

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

Studia uralo-altaica 53

Redigunt

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

Papers of the 7th International Conference on the Medieval History
of the Eurasian Steppe
Nov. 9–12, 2018
Shanghai University, China

Edited by Chen Hao

Szeged, 2019

This publication was financially supported by the MTA-ELTE-SZTE Silk Road Research Group

© University of Szeged,
Department of Altaic Studies,
Department of Finno-Ugrian Philology
Printed in 2019

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Printed by: Innovariant Ltd., H-6750 Algyó, Ipartelep 4.

ISBN: 978-963-306-708-6 (printed)

ISBN: 978-963-306-714-7 (pdf)

ISSN: 0133 4239

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Competing Narratives: A Comparative Study of Chinese Sources with the Old Turkic Inscriptions*

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Historiography and stereotypes

As the Chinese historians had the privilege of writing history, they described their neighboring ethnic groups as Rong, Yi, Man and Di, all of which have animalistic connotations in one way or another. Here we take the example of the Di to explain the problem that can be inherent in such historical records compiled from a single faceted perspective. Di refers to the nomadic and pastoral people to the north of China. Like other nomads, these people were skilled in archery and martial art rather than literature and scholarship. The steppe empires such as the Xiongnu, Rouran and Xianbei did not have their own writing systems, and therefore did not leave us any history about them written in their own language. Their histories were written by the Chinese historians. When the teachings of Confucianism were set as the moral standard, the steppe people were labelled as “lacking a sense of shame, knowing no rituals”, and even their costumes and hairstyles came to be viewed as “weird”, because they plaited their hair and fastened their gowns on the left side.¹ However, what about the image of the Chinese in the eyes of the nomadic peoples? How did they call the Chinese people in their own languages?

The Türks, who began to emerge as a steppe empire from the middle of the 6th century, were the first nomadic people who left us historical sources written in their own language and script.² They took the opportunity of establishing memorials for their lords, and left us many steles in which their “national history” is inscribed. The composers of Türk national history were of course all Türk-

* 本文是国家社科基金青年项目“‘突厥’的概念史研究”（18CSS001）的阶段成果，并受到上海市青年东方学者奖励计划的资助。

1 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Chapter 110, “Biography of the Xiongnu”, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1959: 28-79.

2 The Bugut Inscription, which belongs to the First Türk Empire, was written in the Sogdian script and the Sogdian language. S. G. Kljaštornyj and V. A. Livšic, “The Sogdian Inscription of Bugut revised”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 1972, vol. 26(1): 69-102; Yutaka Yoshida and Takao Moriyasu, “Bugut Inscription”, *Provisional Report of Researches on Historical Sites and Inscriptions in Mongolia from 1996-1998*, ed., Takao Moriyasu and Ayudai Ochir, The Society of Central Eurasian Studies, 1999: 122-125.

centered, and they did not follow the principle of writing history without biases. Nonetheless, such epic narratives of Türk history are very valuable for us to understand the political order of East Asia between the 6th to 8th centuries. Their value lies in the fact that they provide us with a different perspective from that of the Chinese historians.

Our questions are: What kind of image of “China” can be found in the narratives of the Early Türks? How different are the narratives concerning the same military or diplomatic issues in Turkic and Chinese sources? To answer such questions, we need to do a comparative study of the Chinese sources and the Old Turkic inscriptions. Those questions also help us better understand the nuances of the interactions between the sedentary society and the nomadic steppe in East Asia and Inner Asia of the 8th century.

In the Old Turkic inscriptions, China was called neither “China” nor “Sui” nor “Tang”, the self-designations for contemporary dynasties. Rather, it was called “Tabgach” by the Türks.³ According to the interpretation of P. Pelliot and many other scholars, *tabgach* was the name of the Tuoba, a subgroup of the Xianbei, who established the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 A.D.) in North China.⁴ The fact that the Türks used “Tabgach” to refer to their contemporary Tang dynasty can be explained partly by a continuation of historical appellation. However, it might also be because the Türks did not want to acknowledge the legitimacy of the new regime, and therefore did not bother to adopt the official name of the Tang dynasty.

The image of China and the Chinese people portrayed in the Old Turkic inscriptions is very negative. In the Kül Tegin Inscription, the Türk kağan castigated the dishonesty of Chinese people, complaining that:

tabğaç bodun sabı süçig, ağısı yımşak ermiş. süçig sabın yımşak ağın arıp irak bodunuğ ança yağutır ermiş. yağru kontukda kesre aňıñ bilig anta öyür ermiş. edgü bilge kişig, edgü alp kişig yoritmaz ermiş. bir kişi yañılsar uğuşı bodunı beşükiñe tegi kıdmaz ermiş.

