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A New Study of the Clothing of the Zubu Nomads in Mongolia During the Liao Dynasty

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Abstract: The clothing styles of the ancient Xiongnu and Xianbei nomads were inherited by the Khitans, proto-Mongolic speakers who established a powerful state in the 10th-12th centuries. After founding their state, they enacted laws regulating dress: in the northern part of their realm, people were to wear their traditional attire, while in the southern regions, people were required to wear Han-style garments. During the height of the Khitan Empire, the Mongolic groups under their authority, known as Zubu, left behind clothing traditions that Mongolian archaeologists have recently uncovered and studied, contributing significant knowledge about the apparel of early nomads. Furthermore, among the cultural heritage preserved in private collections in Mongolia are valuable artefacts that shed light on the clothing design of early Mongolic peoples. Based on geographic context, historical sources, detailed examination of related artefacts, and radiocarbon dating, researchers have concluded that these finds are associated with the Kerait and Naiman lineages.

Keywords: Khitan; Liao dynasty; ancient Mongols; Zubu nomads; clothing

Introduction

The richest source of information on Khitan clothing is found in the murals of their tombs. Although no examples of this type have yet been discovered in Mongolia, a substantial number have been unearthed and studied in the Khitan heartlands of present-day Jilin and Liaoning provinces, as well as in Ulaanchab and Tongliao of Inner Mongolia, China. These murals remain among the most important sources for reconstructing the clothing and physical appearance of people of that era. To date, more than 300 tombs have been excavated, of which over 80 contain murals. From these depictions, it is evident that Khitan clothing included several types, such as close-fitting robes with overlapping fronts that were pulled on over the head, garments with a straight vertical opening at the front, and robes with diagonal lapels crossing in the opposite direction (Wangchao 2002).

Agriculture and handicrafts flourished among the Khitans, including knowledge of crop cultivation, hemp and ramie production, sericulture, and silk weaving. The achievements of Khitan painting were outstanding among the nomadic societies of the Mongolian Plateau. Notable painters emerged during this period, including Yelu Pei, the eldest son of Emperor Taizu of the Liao dynasty (907-1125); Emperor Shengzong Yelu Longxu; Emperor Xingzong Yelu Zongzhen; as well as the renowned artists Hu Gui and his son Hu Qian. Some of their works have survived to the present day. The silk textiles unearthed from Liao tombs, temples, and stupas provide tangible evidence for understanding the level of Khitan silk-weaving techniques. According to the research of scholars from the China National Silk Museum, the weaving techniques of the Liao dynasty inherited the traditions of the Tang dynasty, developed further on the foundations of Chinese silk weaving, and eventually attained a highly advanced level (Zhao 2004: 251-259).

During the height of the Khitan empire, the Mongolic groups under their administration, referred to as Zubu, left behind clothing remains that have been uncovered in recent years by Mongolian researchers, providing important insights into the attire of early nomadic peoples.

A notable example is the discovery of clothing fragments at a rock burial site in Dugui Tsakhir, Bayantsagaan soum of Bayankhongor province. Here, remains of several robes made of felt, silk, leather, and wool were unearthed, offering highly valuable evidence for the study of the garments of Mongolic groups of that period. These finds fully reflect the distinctive characteristics of nomadic clothing. On the basis of geographic context, historical accounts, comparative analysis of associated artefacts, and radiocarbon dating, researchers have concluded that these remains are connected with the lineages of the Kerait and Naiman (Erdenebat & Amartuvshin 2010).

Clothing Items Preserved in Public Collections

In 2015, a cave burial dating to the 10th century was excavated at a rock site called Üzüür Gyalan in Munkhkhairkhan soum, Khovd province. The excavation revealed remarkably well-preserved artefacts, including four felt-lined leather robes, felt-lined cotton trousers with shoulder straps, a hat, felt socks, uniquely crafted

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leather shoes, a felt bundle, a purse, a bag, and a felt pouch containing sewing tools. These finds constitute an unparalleled primary source for studying the clothing and personal effects of women of that period. Additionally, textile-related artefacts such as painted felt, embroidered flowers and spirals using loose threads, stirrups, saddle padding, weaving frames, various wool threads, and silk floss were uncovered in significant numbers (Munkhbayar et al. 2016: 164-187; Bayarsaikhan & Enkhbat 2017: 29-79).

