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Wu Yingzhe (吴英喆)

A brief discussion on the vowel attachment in the Khitan Small Script[1]

The Khitan (Chinese: 契丹 qìdān) were nomadic people, who lived in the eastern Mongolian Plateau. They founded a powerful and great empire known as Liao 遼 (liáo) (sometimes called Great Khitan 大契丹 dà qìdān), which existed from 907 to 1125. Later, they also founded Western Liao in Central Asia which existed from 1124 to 1218. At present, most scholars believe that, being a member of the Altaic complex, Khitan language is more closely related to the Mongolic languages. In 920, the fifth year of the Shence 神冊 (shéncè) era, Yelü Tulübu 耶律突呂布 (yēlǜ tūlǚbù) and Yelü Lubugu 耶律魯不古 (yēlǜ lǔbùgǔ) created the Khitan Large Script with which they recorded texts in Khitan language. This is an ideographic script and, thus, somewhat inconvenient to record an agglutinative language such as Khitan. Before long, Diela 迭剌 (diélá), the emperor's younger brother, created another writing system called Khitan Small Script, which is a kind of phonographic writing. Both scripts were used in the period of the Liao Empire for nearly two hundred years and they continued to be used in the Jin 金 (jīn) dynasty after the fall of the Liao Dynasty until the 2nd year of Ming-chang 明昌 (míngchāng) era (1191) of the Jurchen Jin Zhangzong 金章宗 (jīn zhāngzōng) Emperor. Later, the Khitan scripts were gradually forgotten and all records of them vanished (?in the changing social environment). Khitan language has also gradually become extinct.

Nearly several hundred years had passed until the Khitan Small Script was accidentally rediscovered by Belgian Father L. Kervyn in 1922 from the Qingling Tomb of the Liao dynasty, located in Baarin Right Banner of Inner Mongolia. Since then, 15 Khitan Large Script inscriptions which have over 15000 characters and 35 Khitan Small Script inscriptions which have about 40000 characters have been found in the northern China. Currently, work on them is being done by a number of specialists from China, Japan, Australia, Russia, USA, and Finland. It is extremely difficult for researchers to decipher Khitan Script materials, because there is no reference document except for very few Khitan words, which were recorded in the *Liao Shi* 遼史 (The History of the Liao Dynasty, liáoshǐ). So, although considerable progress has been made, the materials of the Khitan Large Script and the Khitan Small Script are not fully understood yet.

This paper will briefly introduce the Vowel Attachment in the Khitan Small Script. The Vowel Attachment is one of the spelling methods. Former research has reconstructed that a lot of original characters start with a consonant sound. However, in my research it is shown that we can add a proper vowel in front of some of these original characters.

Chinese loanword （三 'three', sān） reads *s-a-am*, （仙 'immortal', xiān) reads *s-ie-en*, （小 'small,' xiǎo) reads *s-iau*, so their first original character must be *s*, which was already identified by Khitan Script Research Group in 1970s. Based on this conclusion,  which means 'night', pronounces *sonj* which is close to the  *son ~ ʃon* in Mongolian language. However, after publishing both Khitan and Chinese versions of *Yellü Zhixian Epitaph* 耶律智先墓誌 (yēlǜ zhìxiān mùzhì), the researchers realized that  also denotes personal name *Axin* (阿信, āxìn) . Moreover, they understood that  in the *Xüwang Epitaph* (許王墓誌 xǔwáng mùzhì) denotes tomb owner's name *Yixinyin* 乙辛隱 (yǐxīnyǐn). Therefore, we can read the original character  as *as ~ ɛs*. Even though at present we are still unable to identify its exact vowel, there is no doubt that original character  has a vowel in front of its consonant *s*.

The character  denotes 'filial piety' (孝, xiào) and reads *chi shi de ben* 赤寔得本 (chìshídéběn). It is recorded in the *Liao Shi* and its original characters read:  *tʃ*,  *i*,  *d*,  *p* and  *n*. Its third original character  has a meaning of 'nine'. If  reads *is*, it is similar to the Mongolian word and consistent with historical records. In the same way we can also understand that the pronunciation of （乙室已之 tribal name, yǐshìjǐzhī) is *isgən*. Both these examples sup-

[1] This paper is a research achievement of the project named "Research on the Khitan Small Script and studies of Khitan language Grammar" (Approval number: 06CMZ006) sponsored by the State Social Science Fund. It is also a research achievement of the national level key project named "The Khitan Script and the History of Liao and Khitan: Interdisciplinary Study of National History" (Approval number: 07JJD770090) sponsored by the key research base of the humanities and social science study, the Ministry of Education.

