

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Some Opinions on the Role of the Mohe 靺鞨 People in the Cultural and Ethnical Relationships between Tungusic, Turkic and Mongolian Peoples

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The Mohe 靺鞨 are a Tungusic people. Their ancestors are recorded numerous times in Chinese sources as Sushen 肅慎, Yilou 挹婁, or Wuji 勿吉. The name 'Mohe' first appears in the records of the Bei Qi State (550–577). According to the 7th chapter of the Bei Qi Shu; the Shiwei, Kumoxi, Mohe and Qidan peoples sent envoys and presented taxes to the Chinese court.

It can be understood from various sources that the Mohe tribes stretched from the northern part of the Korean peninsula to the northern part of the Yalu river basin. This is an intercultural area that currently lies between in modern-day Siberia, Mongolia, China and Korea. It can be therefore said that the Mohe people were not a single ethnic group or a monolingual community, and that they were basically Tungusic, but at the same time a mixture of Turks and Mongols.

There are two widely held opinions about the roots of the Mohe: i) They were originally named Sushen, and their name changed first to Wuji and then to Mohe; ii) They originally came from Huimo 穢貊, and their name is a different variation on the name Huimo (Sun-Zhang-Jiang-Gan 1987: 37-38). However, some researchers disagree and think that the Wuji, who are mentioned as ancestors of the Mohe in Chinese sources, are not the same as the Mohe. The Wuji, it is suggested, were a community that ruled over ancient Sushen, including a large number of remaining Sushen territories. The ethnographer Shirokogoroff suggests that the Wuji were located in the Northern Tungus areas. According to his evaluation, *weiji* means "forest" in the Manchu language, and when the Mohe became the dominant power at the end of the 4th century, the Wuji settled instead in dense forest (Huang 1990: 252). Shirokogoroff's opinion, in spite of clear expressions in the historical sources, should still be taken seriously. As a matter of fact, the Mohe people existed in a relatively nomadic cultural area since the beginning of the 7th century. While the first information relating to Mohe culture matches that of the traditional Sushen, Yilou and Wuji, some differences can be observed after the 7th century. However, areas where the Mohe tribes spread are clearly explained in Chinese sources, and thus their inclusion in the Northern Tungus areas seems geographically problematic.

I would like to make the following additions based on my recent article (Yıldırım 2017) about the origin of the Mohe people: i) In the inscription of Köl Tigin and Bilge Kagan, the names of those who participated in the funeral ceremony of Bumin Kagan in the year 552 are first mentioned and they include the “Bükli (Bükküli or Bökli) from the places where the sun rises.”¹ In another instance in the inscriptions, there is a reference to the years 630–680 when the administrators of the Turk Khanate were in China's captivity and service: “They (Turkic soldiers) served and worked for fifty years, and battled against Bükli Kagan in the east where the sun rises;”² ii) According to “The History of Theophylact Simocatta”, written at the beginning of the 7th century, “When the Avars had been defeated, some of them made their escape to those who inhabit Taugast (China)... Others of the Avars, who declined to humbler fortune because of their defeat, came to those who are called Mucri; this nation is the closest neighbor to the men of Taugast; it has great might in battle both because of its daily practice of drill and because of endurance of spirit in danger” (The History of Theophylact Simocatta 1986: 11–12); iii) There is a reference to the Mohe in Chapter 199 of Jiu Tang Shu: “the Mohe 靺鞨, live in Sushen 肅慎 land. They were called Wuji 勿吉 at the time of the Hou Wei 後魏. The Mohe are six thousand *li* to the north east of the Chinese capital. To the east of the Mohe there is sea, their western neighbors are the Tujue (Turk), Gaoli 高麗 is to the south and Shiwei 室韋 to the north. There are ten tribes in this country, and each tribe has its own chief. They are said to serve the Turks (Tujue) and to depend on Gaoli. Heishui 黑水 (Black Water) Mohe 靺鞨 live furthest to the north; they are forceful, and continuously make trouble for their neighbors” (Jiu Tang Shu 1997: 5358).

