of the city, Īnālchuk, a relative of the Sultan's mother, Terkan Khatun, and immediately upon seeing the jewels, furs, and precious goods which the merchants were transporting he allowed cupidity to rule his actions. How responsible the Sultan was for his governor's actions is debatable. Juwaynī states unequivocally that Īnālchuk executed his prisoners only after receiving instructions from the Sultan, a version endorsed by Rashīd al-Dīn and it is known that he received his share of the spoils. The Shah would have received news of the merchants' arrest after the departure of the envoys whom he had entertained, and he might well have been smarting from the indignity of that memory. Ibn al-Athīr (d.1233), despite his sympathy for the Khwarazmshah, considered him fully responsible for the massacre and looting of the envoys and quotes the Shah threatening the Chinggisid invaders. "I am coming to you, though you were at the end of the Earth, to deliver punishment and to treat you as I treated your followers."⁵²

When news reached the Great Khan of the tragic fate of his envoys after their arrival in Otrar, he prepared for war but first he sought solitude and time to converse with his God. In a display of restraint and statesmanship, Chinggis Khan decided to give the Sultan one last chance to withdraw from the brink of the destruction, which the Khan assured the Khwarazmshah would be his fate if he confronted the Mongol-led armies. Since Maḥmūd had arrived back safely from the Sultan's court and the merchants had been massacred in Otrar before having reached the capital, there was a chance that the Khwarazmshah was innocent of this grave diplomatic crime, particularly heinous to Turco-Mongols who consider ambassadors and diplomats sacrosanct and untouchable and the breach of this stricture of the Great Yasa as grounds for war.

Chinggis Khan exercised extreme restraint since he had no wish to enter another war when he had yet to conclude hostilities in the east and the prospect of lucrative commercial relations in the west was still a possibility. Ibn Kafraj Bughrā, whose father had been in the service of Tekish Khwarazmshah, accompanied by two

⁵² Ibn al-Athīr, *The Chronicle for the Crusading Period, 1193-1231*, trans. D.S. Richards (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 206.

Mongol officials led the mission whose aim was to receive an explanation, an apology, and the head of Īnālchuk and to conclude a peace treaty with the Khwarazmshah. The Sultan did not hesitate, and he murdered the Great Khan's messenger, though he spared his companions, ignominiously shaving their beards and sending them back with his message of defiance.⁵³ By the time Chinggis Khan was ready to launch his attack on the lands of the Khwarazmshah, covering much of Greater Iran, his view of his opponent had changed. He had learnt much from his scouts and spies and from the many merchants and administrative officials who had happily joined his entourage. The Khwarazmshah ruled over a vast expanse of land but his kingdom was riven with discontent, disunity, and rebellion not least among whom was his mother, Terkan Khatun (d.1233), who eventually surrendered and lived another ten years in exile in Mongolia. The Khwarazmshah fled leaving his generals to mount what resistance they could muster and died alone and wracked with pleurisy on the island of Abaskun in the southern Caspian.⁵⁴

One reason that the Chinggisid victory was so complete is that the Khwarazmshah's regime collapsed and disintegrated and that the Khitans, both those serving under the Qara Khitai and later Kuchluq and those administering the Sultan's lands and cities, were ready to join forces with the invaders and swell the ranks of the Chinggisid army. It was around this time that Rashīd al-Dīn records that it came about that:

the people of Cathay, Jurcha, Nankiyas Uyghur, Qipchaq, Turcoman, Qarluq, Qalach, and all the prisoners and Tajik races that have been brought up among the Mongols are also called Mongols. All that assemblage takes pride in calling itself Mongol.⁵⁵

Included in this quotation are most of the tribes and people who were swallowed up in those first decades of the thirteenth century when the Chinggisid revolution spread across Asia. The Khitans were among the first to assimilate and were the most important in the assimilation of the lands of both east and west and it was a role they continued to play throughout the Chinggisid lands and centuries.

After the collapse of the Khwarazmshah's empire, Iran became nominally part of the Mongol Empire. However, it remained peripheral and neglected and for three decades it existed as a collection of often warring mini-states buffeted by the slings and arrows of its neighbours' fortunes and decisions made far from its weakened, porous borders. For three decades the whole region enjoyed few of the advantages of being a

⁵³ Ibn al-Athīr, *The Chronicle for the Crusading Period*, 206.

⁵⁴ On his end see Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jahān Gushā*, vol. II, 115-17; Boyle, *Genghis Khan*, 385-87.

⁵⁵ Rashīd al-Dīn, *History of the Saljuq Turks*, 78.

part of a vast empire but most of the disadvantages. A Chinggisid army and a military governor ensured that the various city-states paid their taxes to far-off Qaraqorum, but that same army was unable to enforce security or provide protection for merchants braving the highways. Jalāl al-Dīn Mingabertī, the last Khwarazmshah “was at that time leaping all over the counties of Khurasan like a stag”⁵⁶ and like other warlords of the region, the Caliph’s troops and Ismaili forces continued to rampage unchecked across the whole country from the Caucasus to the waters of the Gulf and from the deserts of the Sind to the lands watered by the Oxus.