Moreover, among the cultural heritage preserved in private collections in Mongolia, there are rare and precious items that allow the study of the history of Mongolian clothing and adornment. For instance, a private collection in Ulaanbaatar contains several types of clothing items from Mongolic groups dating to the Khitan period. From the 10th-12th centuries, Mongolic groups documented in Khitan historical sources under the general name Zubu have yielded several examples of headgear. These include felt crowns, hair ornaments made of animal hair, felt-lined hats, and winter hats finished with silk or cotton. The common characteristics of these hats are a pointed crown, long earflaps protecting the ears and neck from wind and cold, and the fact that the brim and earflaps were always sewn and lined with soft, warm fur. Additionally, the crown of the hat was reinforced with felt, and two earflaps could be raised and tied at the back with a cloth ribbon. This design preserves the fundamental form of winter hats that has long been widespread among nomadic herders living under the extreme and harsh climatic conditions of Central Asia.

In private collections in Ulaanbaatar, there are winter hats with a pointed crown, an open top section, a wide brim, and earflaps, lined with calf leather. These hats consist of three parts and feature a felt construction resembling an intertwined crown, with a highly distinctive, ornate brim (Figure 1). To date, no other examples of hats with such long brims, connected with decorative buttons or straps, have been found in this region. However, based on overall construction and structure, the winter hat most similar to these has been discovered in Alaer, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China, and researchers have attributed it to the Tatars of the 11th-12th centuries (Gorelik 2010: 50, Table 9, 1). A notable characteristic of the hat found in Xinjiang is that it either lacks a brim or the brim has not survived, whereas the tall crown at the open top, sewn together with felt, has been preserved intact (Qi & Wang 2008: 42-43) (Figure 2).

Another hat with a tall crown lined with animal hair was also discovered in Xinjiang, and researchers have dated it to the 11th-12th centuries. The crown of this hat is made of a material distinct from the main body, made of leopard skin and adorned with red embroidery. Depictions of various types of nomadic clothing, including hats with brims, can be observed in some medieval paintings (Zhongguo 1999: 29).

In private collections in Ulaanbaatar, there is a felt, silk-covered crown-like headdress, ornamented with colourful thread patterns and fastened with multiple cloth straps and buttons. To date, no similar example has been found elsewhere in Mongolia. The overall shape and design of this crown resemble an 8th-century golden crown unearthed from the sacrificial tomb of Bilge Khan of the Turks in Khushuu Tsaidam, Kharkh, Arkhangai province, as well as a golden crown discovered in a Liao dynasty tomb in Inner Mongolia. The tradition of decorating hats with such crown-shaped brims appears to have been passed down among medieval Mongols, as evidenced by an illustration in a 15th-17th century copy of Sudryn Chuulgan, preserved in the library of Rampur, India (Rice 2012: 152, Fig. 2).

Over the past fifty years, Chinese archaeologists have excavated numerous Liao dynasty tombs in Inner Mongolia and Liaoning provinces, uncovering and studying a wide variety of Khitan clothing and apparel. These studies indicate that the structure and style of Khitan dress closely resemble those of Mongols during the later Yuan dynasty. Summer knee-length garments were layered, while winter garments retained the same basic shape as summer clothing but were wider and fuller. The cuffs of boots were high, similar to modern Mongolian winter garments. The primary distinction noted is that Khitan robes featured a round neckline with a cross-over closure (i.e., a left-over-right front).

Some of the most famous and remarkably well-preserved artefacts of Khitan clothing have been discovered in prominent sites such as the tomb of Yelu Yuzhi in Ulaanhad, Inner Mongolia (died 941); the tomb of an unidentified Khitan aristocrat in Daichin Tal, a Liao dynasty woman's tomb unearthed in Yuemaotai, Liaoning province; the tomb of the son-in-law of a Liao dynasty emperor in Ulaanhad, Inner Mongolia; the royal burial of the Wei state in Qinlunshan, the tomb of Princess Chengguo and her husband Xiao Shaozhu, and finds from Tugaljin Mountain in the Horchin East Banner and from the White Stupa in Chingzhou, Baarin West Banner, Tunliao city. In addition, Liao dynasty garments and textile artefacts are preserved in institutions such as the Abegg-Stiftung in Switzerland, the Musée Guimet in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Cleveland Museum of Art, as well as in various galleries and private collections in China, Europe, Asia, and the Americas (Zhao 2004: 17-29; Schorta 2007: 17-52).