Various views have been taken of the names mentioned in the main sources written in three different languages. In my opinion, the Wuji 勿吉 of the Chinese sources are equivalent to the “Bükli” of the Orkhun Turkic inscriptions. The equivalent in Roman sources are the “Mucri” or “Mukri”. The opinions of scholars such as Chavannes, Marquart, Shiratori and Uchida about the Wuji-Mukri equivalency are accurate. The Mohe 靺鞨 people, who are of the Manchurian region and who had some relations with the Turks, are recorded as Sushen 肅慎, Yilou 挹婁 and Wuji 勿吉 in previous Chinese sources. These can be seen as ancestors of the Tungus people. In this respect, “Bükli Çöl” of the Turkic inscriptions must be Manchuria; the people of “Bükli Çöl” must be the Mohe, and finally, references to the people of “Bükli Çöllü El” in inscriptions must be the Tungus people, not Koreans. Moreover, only one people in the east, the “Bükli” are recorded in inscriptions about the Bumin Kagan funerals. Accordingly, those of Mongol descent, such as the Otuz Tatar and the Kitan of the Turkic inscriptions are considered to be the equivalent of the Shiwei of Chinese sources. These people are located to the north of the “Bükli”. In other words, when the Turks (Tujue)

1 Köl Tigin Inscription, east/4; Bilge Kagan Inscription, east/5.

2 Köl Tigin Inscription, east/8; Bilge Kagan Inscription, east/8.

progressed to the east, they directly encountered the Tungus people in the area of “Bükli Çöllig”, while the Mongolian people were further to the north and northwest.

The Cultural Mixture of the Mohe People

In fact, the culture of this humid and swampy part of Asia, Manchuria, is considered by some scholars to have different periods: the eras of the hunter; the semi-hunter and semi-farmer; and the semi-hunter and semi-shepherd (Egami 1985: 99). However, since the Neolithic Age (8000–5500 B.C.), a semi-hunter and semi-farmer society could be seen in the region of Manchuria. At the beginning of the Christian era, it is said that inhabitants of this area hunted animals such as cows, horses and pigs with short spears and small horses (Egami 1985: 104, 106).

Due to the Mohe land, namely Manchuria's, geographical location lying between China, Mongolia and Siberia, a mixture of many ethnic groups can be found there. According to some researchers, this region was home to prehistoric culture from at least four places: The Yellow River valley, the Mongolian desert and steppe, the Pacific coast, and the taiga region around Lake Baikal (Huang 1990: 240).

At this point, reference must be made to Chinese sources (Wei Shu 1997: 2219–2220; Sui Shu 1997: 1821; Jiu Tang Shu 1997: 5358; Xin Tang Shu 1997: 6178). From the few main sources which refer to Mohe culture, the following points can be made:

As each of the settlements and tribes of the Mohe people had their own chief, they did not congregate under a single ruler. They were very strong physically and the strongest of the peoples in the east of China. Each tribe's speech and language was different, and “they lived in the ground”. They dug ground, built cities, and lived in them. The shape of the houses was like a tomb, with doors open to the sky and stairs down to the house. There were no cattle in this country. They had cart horses and also used them to plough fields. Millet, wheat and sunflowers were sown. The water of that land was dense and salty, meaning that the salt from trunks and the tops of trees was removed. There were salt lakes. Lots of pigs were fed, but there were no sheep. They made alcoholic drinks by processing rice, and drank them until they became drunk. Married women wore cloth skirts, while boys wore pig and dog leather. People also wore leopard and tiger tails. They were very good hunters, and their bows were three *chi* and two *cun*. Their arrow heads were stone. In the 7th and 8th months, they made poisonous arrows. When an animal or a person was hit by such an arrow, the poison killed them. They buried parents in the spring and summer and built a house on the top of the tomb. If someone died in the autumn or winter, they threw the dead body to the martens who ate the flesh, and then finally they are at rest. They used to wash their hands and faces

with urine. Everybody weaved their hair. The people were cruel, ruthless, and valued becoming powerful and disparaging elders.

According to the records of the Jiu Tang Shu and Xin Tang Shu, some changes began to take place in Mohe culture from the 7th century. For example, people began to “go behind the grass and water” and sacrifice horses. It can be seen that their culture became a kind of nomadic culture, but at the same time they didn’t have any sheep, only pigs.

