Did Wanyan Xiyin Invent the Jurchen Script?

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It is often believed that the first Jurchen emperor Wanyan Aguda (完顏阿骨打),[1] or Taizu (太祖) of the Jin (金) dynasty, introduced in 1119 A.D. a national script that had been invented by Wanyan Xiyin (完顏希尹),[2] a court shaman and a courtier (Vorob'iev 1983:1951–52), (Janhunen 1994:109). This belief dates back to the episode narrated in the history of the Jin empire, *Jin shi* (金史):

> 金人初無文字國勢日強與隣國交好迺用契丹字太祖命希尹撰本國字備制度希尹乃依倣漢人楷字因契丹字制度合本國語製女真字天輔三年八月字書成太祖大悦命頒行之賜希尹馬一匹衣一襲
>
> In the beginning, the people of Jin did not have writing. When the state strength grew day [by day], and it entered in friendly relationship with the neighboring states, then the Khitan writing was used. Taizu ordered Xiyin to compose/edit the national writing and to devise [its] system. Therefore, Xiyin created the national writing imitating the Chinese *kaishu* [style] of characters and conforming to the Khitan system of writing. In the eighth lunar month of the year Tian[1]fu[3],[3] the book on the [national] writing was completed. Taizu was greatly rejoiced, and ordered to promulgate it. [He] presented [Xiyin] with a gift of a horse and a garment (JS 73:8a)[4]

However, as Janhunen correctly pointed out, "scripts, in general, are rarely «invented». In the normal case, a script emerges gradually out of previous scripts" (1994: 114). Nice legends surrounding the promulgation of scripts usually represent no more than fairy tales concocted much later. It is interesting to note that even these later fabrications sometimes contain certain hints that point out to the real state of affairs. Thus, in the passage above we find a phrase 太祖命希尹撰本國字 'Taizu ordered Xiyin to compose/edit the national writing.' The character 撰 /zhuan[4]/

1 Wanyan 完顏 represents the clan name of Jurchen emperors, and Aguda 阿骨打 is the given name. In Early Mandarin pronunciation these would be *[γ]ɔn yan* and *'a ku ta*.

2 In Early Mandarin pronunciation Wanyan Xiyin (完顏希尹) would be *[γ]ɔn yan hi yün*.

3 1119 A.D.

4 Vorob'iev incorrectly indicates that this passage is found in the second volume of the Jin Shi (1983:152). The second volume of Jin Shi is dedicated to Taizu, but it does not contain this passage, which is located in the biography of Wanyan Xiyin in the seventy third volume of the Jin Shi.

means ‘to compose [a book etc.],’ but it also may mean ‘to edit (a book etc.).’ If the character 撰 is to be taken in its second meaning, it would imply that Xiyin was actually editing the pre–existing script rather than creating it from the scratch. On the other hand, the phrase 希尹乃依倣漢人楷字因契丹字制度 ‘Therefore, Xiyin created the national writing imitating the Chinese *kaishu* [style] of characters and conforming to the Khitan system of writing’ probably indicates that Xiyin followed the external appearance of Chinese *kaishu* with its straight lines, but structurally used the principle of the Khitan system of writing which is a mixed semantographo–syllabic system.[5] Nevertheless, the reference to Chinese and Khitan here may be viewed as a late interpolation needed to assert the authority of the rising Jurchen state *vis–à–vis* its powerful neighbors. Any reference to, let us say, the Parhae script, provided it would have any relevance, would not serve this purpose, since it is well known that Parhae was destroyed by Khitan in 926 A.D.

Most scripts in Inner and especially East Asia were ultimately derived from Chinese. Three major paths of this derivation can be traced:

1. Borrowing of the Chinese script *per se* with a subsequent adaptation for local needs: this was the strategy adopted for Old Korean *hyangchal* and Old Japanese *man'yōgana* scripts: at the first glance Old Korean and Old Japanese texts employ the same characters, but the reader very quickly discovers that besides the semantographic usage typical for Chinese, a phonographic usage is also present: in other words, characters could also be used phonetically as syllabic signs;

2. Borrowing of Chinese script with some further modifications: this was the strategy employed by the Vietnamese *chu' nôm* and Zhuang character scripts, as one finds there a significant number of newly created or modified Chinese characters;

3. Designing of a completely new script ultimately based on the Chinese model: this was the strategy employed by “creators” of Khitan, Tangut, and Jurchen script. Such scripts theoretically may be called ‘pseudo–Sinitic.’