Examining 10th-12th century robes discovered in Mongolia, their general cut and design are very similar to Khitan garments, characterised by narrow sleeves, long flared hems, and straight closures. The felt robe uncovered from the rock burial in Dugui Tsakhir, Bayankhongor

province, features a round collar, overlaps closed to the right with buttons on the front, a straight front opening, a decorated yoke at the back, and long flared hems extending from loose side panels sewn into the body. The collar, hems, and sleeve openings are padded with brown felt and ornamented with patterns sewn using camel-wool yarn (Erdenebat & Amartüvshin 2010: 26-37). Interestingly, a fragment from Dugui Tsakhir is made of thin, brush-finished felt and is triangular, edged with brown felt. Its form closely resembles the crown portion of a felt headdress preserved in a private collection in Ulaanbaatar, as well as the tail section of an ancient shaman's robe. This demonstrates a direct continuity in the structural and decorative forms of these early Mongolian garments and headgear.

Examining six robes dating to the 10th-12th centuries unearthed from Dugui Tsakhir in Bayankhongor province and Üzüür Gylan in Khovd province, it is evident that their construction and design closely resemble Liao-dynasty robes. However, they feature right-side closures, and most do not have a fastening at the back. While some Chinese historical sources describe Khitans as wearing robes with left-over-right closures, numerous artefacts, including murals from Liao tombs in Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia, also depict Khitans wearing right-side closure robes. Among four Liao-period robes in a private collection in Ulaanbaatar, one robe made of five-patterned silk, partially burnt and almost destroyed, features a straight front closure folded toward the left. Its front panel at the chest is inset with a square piece of fabric of a different colour. Examination of the preserved outer edges, chest, and hems suggests that the robe was either fully lined or decorated with calf fur.

Our so-called "shaman's robe" (Figure 3) has narrow sleeves, multiple pleats on both shoulders, a wide front with double decorative panels sewn in the form of the robe's shoulder yoke, and a front panel and long flaps at the sides attached with multiple cloth tassels finished with small silver bells at the ends. The robe also features a distinctive "tail" at the back, a wide fastening, and a front panel with a unique square notch on the inside. Researchers have noted that the square-notch front panel design originated in Sasanian Iran (AD 224-651) and spread to parts of Europe and Asia from the 4th–5th centuries (Oka 2015: 65-76).

In addition, the robe was accompanied in the collection by spherical brass bell ornaments mounted on a flower-shaped base, with long straps made of twisted thick wool yarn, likely used to fasten and suspend them. In general construction, these brass bell tassels are identical to the golden bells discovered during the excavation of a 7th-century nomadic aristocrat's tomb at Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur soum, Bulgan province (Ochir & Erdenebold 2017: 212-213). The shape, form, design, knots, and decoration at tapered ends of the ribbon tapes on the shaman's deel are most identical to the ribbon tapes of the headdress and costumes of a Khitan nobleman kept at the Abegg-Stiftung Textile Museum in Switzerland. As a result of the radiocarbon dating, the dating of these textile artefacts is 976-1161 AD (98,8%) at the earliest and 1158-1283 (97,3%) at the latest (Schorta 2007: 180-204). Furthermore, the shaman's robe and the silk robe decorated with elaborate bird motifs (Figure 4) later became one of the principal garments used in the tsam ritual, when religion and monastic institutions flourished. This garment included a shoulder ornament resembling a sash, referred to as a dodig, which indicates an ancient tradition (Cammann 1951: 1-9; Dyakonova 1971: 127). In the case of the first robe, only the upper tubular part of the silk shoulder ornament, cut to form a sharp angle between the two shoulders and the back, was stitched into the collar of the robe, while the remaining part hung loosely and hollow. By contrast, the "bird-decorated" robe was deliberately crafted in this shoulder-ornament form from patterned silk woven specifically with such a motif. Within the ornamental frame of the shoulder piece (dodig), pairs of mythical firebirds facing each other in flight were woven. The phoenix or firebird was the emblem of the Liao imperial family. This silk fabric must therefore have been a product of the Khitan imperial weaving workshop, and the individual who wore this robe must have been an aristocrat of the highest rank in society at the time.