“The words of Chinese people were sweet and their treasures were fine (lit. soft). With sweet words and fine treasures they brought the distant people near. After [the distant people] had settled nearby, [the Chinese people] would think of bad ideas. They did not let the truly wise men and truly brave men succeed (lit. to walk, march). If one man committed a crime, [the Chinese] would not spare his clan, his relatives and even his children.”⁵

³ Talat Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, Indiana University, 1968: 231, 249.

⁴ Paul Pelliot, “L’origine du nom de ‘Chine’”, *T’oung Pao*, second series, 1912, vol. 13(5): 727–742.

⁵ Chen Hao, *A History of the Second Türk Empire (ca. 682-745 AD): Through a Combination of Old Turkic Inscriptions and Chinese Sources*, doctoral dissertation, Free University of Berlin, 2016: 216, 238.

From the above citation we can tell that the Türks were upset and disappointed with the Chinese policy towards the Türk residents. They could not understand the Chinese judicial practice of involving a criminal's family, relatives and clan in a legal case. Of course, these complaints were made from the perspective of the Türks, who judged other people by their own legal and moral standards. We can't say that their judgment is objective. However, these sources show us an unrevealed side of history. Without them, we would never know the image of the Chinese people in the eyes of this neighboring people.

Center and periphery

When discussing the political order in East Asia in the 6th to 8th centuries, scholars are inclined to put the Tang in the center and other Inner Asian regimes such as the Türk, Tibetan, Korean, and Tangut empires on the periphery. As far as factors such as military power, the economy and the population are concerned, it might not be wrong to draw a political map of early medieval East Asia with Chang'an or Luoyang as the center(s). However, such a political map is not sufficient for historians to gain the whole picture. Most of the Chinese sources are compiled from this perspective. If we are not aware of this, we are prone to falling into the trap of believing in the Chinese sources without critical thinking.

However, through the perspective of the Türks, we can draw a political map of East Asia with the Türk regime as the center, while the Tang, Tibet, Korea, the Kitañs, the Tokuz Oğuz, On Ok and Kırkız are distributed in the marginal areas of the map. At the beginning of the Kül Tegin Inscription, it is said that after human beings were created by the blue sky and brown earth, the Türk kağan took power and conquered people in the four directions, reaching Kadirkan Mountain in the east and the Iron Gate in the west.⁶ Accordingly, the two places mentioned here were the eastern and western territorial frontiers.

During the reign of Kapğan Kağan, the Türk army campaigned towards the Yellow River and the Shandong Plateau in the east, towards the Iron Gate in the west, and across the Kögmen Mountains and towards the Kırkız in the north.⁷ Kapğan Kağan largely extended the territory of the Türk Empire and pushed their frontier deeply into the neighboring territories. Although the political borders were always changing depending on their military strength, in essence, the Yellow River can be regarded as the boundary between the Türk and the Tang, whereas the Iron Gate may be the farthest place that the Türk army was able to reach in the west, and the Kögmen Mountains represent the frontier between the Türks and the Kırkız.

6 Chen Hao, *op.cit.*: 205, 231.

7 Chen Hao, *op.cit.*: 232-233.

If we draw a political map according to the Old Turkic inscriptions, its center would be the Türk capital, i.e. Ötüken Mountain, and the other regimes such as the Tang, Tibet, and Kırkız would be located on the periphery. On the occasion of Kül Tegin's funeral, many international envoys came to offer condolences:

udar señün kelti. tabğaç kağanta işiyi likeñ kelti. bir tümen ağı altun kümüş kergeksiz kelürti. tüpüt kağanta bölün kelti. kurya kün batsıkdaki soğd, berçeker, bukarak uluş bodunta enik señün, oğul tarkan kelti. on ok oğlum türğiş kağanta makaraç tamğaçı, oğuz bilge tamğaçı kelti. kırkız kağanta tarduş inançu çor kelti. bark etgüçi, bediz yaratığma, bitig taş etgüçi, tabğaç kağan çıkanı çañ señün kelti.