Among the last three, the Khitan script is the oldest, introduced in 920 A.D., next follows the Tangut script, promulgated in 1036 A.D., and, consequently, the Jurchen script, coming only in 1119 A.D.[6] seems to be the youngest.[7]

5 Let me note that Old Korean hyangchal script also represented a semantographo–syllabic system, although its external appearance is very different from the Khitan script.

6 Other sources give different dates for the promulgation of the Jurchen script: the Wanyan Xiyin inscription provides 1121 A.D. and Da Jin guo zhi (大金國志) ‘The Chronicle of the Great State of Jin’ – 1122 A.D.

7 The history of Khitan and Jurchen scripts is further aggravated by the problem of “big” and “small” scripts: the Jurchen “small” script is yet to be found, and Khitan “large script” is virtually

On the following pages I will try to demonstrate that Jurchen script is actually not the youngest, but possibly the oldest, and that it is likely to be ultimately non–Jurchen or para–Jurchen.

It is well know that in the history of the scripts belonging to the states in the Northern China, we have at least one crying gap: nothing or more exactly, almost nothing, as I will show below, is known about the Parhae (Chin. Bohai, 渤海, 686–926 A.D.) script. There is some limited corpus of Parhae epigraphic materials written in Chinese (Kychanov 1960), and in addition there is early evidence that Parhae had its own script: 有文字及書記 '[Parhae people] have writing and records' (JTS 199:11a). There is another, much later and anecdotal story where the description of this script says that from the Chinese perspective it was similar to the traces of paws of animals and birds (GJQG 6: 282). Thus, we can conclude that this script was non–Chinese looking. There is also a theory that Parhae used Turkic runic script as well (Shavkunov 1958:82).[8]

The population of the Parhae state was most likely multinational and multilingual. Although there are strong grounds to believe that the ruling elite spoke some variety of Old Korean (Vovin 2005, 2006), as it is frequently hypothesized, the Korean elite probably ruled over a vast majority of the population that was Tungusic, possibly Jurchen and/or some other Southern Tungusic. Thus we can expect that the unknown Parhae script was used either for Old Korean or for some form of Tungusic, or even for both. One fact seems to be rather clear, however: it could not be the Old Korean script, because Old Korean script represents an adaptation of the Chinese script *per se*, so it would not look to Chinese as traces of animals and birds. It is apparent that we deal here with some rather different system of writing, although ultimately Chinese–based.

There is one source that is of paramount importance for establishing the identity of the Parhae script, and which was traditionally overlooked by my predecessors. These are short inscriptions on the tiles that include mostly only one, sometimes two, and extremely rarely three signs. These signs probably indicate either names of artisans or names of their shops. As the reader can see from Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 below,[9] most of the written signs on these tiles can be identified as Chinese characters.

undeciphered. I will not deal with this problem here, for a good overview in English see (Janhunen 1994).

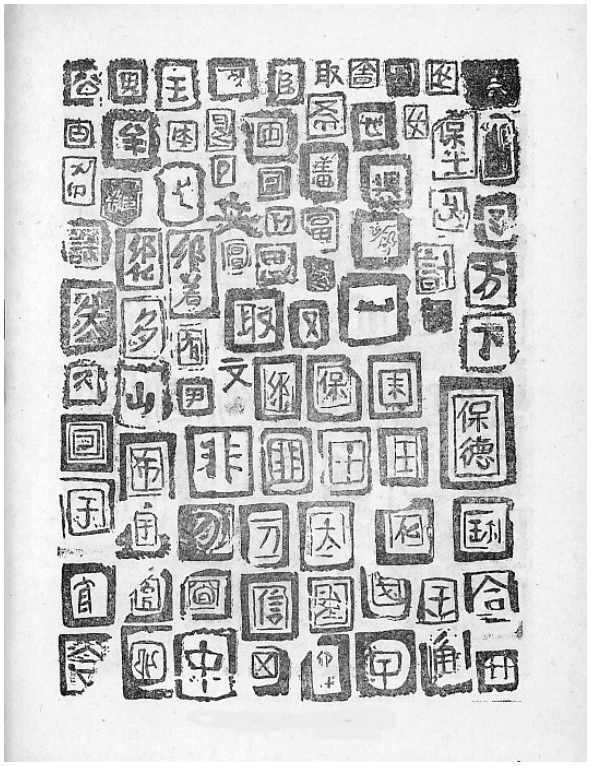
8 This hypothesis seems to be not very reliable, as all the evidence is based on a small piece of stone with a short inscription that may or may not be reminiscent of Turkic runes. In addition, even if Shavkunov's reading of the inscription is correct, there are multiple problems with its phonetic interpretation.