In addition, the wide pleated hem at the back of the shaman's robe, with a short pendant shaped like the tail of a Mongolian sheep, is an element unprecedented in the medieval nomadic costume tradition. However, for the early nomads of Central Asia, a similar "tailed" robe design was already fashionable in the clothing culture of the Altai Pazyryk during the 5th–3rd centuries BCE, as confirmed by archaeological research. The tail of the leather coat discovered in the Pazyryk burials, however, differs in shape from that of the Khitan-period shaman's robe found in Mongolia, and it is also considerably larger in scale. The leather coat with a tail at the back – commonly referred to by scholars as the "Scythian frock" – was first unearthed accidentally in 1865 by V. V. Radlov during the excavation of a burial mound at a site called Katanda. Such a garment style has also been documented in ethnographic studies among some northern peoples inhabiting the cold regions of Northern Asia, stretching from southern Siberia through the northern area of Lake Baikal to the basin of the Angara River, and even in the parkas of the Inuit in Alaska (Polos'mak 2001: 113-114). With regard to the silk trousers preserved in a private collection in Ulaanbaatar, their design and construction most closely resemble finds dated to the 10th–12th centuries. Examination of the silk itself also reveals

similarities with the textiles of the Liao and Southern Song dynasties of the same period. Archaeological evidence further demonstrates that trousers recovered from Khitan burials display a remarkable diversity. These include long trousers with wide cuffs and braces, trousers with integrated stockings and suspenders, trousers tightened at the waist by a drawstring, and short trousers intended for summer wear.

In addition, a particularly distinctive type of Khitan garment was the tukhuu, a unique piece of clothing designed to be worn over tall boots or shoes. This garment consisted of long leggings extending above the knees, secured with straps fastened to a belt around the waist. The tukhuu represents a functional innovation arising from the lived realities of a nomadic lifestyle – one that demanded year-round mobility on horseback. In practical terms, the tukhuu protected the rider's thighs and hips from chafing against the saddle blanket and stirrup leathers, while also serving as insulation against the severe winter cold. When the ancient nomadic garments and textile techniques represented in the Ulaanbaatar private collection are compared with Chinese, Persian, Central Asian, Sogdian, and European silks and fabrics in terms of weaving technology and decorative motifs, intriguing parallels emerge. The saddle covers, saddlecloths, felt pads, headgear, crowns, yellow silk robes, remnants of silk girdles, fragments of shamanic robes, garments with the five-medallion motif, pieces of silk decorated with dragon designs, trousers, and the ceremonial "bird-decorated" silk robe may all be attributed to the Khitan Liao dynasty (907-1125) (Pope 1939a; 1939b; Ierusalimskaja 1972: 5-56; Ierusalimskaja 1996; Dode 2001; Zhao 2004; Schorta 2006; Wieczorek & Lind 2007; Denney 2010: 243-267; Erdenebat 2018: 34-123).

Meanwhile, the silk used for trimming the shaman's robe – decorated with medallions depicting paired wolves and paired birds – appears to belong to the Persian weaving tradition of the 10th–12th centuries. Similarly, the inner lining of the robe, which displays a pattern of floral and avian designs arranged in dotted circles, seems to have been produced by contemporary Central Asian hand-weaving workshops. In terms of design and construction, the garments exhibit a strong influence from the clothing culture of the Liao dynasty, while also incorporating certain elements derived from Western Iranian textile traditions. A clear example can be seen in the square-cut collar of the shaman's robe and the slitted opening with buttonhole fastenings at the chest. The square-cut collar did not develop significantly after the 12th century, whereas the robe design with buttonhole fastenings on the chest became a widespread fashion trend across Eurasia during the Mongol imperial conquests (Gorelik 2011: 59-91).