The Qutlughkhans of Kirman

One of the mini-states that had successfully established itself was centred on the south-eastern city of Kirman ruled over by the Qutlughkhan, Baraq Ḥājib (r.1222-35). Baraq Ḥājib was a Khitan who had served under the Khwarazmshah as governor of Kirman. After the Sultan’s demise, he had seized control and forcefully fought off attempts by the Sultan’s two sons to occupy the city. He converted to Islam and was recognised by the Caliph in Baghdad and then pledged his loyalty to Chinggis Khan who named him Qutlugh Khan as founder of a dynasty. Baraq Ḥājib established the Qara Khitai as a Persian, Muslim, Khitan presence in the new Iran, which was founded in the 1250s with the arrival of Hulegu Khan, its first Ilkhanid ruler. It was the rule of his wife, daughter-in-law, and eventual successor, the remarkable Terkan Khatun that cemented relations between Kirman and the Ilkhanate capital and seat of Iran’s establishment. Possibly a descendant of Qara Khitai royalty, Terkan Khatun was sold into slavery during the wars between the Khwarazmshah and the Gurkhan. Her beauty, poise, and intelligence ensured that her fame spread, and that dominion and propriety rights over her remained highly prized and closely coveted. After passing through the control of various powerful men, Baraq Hajib acquired her and falling in love with her, married her and she hence bore him a son. On his death she passed power to his son, Qubṭ al-Dīn (d.1257), and acquired the title Qutlugh Khatun (r.1257-83), and when Qubṭ al-Dīn also died she ascended the throne of Kirman and received official recognition as the ruler of the province. So effective and popular did she prove with the people of Kirman that they, including the ulema, accepted her as their local sovereign. She remained in power for three decades before power passed to her daughter and wife to two Ilkhans, Padeshah Khatun.

The Qara Khitai of Kirman, the Qutlughkhans, were the last official Khitan dynas-

⁵⁶ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abu al-Faraj*, trans. Ernest Wallis Budge (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2003), 394.

ty in either China or Iran. In both countries they had become fully integrated into the people and culture. However, ancestral memories run deep and it is highly likely that individual families were well aware of their Khitan roots. This ancestral memory might explain why Iranian traders to Hangzhou circa 1280 were so readily accepted by the local population whose administration had been heavily infiltrated by Khitans from the north. When these Muslim merchants arrived following Qubilai's bloodless conquest of the city, former capital of the Song, in 1276, they were welcomed and invited to build a mosque and extensive graveyard in the bustling centre of the city.⁵⁷ As a reward for services to Qubilai Khan and the war on his western border, the Iranian entrepreneur, 'Alā' al-Dīn, was awarded an official position and land in the former Song capital.⁵⁸ He chose to erect a mosque for the growing Muslim and Persian community of the city in the heart of the commercial section of the city, a short walk from the Drum Tower and the former gate to the imperial palace. 'Alā' al-Dīn had acquired a small park or wasteland, Wulin Gardens, which was being utilised by the neighbouring establishments at the time, a popular wine bar with a brothel upstairs on one side and a thriving 'entertainment centre,' the Middle Wazi. The overspill from the two thriving businesses could use the garden as an open-air drinking and carousing venue so its transformation into a revered religious sanctuary must have had a considerable impact on the community. However, there is no record of any social upheaval and the mosque has continued to serve the local Muslim community until the present day. A map of the area from the Ming dynasty a century later records the presence of the Phoenix Mosque but not of the less salubrious neighbouring establishments. It can only be assumed that the two popular nightspots disappeared at the same time as the very prominent mosque appeared on Hangzhou's main thoroughfare, Imperial Street, and yet the local population seems to have accepted this without apparent protest. This suggests that the arrival of this Persian community of Muslim traders was in some way advantageous or welcome to the indigenous people.

Final Reflections

When Chinggis Khan initially invaded northern China and ousted the ruling Jurchen regime, he had been aided and abetted by the Khitan underclass who had provided the logistics, intelligence, and their knowledge of military technology hitherto unavailable to the Mongol forces. In addition, the Khitans were immediately able to provide the administrative know-how crucial for the smooth occupation of such an extensive ter-

⁵⁷ See George Lane, *The Phoenix Mosque* (London: Gingko Press, 2019).

⁵⁸ Lane, *Phoenix Mosque*, 47.

ritory of urban and rural communities. Those Khitans who had provided such timely assistance to the Mongol forces were rewarded with positions of power and prestige in the territory which subsequently fell to the advancing Chinggisid forces including in the Song capital, Hangzhou. Whether the presence of Khitans related through blood and family links can explain the welcome that was afforded the Persians who settled in Hangzhou in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries is pure conjecture and far more research is needed before any conclusions can be arrived at. However, at the very least, entrepreneurial, commercial, and mercantile links and contacts established by decades of Khitan enterprise throughout the snaking, spreading, and flowering path of the Silk Road allowed the opportunities enjoyed by Ilkhanid merchants and adventurers in Hangzhou would not have been available without the enterprise of those early Khitan exiles.

What is also beyond doubt is the positive impact that the Khitans had on the Chinggisid Empire as a whole and the relations the Chinggisids enjoyed with Iran and China. The presence of culturally integrated Khitans in both Iran and China and in the administration and military of the Chinggisid forces ensured that the occupation of Iran circa 1255 proceeded smoothly and with minimal bloodshed. Because the Khitans had embraced the Chinggisid revolution so enthusiastically and assimilated so completely, including in many cases abandoning their Khitan identity, their central role has not, until recently, been fully recognised and their impact under-estimated. In both China and in Iran individual Khitans acquired local names, and in Iran Muslim identities, and in many cases these new names obscured their ethnic origins. It must be hoped that further focused research will clarify some of these problems.

In many ways, the Khitan's greatest achievement is their least recognised in that in achieving it they had abandoned their identity. The Khitans had offered Chinggis Khan their cooperation and vast knowledge of both Iran and China and in return the Great Khan had offered them a share in the administration of his empire. They embraced his overture but in so doing also accepted his name. They, like so many others, became Mongols and so the victories they achieved and enjoyed became collective Mongol successes. They became so integrated as to become almost indistinguishable. However, it must surely be recognised that without the Khitan contribution the Mongol Empire might never have been realised.

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