9 These figures are taken from Cwu (1971:103–04), which represent the most complete collection of inscriptions found on Parhae tiles that is at my disposal.

Figure 1



Figure 2



The problem here is that while most of these inscriptions indeed include easily identifiable and common Chinese characters, such as for example: 田 'paddy,' 合 'to join,' 中 'middle,' 取 'to take,' 非 'no,' 失 'to lose,' 布 'cloth,' 山 'mountain,' 王 'king,' 福 'happiness,' 赤 'red,' 可 'can/may,' 素 'element,' 天 'heaven,' 保德 'preserve the virtue,' and 寶德 'treasure virtue,' not all of them are readily identifiable as Chinese even from the first glance. After we accommodate possible poor preservation of the material and variants in writing that can be easily deduced from the Chinese paleography, there will still remain several tiles with inscriptions that can be definitely identified as non–Chinese. Then, these inscriptions must be in the indigenous Parhae script.[10]

10 Shavkunov suggested that the non–Chinese characters probably represent signs of Old Korean writing system itwu (1968:101). This is, of course, impossible, because the Old Korean itwu writing is well known and belongs to the first type of scripts mentioned above, namely it adapts Chinese characters without modifying them.

A number of these inscriptions include signs that are either impossible to read at all, or that still resist identification. The brief nature of these tile inscriptions is certainly another very negative factor that impedes our understanding of the non–Chinese inscriptions.

In this article I will deal with inscriptions on three tiles from Figure 1: #3 and #4 from the left in the first row and #1 in the seventh row (abbreviated further as 1.1.3, 1.1.4 and 1.7.1). Let us start from the number 1.1.3:

Figure 3: Parhae tile inscription 1.1.3



This inscription is a rare one that includes three characters. Although the top character looks like Chinese 仝, and character in the middle as Chinese 口 'mouth,'[11] the third character is clearly non–Chinese. I believe that it can be identified without any doubt with Jurchen script sign 糸 *–ni, genitive case marker.[12] The first character, if taken as Chinese may be either a combination of graphic elements 人 'person' and 土 'gentry' or 人 'person' and 土 'earth.' But in any of these two cases we face a problem. As I noted above, all easily identifiable Chinese characters on tiles are also very common Chinese characters. Meanwhile, a Chinese character consisting of 人 'person' and 土 'earth' simply does not exist, and

11 The first and the second character are too much apart to be taken together as Chinese character 舍 'to lodge.'

12 Used after stems ending in –n (Kiyose 1977:88).

a Chinese character 仝, a combination of 人 'person' and 士 'gentry' is so rare that it is not recorded even in the famous *Kangxi zidian* that is the dictionary that records the maximum number of isolated characters. On the other hand, Jurchen phonogram 圣 *pe that looks very similar to the character in the inscription is comparatively well attested (Jin 1984:24). The second character 口, is a variant of Jurchen 吳 *gorhon 'thirteen.' Note that 吳 *gorhon 'thirteen' has final /–n/, a condition for having genitive marker 羊 *–ni. The sequence 圣口羊 *pe gorhon–ni can be understood as 'of Old Thirteen,' where 圣 *pe 'old' might function as a semi–honorific prefix for the name[13], similar to Chinese 老 /lao^{3}/ 'old' used before surnames. 口 *gorhon 'thirteen' may be a substitute for a personal name, indicating that the said person was the thirteenth child in the family. Thus, 圣口羊 *pe gorhon–ni '[from the shop] of the Old Thirteen' does not seem to be an unreasonable inscription on a tile.