General Udar, representing the people of Kıtāñ and Tatabı, came to attend the funeral fest and expressed his lamentation. From the Chinese emperor came the secretary Likeñ. He brought countless (lit. ten thousand) silk, gold, silver, and other luxury items. From the Tibetan emperor came Bölün. From Sogdiana, Berçeker (i.e. Persia) and Bukhara in the sunset west, ...came General Enik and Oğul Tarkan. From On Ok, from my son [-in-law] the Türğiş kağan, came Makaraç and Oğuz Bilge, who were officials holding seals. From the Kırkız kağan came Tarduş Inançu Çor. The shrine-builders, fresco-painters, memorial-builders and the maternal cousin of the Chinese emperor, General Zhang, came.⁸

The Türk narrator consciously depicts the many foreign envoys who came to visit, thus emphasizing the central position of the Türks in the political milieu of East Asia.

We may ask, what exactly was the balance of power between Tang and Türk? Actually, it is difficult to answer this question, because then there was no definite dominant power in East Asia. However, we can use political marriages as a barometer to infer which side was relatively more powerful. Generally speaking, the side which married off a bride was more powerful than the other side. During the reign of Kapğan Kağan, he repeatedly proposed to Empress Wu, asking for a Chinese prince to marry to his daughter. When Empress Wu sent one of her grandnephews to marry the Türk princess, Kapğan Kağan complained that he intended to marry his daughter to a prince of the Li Family rather than the Wu Family, and took it as an excuse to invade Chinese territory.⁹ During this period (Empress Wu's reign period: 690–705), the Türks were in an active and aggressive position, while China was in a passive and defensive position.

When Emperor Zhongzong ascended the throne in 705, and especially after he established three strategic citadels on the northern bank of the Yellow River,

⁸ Chen Hao, *op.cit.*: 236–237.

⁹ Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, chapter 206, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1956: 6530–1; Du You, *Tongdian*, chapter 198, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1988: 5435–6.

China's policy changed from defensive to offensive.¹⁰ And in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, the wealth and strength of the Tang dynasty reached its peak. Unlike his uncle, the new Bilge Kağan led a peaceful foreign policy towards China. He constantly sent envoys to the Tang court, wishing to marry a Chinese princess. It is noteworthy that, unlike his uncle, he never asked for a Chinese groom, but only wished for a Chinese bride for himself. The desire of Bilge Kağan can be explained by the political competition among the East Asian regimes, which means it would be shameful if one regime did not have a Chinese princess. Bilge Kağan once complained in front of the Chinese diplomats:

“The Tibetans are descendants of dogs. The Kitan and Tatabi used to be my slaves. However, all of them have married a Chinese princess. We Türks have repeatedly requested one, but never received one. Why? I know that the lady you married off to Tibet is not from the imperial house. I did not even ask for an authentic Chinese princess. But your constant refusal makes me feel ashamed in front of other regimes.”¹¹

Obviously, at this period (Bilge Kağan's reign period: 716–734), the Tang were in the center, and the Türks were on the periphery.

Perspective or truth

What can different perspectives bring to us? Through a comparative study, we can reveal the aspects of history that have been neglected or ignored, and try to reveal the diversity and complexity of history. We will take the Beş Balık battle between the Tang and the Türks as an example, to see how an event can be narrated in different ways, according to different perspectives.

Beş Balık was the Turkic name for a strategic city in the region of today's Jimsar county, about 160km from Ürümqi, in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. The ruins of the ancient Beş Balık lie around 12 km north of the modern city of Jimsar. The earliest record about Beş Balık can be found in the *Hou Hanshu*, which is the official history of the Later Han Dynasty or Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.). This place had been inhabited by an Indo-European-speaking tribe called the *Jushi* before the 1st century B.C. Because of its strategic location, it had become a contentious target between the Han and the Xiongnu. In the end it was controlled by the Han government. Hundreds of Chinese soldiers were stationed in the city.¹² At a particular time of in

10 Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu*, chapter 93, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1975: 2982; Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tangshu*, chapter 111, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1975: 4152; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, chapter 209: 6621.

11 *Jiu Tangshu*: 5175; *Xin Tangshu*: 6053.

12 Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu*, chapter 88, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1965: 2914.

its history, most probably when the city was initially constructed, it had consisted of five towns. Therefore, the city was also called “city of five towns” by the local inhabitants.¹³

It seems that the city had been abandoned for a long time before the First Türk Empire occupied it and settled Turkic-speaking subjects in it. Following the Türks’ common practice, place-names in the newly conquered territory of the Türk Empire were Turkicized. It is obvious that *beş balık* was a translation of the local name, as *beş* means “five” and *balık* means “city, town” in Old Turkic. After the First Türk Empire collapsed, the city came under the control of the Tang government and therefore a large population of Chinese immigrants began to take residence near and in the city.¹⁴ As a result, the population composition in Beş Balık was very diverse, including Chinese-speaking people and Turkic-speaking people, as well as Indo-European-speaking inhabitants.