Wu Yingzhe: Doctor at Institute of Mongolian Language, School of Mongolian Studies, Inner Mongolia University

port the hypothesis that the pronunciation of 𘤪 might be *is*. However, after reading 𘥥𘤪 (延昌宮之副使, official name, yánchānggōng zhīfùshǐ), we are able to learn that the 𘤪 which denotes 使 ('messenger', shǐ) *shi* also probably reads *si*. It seems certain that the original character 𘤪 has a vowel *i* but sometimes the vowel comes after the consonant *s*.

The original character 𘥣 appeared in 𘤍𘥣 which means 'horse'. Chinese loanword 𘤍𘤟 (密 'secret', mì) reads *mi*, 𘤍𘤓 (門 'door', mén) reads *mun* or *mən*, so their first original character 𘤍 might read *mo* or *m* which was identified in 1970s. As in Mongolian language 'horse' is pronounced *mori*, scholars believed that the original character 𘥣 read *ri*, and that 𘤍𘥣 read *mori*, which is the same as the Mongolian equivalent. The pronunciation *ri* for 𘥣 was also confirmed in other blocks (complex characters). For instance, researchers Liu Fengzhu 劉鳳翥 (liú fèngzhù) and Yu Baolin 于寶林 (yúbǎolín) considered that the block 𘤟𘥣 reads *iri* [Yu Baolin 1981], researcher Ji Shi 即實(jíshí) considered that 𘥤𘥣/𘥥 reads *tirik*, which means 梯裏己 (official title, tīlǐjǐ) [Ji Shi 1986]. In spite of this, sometimes we can read the original character 𘥣 as *ir*. For instance, the character 𘥣𘥥/𘤓 which frequently appears in materials of Khitan Small Script means 'Yilijin' 夷離堇 (official title, yílíjǐn) [Ji Shi 1996]. In the light of this statement, the pronunciation of 𘥣𘥥/𘤓 might be *irgin*, so 𘥣 reads *ir*. It indicates that original character 𘥣 has two pronunciations: *ir* and *ri* , and its vowel *i* can appear not only in front of consonant *r*, but also behind it.

The block 𘤩𘤦/𘥠𘤣, which denotes personal name 撻不也 (tàbùyě), reads *toboji* and the block 𘤧𘤦/𘤫, which means the name of 'zubu' 阻蔔 (tribal name, zǔbǔ), reads *ʧobog ~ ʧubug* that was discussed by researcher Wang Hongli 王弘力 (wáng hónglì) [Wang Hongli 1986]. Thus, the original character 𘤦 which is the second in this block can be read as *bo ~ bu*. Despite this, there are still a few characters which indicate that 𘤦 can be occasionally read as *ab ~ ob*. For instance, the characters 𘤣𘤓/𘥡 𘤦 which appeared in the 28th line of the *Xiao Zhonggong Epitaph* (蕭仲恭墓誌 xiāo zhònggōng mùzhì) denote personal name 敵輦阿不 (díniǎn ābù) [Ji Shi 1996]. Researcher Ji Shi, who pointed this out, said that this personal name 敵輦阿不 (díniǎn ābù) had been recorded in the biography of Xiao Zhonggong in the *Jin Shi* 金史 (The History of the Jin Dynasty, jīn shǐ). For this reason, we can read 𘤦 as *ab ~ ob*. On another occasion, Khitan Script researchers have all known that 𘤦𘤪 means 'grandfather'. If 𘤦 reads *ob*, this pronunciation is close to ᠠᠪᠤ *əbŏg~obo:* of Written Mongolian language; the word ᠠᠪᠤ 'grandfather' is pronounced *ob* or *obo* in many dialects of Mongolian languages. It is clear that 𘤦 can be read as *bo ~ bu*, but sometimes it can also be read as *ob*.