The prototype of the paired-bird motif that appears on Khitan-period aristocratic silk robes and saddle ornaments found in Mongolia can be traced back to designs originating during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Influenced by Sogdian culture in Central Asia, these motifs spread widely throughout the east. By the 12th century, the paired-bird design had astonishingly penetrated not only into Iran but also into the Islamic art and silk-weaving traditions of Western Europe. The depictions of peacock-like birds found on medieval silks from a private collection in Ulaanbaatar correspond directly to the images on the silver saddle ornaments discovered in Inner Mongolia at Qinglunshan, specifically in the tombs of Khitan nobles – Princess Chenguo of the Liao dynasty (d. 1018 CE) and her husband of the Xiao clan, Shaozu (Sun Jianxua & Yang Xinyu 2008: 192).

Scholars of Liao textile art have categorised the woven motifs into a wide range of subjects: mythical creatures (dragon, phoenix, winged horse, makara); human figures (Buddhists, Daoists, dancers, horsemen); animals (lion, deer, hare, goose, falcon, peacock, pheasant, bee, butterfly, fish); plants (floral garlands, jamba flowers, peonies, lotuses, pomegranates, plums, bananas, bamboo, willows); natural elements (mountains, rocks, clouds, water); symbolic patterns (ribbons, canopies, and the like); and geometric designs (the five-medallion motif, scaled armour patterns) (Zhao 2004: 31-177). It must be emphasised that the silk garments of the Khitan-period Mongolic tribes preserved in the private collections of Ulaanbaatar have no exact parallels currently known anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, as noted earlier, some of these pieces were likely produced in the imperial silk-weaving workshops, which manufactured garments exclusively for the aristocracy and ruling elite. This phenomenon was not confined solely to the Liao dynasty but continued to flourish under the Mongol Empire (Allsen 1997: 99-106). The textile materials of the nomadic costumes dating from the 10th to early 11th centuries, and possibly extending to the end of the 12th century, thus serve as invaluable evidence for examining the population, settlement, economy, cultural interactions, military affairs, and political circumstances of the Mongolic groups of the period.

Conclusion

The clothing culture of the Khitans exerted a powerful influence not only upon the peoples subjected to their rule during the more than 200 years of their dynasty but also beyond their borders, affecting the Han Chinese population in the frontier regions of the Northern Song dynasty. This is clearly demonstrated by the edict of Emperor Huizong of the Song (r. 1100-1125), which decreed: "Those who presumptuously wear Khitan clothing, such as felt hats

or he-tun (boots), shall be punished for violating the imperial command." This illustrates the extent to which Khitan garments had become popular and widespread within Northern Song China (Wittfogel & Feng 1947: 236). The clothing of the Mongols was highly adapted to the natural environment, their way of life, and their pastoral economy. This functionality formed the basis for the wide dissemination of such attire and its influence upon the material cultures of neighbouring tribes, nations, and ethnic groups. Historical evidence shows that the clothing of the Mongols and their ancestors, the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, was highly valued even among the populations of sedentary civilisations with advanced material cultures. Indeed, many such societies adopted and utilised elements of nomadic costume.

Foreign scholars have devoted extensive research to the spread and diffusion of Mongolian clothing traditions, frequently emphasising their role as a significant contribution of the nomadic Mongols to the material culture of many peoples across the world. From this perspective, it becomes evident that the Mongols and their forebears influenced the culture of humanity not only through their military campaigns, martial skills, tactics, and equestrian culture but also through their remarkable achievements in the realm of material culture – most notably in the domain of clothing.

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Figure 1. Headdress. 10-12 century, silk, cotton, sable fur, silk thread. © Private collection in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Figure 2c. Hat of Nomads 11th-12th century. © Private Collection, Xinjiang, China

Figures 2a, 2b. Winter hat covered with silk and lined with sable fur, 11th-12th century. © Alaer, Urumch Museum, Xinjiang, China

Figure 3. Shaman's robe. 10th-12th century, silk, cotton, silk thread, silver. 220×128 cm.
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Figure 4. Robe. 10th-12th century, silk, cotton, silk thread. 208×144 cm.
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