The city of Beş Balık had been prosperous for many centuries. When the Uyghurs were expelled from the steppe by the Kırkız, one group of Uyghur refugees found shelter in Koço, today’s Turfan in Xinjiang. The Uyghur Koço Kingdom lasted for many centuries. During this period, Beş Balık was used by the Uyghur rulers as their summer palace. After the invasion of the Mongols, this region was a part of the Chagatai Ulus. In the year 1418, the Chagatai rulers moved their kingdom to Ili. According to the *Mingshi*, the official annals of the Ming Dynasty, during this time there was neither a citadel nor a palace in the kingdom of Beş Balık, and people lived a nomadic lifestyle.¹⁵

Considering the strategic location of this city, the Tang government used it as a bastion to guard against the invasion of the Türgiș, Kırkız and Türks. The protectorate established by the Tang government in this area was called Beiting.¹⁶ In the eyes of Kapğan Kağan, the strategic importance of Beş Balık was self-evident and forced him to spare no efforts to seize it.

In Chinese sources, the outcome of the Beş Balık Battle was recorded on the 7th day of the 2nd month of Kaiyuan II (25 Feb. 714). Kapğan Kağan sent his sons Yinie (EMC: *ji-net* < OT: *inel*) Kağan and Tong-e (EMC: *dəwŋ-ŋa* < OT: *toŋa*) Tegin and his son-in-law Huoba-xielifa-shi-ashibi to lead troops to besiege Beiting Protectorate (i.e. Beş Balık).¹⁷ The Chinese Protector-General Guo Qianguan led the defense against the Türks. Toŋa Tegin rode a horse and pressed up to the city wall by himself. He was ambushed by the strong Chinese soldiers, who had earlier hidden on the roadside. The Türks were required to ransom Toŋa Tegin for all the provisions in their army. When they heard of the death of Toŋa Tegin, they burst

¹³ *Jiu Tangshu*: 1646.

¹⁴ Li Jifu ed., *Yuanhe junxian tuzhi*, chapter 40, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1983: 1033.

¹⁵ Zhang Tingyu et al., *Mingshi*, Zhonghua Publishing House, 1974: 8609.

¹⁶ *Xin Tangshu*: 1047.

¹⁷ It is a complicated title. Wu Yugui identified *huoba* as a tribal name, *xielifa* (EMC: *yet-li^h-puat* < OT: *elteber*) as the official title and *shi-ashibi* as the personal name. (cf. Wu Yugui 2009: 911).

into tears and left.¹⁸ Having lost Tonja Tegin, Shi-ashibi (short form of Huoba-xielifa-shi-ashibi) dared not return home to face the punishment by Kapğan Kağan. On the 25th day of the leap 2nd month (14 April 714), Shi-ashibi, along with his wife, came to surrender to the Tang emperor. He was appointed Grand General of the Right Guard and Prince of Yanshan Commandery.¹⁹ His wife was appointed Princess of Jinshan. They received a house, ten maids, ten horses and thousands of pieces of silk as a reward.²⁰

The Beş Balık Battle was also narrated by Bilge Kağan in a Turkic inscription, but in a different way. According to his narrative, the Türk army besieged the city Beş Balık and launched six assaults in total. Eventually, the inhabitants living inside the city came out to welcome the Türk army and therefore the city avoided being slaughtered.²¹ Bilge Kağan did not mention a single word about the Türks' losing this battle. Neither did he mention that one of his cousins lost his life. His younger brother, Kül Tegin, probably did not take part in this campaign, because the Kül Tegin Inscription is completely silent about this event.

Considering the striking difference in the outcome of the battle and in the number of injured and casualties between the Turkic and the Chinese narratives, we are not going to judge which narrative is more “right” or which narrative is closer to the “truth”. To us and for our research, the perspectives and the contexts of the sources are more important. Chinese history writers and Turkic statesmen highlighted different aspects of the same event, providing us rich but not necessarily reliable information about this event and enriching our vision of history.

18 *Jiu Tangshu*, chapter 103: 3187; *Xin Tangshu*, chapter 133: 4543; *Jiu Tangshu*, chapter 194: 5172; *Zizhi tongjian*, chapter 211: 6696.

19 *Jiu Tangshu*, chapter 194 and *Zizhi tongjian* record his title as “Prince of Yanbei Commandary” (cf. Wu Yugui 2009: 918).

20 *Jiu Tangshu*: 172; *Jiu Tangshu*: 5172; *Zizhi tongjian*: 6697.

21 Chen Hao, *op.cit.*: 245–246, 260.