Some researchers believe that the pronunciation of the original character 𘥦 is *ru* and some others read it as *ru* or *rə*. However, this original character is often used in the initial position of blocks (31 time in all known materials of Khitan Small Script). For example, 𘥦𘥣/𘥢, 𘥦𘤣/𘤫, 𘥦𘥣/𘥡𘤩, 𘥦𘥣/𘥡𘤓 and so on. It seems certain that these blocks might denote the native Khitan words, rather than Chinese loanwords. We have all known that the Altaic languages have common feature that the consonant *r* never appears in the beginning of a word. It is obvious that these words are no exception and that their first sound is not *r* and in front of the consonant *r* must stand a certain vowel.

𘤫 is one of common original characters and scholars have determined its pronunciation as *p*. However, recently Professor Liu Pujiang 劉浦江 (liú pǔjiāng) pointed out that the block 𘤫𘥠/𘥢 denotes personal name 阿保謹 (ābǎojǐn) [Liu Pujiang 2008]. It indicates that original character 𘤫 also has a vowel in front of its consonant *p*.

In summary, each of the original characters 𘤧, 𘤪, 𘥣, 𘤦, 𘥦 and 𘤫, which were mentioned above, has two different pronunciations and one feature in common: their vowels can appear in front or behind of their consonants. It must be a spelling characteristic of the Khitan Small Script. We can call this rule 'Vowel Attachment'.

To varying degrees, other writing systems also have this sort of rule. For instance, Mongolian word ᠷᠠᠰᠢᠶᠠᠨ (rasiyan) reads [ɑɾʃɑːŋ], ᠷᠠᠳᠢᠣ (radio) reads [ɑɾɑːʤʊː], ᠶᠡᠰᠦᠨ ᠵᠠᠭᠤᠷ_ᠠ (ɣšaːŋ ǰaɣur_a) read [ɑgʃɪŋʤʊːr] and so on. In the Written Mongolian language, all these words have no vowel in front of their first consonant, but each of these words is actually pronounced with a vowel 'ɑ' in spoken Mongolian.

However, there is a similar spelling rule in Old Turkic script. Let us take a look at the following characteristics of Old Turkic script:

(1) In this writing system 4 letters are used to denote 8 vowels: the letter 𐰀 denotes *a*, *ä*, 𐰃 denotes *ï, i*, 𐰆 denotes *o, u* and 𐰇 denotes *ö, ü*.

(2) The vowels *a*, *ä* at the beginning of a word or at the end of the first syllable are usually omitted. For instance, the letter 𐰀 (t¹) (Arabic numeral 1 marks a consonant spelt with back vowel) reads *at* 'horse', the letter 𐰃 (t²) (Arabic numeral 2 marks a consonant spelt with front vowel) reads *ät* 'meat', the letter 𐰉 (l¹) reads *al-* 'to take' and the letter 𐰚 (l²) reads *äl* 'country'. But if they appear at the end of a word, they are usually written out. For instance, the block 𐰴𐰞 (qr¹a) reads *qara* 'black', the block 𐰴𐰉 (pa) reads *apa* 'forefather' and the block 𐰴𐰍𐰣𐰀 (t¹mɣa) reads *tamɣa* 'stamp'.

(3) If the vowels *ï, i* and *o, u, ö, ü* are at the beginning of a word or in the first syllable, they are not written out. If the vowels *o, u* or *ö, ü* appear in both front and back of the consonant 𐰖 *q* and 𐰆 *k* they are usually omitted. The vowels *u, ü* which appear in affixes are also omitted. For instance, 𐰖𐰣𐰺 Id¹q *ïduq* means 'saint', 𐰺𐰀𐰺 It¹I *ïtti* means 'dispatch', 𐰣𐰍𐰴𐰽 Oɣlm *oɣlum* means 'my son' and 𐰞𐰍𐰃𐰽 Üčn² *üčün* means 'in order to' [Geng Shimin 2005].