According to these records, they were nomadic. They used to excavate the ground between the mountains and the waters, build a tree skeleton on top and then cover it with clay. These houses, in which they all lived together, are similar to the tombs of China. They used to go behind the water and grass in the summer and live in caves in the winter. The son was his father's heir and became the chief after his father. Their chief was called Da Mofu Manduo 大莫弗瞞咄, and such titles were inherited through succession. They had no writings or agreements. They used weapons such as a horn bow and a ‘*hu*’ (thorny tree) arrow. They used to feed a lot of pigs, and the rich had hundreds of them. They used to eat their flesh and wear their skin. The dead were buried in the ground and the bodies were not placed in coffins. They would sacrifice cart horses and place them in graves with the dead. There were marten, white rabbits and eagles in this land.

Another source, the Jiu Tang Shu, states that their “traditions are the same as those of the Qidan and Gaoli people” (Jiu Tang Shu 1997: 5360).

Their writings and agreements are recorded in the Xin Tang Shu (Xin Tang Shu 1997: 6178), and these are probably derived from the records about the Bohai state. There was no system of writing and recording by the Mohe people before the Bohai State.

The Heishui, “Black Water” Mohe, who lived on the banks of the Nen River, which flows from the northern part of the Amur region to the northeast of Inner Mongolia, are described as being the strongest people. Therefore, the elements of nomadic culture observed in the cultures of the “Black Water” Mohe, who spread towards the steppe belt, may have been recorded as if they were the culture of all Mohe people.

There now follow some accounts of Mohe culture from more recent archaeological studies (Istoriya Sibiri 1968: 308-310): Unlike other peoples of Manchuria, horses played a major role in the culture of the Mohe people. The horse was also as important in the afterlife as it was in everyday life, and so people would always be buried with their horses, as evidenced by many archeological studies. The horse also had an important place in the Mohe economy, in which horses were sold to neighbors.

However, perhaps the most important feature of Mohe culture, as is the case with other Manchurian peoples, was pig rearing. From the Neolithic and Bronze Age, pig bones have been uncovered in Mohe settlements. These people lived in deep pits to conserve flesh in the summer. Many pig bones have been found in

these underground dwellings, particularly in Central Amur. Written sources are also testament to the enduring popularity of pigs.

According to materials removed from excavations, the Mohe people wore clothes of pig and dog skin, and wore dresses and embroidered necklaces on special occasions. The wealthiest people wore silk and pearls.

The Mohe people, like other Tungus people, plaited their hair. The "Black Water" Mohe wore necklaces made of the teeth of wild boars and bears. Unlike other groups, the Sumo (Sungari) Mohe had hats with tiger and leopard tails.

These peoples had horse and pig figures as ornaments and clay sculptures, and there are a lot of horses and horseman figures on rock paintings. The rock paintings in Sakaçi-Alyan have figures of goat hunting, reflecting the steppe art of the Turks.

Mohe people respected the tiger and they feared its power. According to archaeological materials and Japanese sources, there was also a "bear cult" that the Mohe shared with the Koreans.

Conclusion

The following geographical and historical assessments can be made: Two ancient cultures existed in the north of China until 1000 years before Christ: that of the horse breeding Hun people, and that of the pig breeding Sushen people. These two cultures also included the Donghu and Shiwei cultures, which were related to both cultures. The Donghu culture dates back to the 7th century B.C., and the Donghu and Shiwei cultures may have been born from contact between the Hun and the Sushen (Eberhard 1942: 144-145). It can therefore be said that the Turks had close contact with the Sushen (the ancestors of the Mohe) and the Donghu (the ancestors of the Mongols) in the first millennium B.C.

Traces of the Turks and Mongols can be seen in Mohe ethnicity and culture, and common cultural elements and historical relations are clearly described in Chinese sources. In addition to Mohe's close cultural exchanges with Turks, Mongols and Chinese, it would have been quite natural for them to intermix with Manchuria's indigenous people and the Paleo-Sibir people. The Mohe can therefore be considered a political unity with many ethnic identities, which is the likelihood that is best suited to the realities of Central Asian history.

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