Let us now consider the inscription 1.7.1:

Figure 4: Parhae tile inscription 1.7.1



This inscription consists of just one character, and once again such a character does not exist in the Chinese script.[14] On the other hand, this character 礽[15] is present in the Jurchen script, where it represents one of the graphic variants of the phonogram 列 *in (Jin 1984:89). To the best of my knowledge, there is no word *in Jurchen or Manchu,[16] and while the compilation of the Jurchen onomasticon is still the task of the future, Stary does not provide the Manchu name *In* in his excellent compendium

13 Cf. Manchu *fe* 'old,' Late Jurchen *fo (Kane 1989:173).

14 The closest approximation is an extremely rare Chinese character 礽 that is again not recorded in the Kangxi zidian.

15 The initial vertical element of the first stroke of this character is exaggerated in the Jurchen font that I have on my computer, in reality it is much smaller, cf. Jin 1984: 89.

16 There is, of course, Manchu in 'Yin [force of nature]', an apparent Chinese loan (陰), and the oblique stem of the pronoun *i* 's/he' is *in*–, but none of these are applicable in the case of a tile inscription.

of Manchu names (Stary 2000). However, we should not forget that Parhae was a multinational state: the Korean family name *In* (印) is well attested (Martin 1992:366, 368). There is also the Old Korean given name *In* (因) attested at least from 870 A.D. (SKSK XI:9a),[17] and the same character *In* (因) is also attested in Old Korean as a component of given names (Song 2004:790). Thus, Jurchen 礽 can be a phonetic transcription of either a Korean given name *In* (因) or a Korean family name *In* (印). This seems to be a reasonable solution for an inscription on the tile.[18]

Finally, let us have a look at the inscription 1.1.4:

Figure 5: Parhae tile inscription 1.1.4



The first character could have been taken for Chinese character 毛 'hair,' but three facts speak against such an identification: (a) the second character is clearly non–Chinese, (b) the third horizontal line looks like two dots rather than a solid line, (c) the final curve of the vertical line is too much rounded for Chinese 毛 'hair' and does not have a final hook. Given all this, the character looks much more like Jurchen phonogram 毛 *ir (Jin 1984:267). The second character is difficult to identify, but it can potentially be a semi–cursive variant of the Jurchen phonogram 夬 *a. The resulting sequence 毛夬 *ira may well represent a Jurchen given name, cf. Manchu given name *Ira* (Stary 2000:216).

17 As a given name of the Silla's ambassador to Tang, Kim In (金因).

18 An anonymous reviewer suggested a possibility that this character may represent a transcription of the Chinese 印 /yin/ 'seal' frequently found on manuscripts etc. This seems to be very unlikely to me, since I am not aware of the cases when this character would be placed on a tile. Normally one can find on tiles names of artisans, their shops, and also names of donors.

On the basis of the identifications presented above, we can arrive at the following four important conclusions:

1. The Jurchen script has its prototype in the script of Parhae (686–926 A.D.) so far found only on Parhae tiles. Since the non–Chinese states in Northern China tended to introduce their "new" scripts immediately after the founding of the dynasty or even earlier, we can more or less safely date the inception of the Parhae–Jurchen script to the late seventh or early eighth century, unless the Parhae–Jurchen script goes back to even an earlier prototype still unknown to us. Thus, it makes the Parhae–Jurchen script the earliest among Khitan, Tangut, and Jurchen scripts.

2. Although the evidence from the three inscriptions cited above is scanty, being limited to one adjective *pe 'old,' one morphological marker, a genitive *–ni, and one proper name *Ira, we now have an important linguistic and paleographic proof for the hypothesis that the Parhae population was partially not only Tungusic, but Jurchen. This is of a paramount importance for the ethnolinguistic history of the region, as it allows us to trace back the speakers of the Jurchen language as inhabitants of Manchuria and North–East Korea to at least seventh century A.D.

3. We further receive a confirmation that the Parhae population was mixed and included both Jurchen and Korean elements.

4. On the basis of Parhae *pe 'old' we also receive an additional confirmation for the already known fact on the basis of Old Jurchen data that Manchu and Late Jurchen /f/ < *p.

Primary sources:

GJQG Gu jin qi guan (古今奇觀), fifteenth–sixteenth centuries A.D.
JS Jin shi (金史), mid–fourteenth century A.D.
JTS Jiu Tang shu (舊唐書), mid–tenth century A.D.
KS Korye sa (高麗史), 1451 A.D.
SKSK Samkwuk saki (三國事記), 1149 A.D.

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