I suppose it is possible that there is a definite relation between these rules and the Vowel Attachment. In fact, comparative study of Khitan Small Script and Old Turkic script is not a new topic. As early as in the 1950s, a Japanese scholar Murayama Shichiro 村山七郎 (ムラヤマ　シチロウ) attempted to reconstruct Khitan words with the help of Old Turkic graphemes. His main idea was that the Khitan Small Script was of Turkic origin, and its writing system, that, according to the Liao Annals, Diela learned from the Uygurs 回鶻 (huígǔ), was not the Uygur alphabet, but the script of the ancient Turks. To demonstrate this, Professor Murayama gave a chart of Khitan characters with their alleged Turkic equivalents [Murayama 1951]. Later studies showed this idea to be wrong. It means that there is no relation between the Khitan original characters and Old Turkic characters in terms of grapheme. Nevertheless, it is possible that some spelling rules in Khitan Small Script are based on Turkic spelling rules. Of course, when Khitan people created their own writing system — Khitan Large Script and Khitan Small Script, Old Turkic writing system had already faded. But according to *The Liao Shi,* in 924, Khitan people were still using Turkic writing system: 甲子, 詔磾辟遏可汗故碑,以契丹、突厥、漢字記其功 ("In the year of Jiazi, imperial order had been given to make a monument of Longpie khan's merits in Khitan, Turkic and Chinese"). From this brief record we can understand that at that time Turkic writing system might still be familiar to Khitan people. So, they must have employed some idea from Old Turkic script to create the Khitan Small Script.

More interesting, if we continue to apply Vowel Attachment rule, we will be able to solve some problems that have long existed in the study of Khitan Small Script.

(1)The original character 𘬀 denotes 'female' and 𘬀𘬁 denotes 'woman', but the pronunciation of original character 𘬀 is still unclear. According to: 耨斡麼 (nòuwòme), 麼 (me), 亦作改 (also regard as gai, yìzuògǎi) 。耨斡 (nòuwò), 後土稱 (call earth, hòutǔchēng)。麼(me), 母稱(call mǔchēng) which is recorded in the *Liao Shi,* Khitan Script Research Group knew that 𘬂𘬃𘬀 denote 'empress'. Prior to this, they also knew that 𘬃 reads *ə*, so they considered that 𘬂𘬃 reads *nou-e* and 𘬀 reads *muo*. But none of Altaic languages has a word *muo* with the meaning 'female, woman'. If in front of it we add the vowel *ə*, it will read *əmuo* ~ *əmə*. The 𘬀𘬁 can be read as *əmə ku*, 𘬀𘬄 can be read as *əməd* which is plural of 𘬀. This reading is phonetically close to the semantic equivalent in some Mongolic languages, for example, 'woman' in Mongolian sounds as [əm], in Dagur [əmgun], in Shira Yughur [eme], in Dongxiang [əmə], in Baoan [ɛmə].

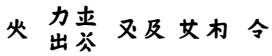
(2) According to another scholar, Liu Fengzhu, 丸 means 'grandson', and he reads it as *mu* [Liu Fengzhu 2006]. If in front of the word we add the vowel *o*, it will sound as *omu*, and this pronunciation is close to the equivalents in some Altaic languages, for example, in Manchu 'grandson' reads *omolo*, and *omul* in Dagur.

(3) The original character 𘬅 means 'one', this has been identified by other scholars, but so far, its pronunciation proved to be a problem. In the *Daozong Aice Epitaph* 道宗哀冊 (dàozōng āicè), the character 𘬇𘬆 𘬄𘬁 was rewritten by 𘬅𘬄 𘬁, and so some scholars believed that 𘬅 equals to 𘬇𘬆, and according to the pronunciation of 𘬇𘬆 the character 𘬅 can be read as *mas* [Chinggeltei 2002]. Even though such conclusion solved the problem to some degree, this pronunciation does not correspond to any equivalents in Altaic languages. We know that cardinal number 'one' in Old Turkic reads *bir*, in Mongolian *neg~negen*, in Manchu *emu*, in Xibe language *əmkən*, in Hezhen language *əmkən*, in Evenki *əmиŋ*, in Oroqen *иmин*. Based on the Vowel Attachment, we can read it in Khitan as *emom* ~ *emo*. According to the later study, we can read 𘬇 as *m* and 𘬆 as *mə*. Therefore, the pronunciation of 𘬇𘬆 may be different from *mas*. If it is correct to read the original character as *emo*, Khitan language might have had a number of features of Manchu-Tungus languages.

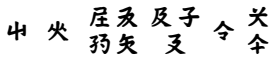
(4) The character 𘬄 often appears in front of the word with plural suffix:

(1) 𘬀 𘬁 𘬄 𘬈 𘬉 𘬋𘬌 𘬍𘬎

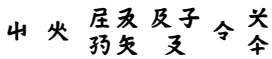
wife these two's second son; *Yellü Dile Epitaph* (耶律迪烈墓誌 (yēlǜ díliè mùzhì)-*8*

(2) 

Dolon lady uncle large tent's these two's children two; *Yellü Dile Epitaph-11*

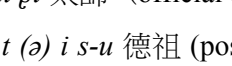
(3) 

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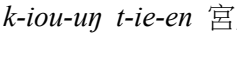
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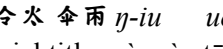
South Courtyard Fu Bu Shu these official positions there was *Yellü Zongjiao Epitaph-12*

Based on the following examples, researchers are able to understand that its pronunciation is *t ~ t'*.

 *t'-ai şï* 太師 (official title, tàishī)

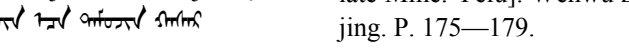
 t (ə) i s-u 德祖 (posthumous title of an emperor, dézǔ)

 *k-iou-uŋ t-ie-en* 宮殿 ('palace', gōngdiàn)

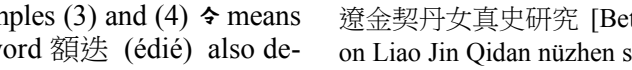
 *ŋ-iu ue-en t'-uŋ ʦ-in* 禦院通進 (official title, yùyuàn tōng jìn)

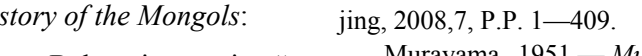
Even though it was said about the character  that its meaning may be close to 'et cetera', it may be different from the equivalents in all other Altaic languages. If we apply Vowel Attachment rule once again, we can not only understand the character , but also can reconstruct its pronunciation that is close to the word  *[əd]* in Mongolian language. In other words, if we add the vowel *ə* in front of the Khitan word *t ~ t'*, it can be read *ət* or *ət'* which is similar to , which means 'these' in medieval Mongolian language. The meaning of 'these' is written as '額迭' in *The Secret History of the Mongols*:

Yisügei_baʿatur-un Höʿelün-üǰin-eč Temüǰin Qasar


Qačiʿun Temüge ede dörben köʿüt töre=be.

[Kuribayashi 2001]

Here the word 額迭 (*ede*, édié) denotes persons and its meaning is the same as in the examples (1) and (2) mentioned above. In the examples (3) and (4) means things in the same way the word 額迭 (édié) also denotes things in *The Secret History of the Mongols*:

ǰamuqa-yin ede üges in-u Qasar Belgütei qoyar ire=ǰu


Temüǰin-e ügüle=ǰü Toʿoril_qan-na kelen gürge=be.


It seems certain that the character and the word 額迭(*ede*, édié) have the same meaning. Because of this, we can read as *ət* or *ət'*.

(4) There is even a more interesting example, which might considerably support the existence of the Vowel Attachment. The characters  mean 'grandmother', which was identified by researcher Liu Fengzhu. reads *m ~ mə*, which was reconstructed in 1970s, reads *k ~ kə* which was reconstructed by myself, and reads *əmuo ~ əmə* which was mentioned above. So, together they are read as *məkə mə*. If we add the vowel *ə*, it can be read as *əməkə əmə*. This reading is very close to [əməəg~ əməː] in Written Mongolian, [əmə] in Modern Mongolian language.

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РЕЗЮМЕ

К настоящему времени выяснено фонетическое значение больше чем половины символов малого киданьского письма. Однако в ряде случаев эта работа натыкается на определенные трудности. Ориентируясь на сопоставление с принципами тюркского руни́ческого письма и анализируя дешифруемые слова, можно заметить, что в малом киданьском письме используется принцип «подставной гласной», когда знак читается с дополнительной предшествующей или последующей гласной, определяемой правилами вокалического сингармонизма.

SUMMARY

More than half of the original characters of Khitan Small Script have been analysed and their phonetic value has been reconstructed. Nevertheless, in the course of decipherment, researchers often run into certain difficulties. Based on evaluation of deciphered words and comparison with the spelling system of Ancient Turkic Script, we conclude that an "additional vowel" may be used in the spellings of the original characters. The signs can be spelled with a preceding or following vowel in accordance with vowel harmony rule.