

Liao Archaeology: Tombs and Ideology along the Northern Frontier of China



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LIAO IS THE CHINESE NAME of an empire established by a seminomadic ruler of Qidan nationality along China's northern fringe and in northeast Asia in the tenth century A.D. From the tenth century A.D. through the first quarter of the twelfth century A.D., the Liao empire ruled sixteen prefectures of north China, including the city that is today Beijing; most of the three northeastern Chinese provinces that formerly comprised Manchuria; and portions of Korea, the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, the Mongolian People's Republic, the Gobi Desert, and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Fig. 1).

Between the fall of the Liao empire in 1125 A.D. to another non-Chinese dynasty, the Jin, and the twentieth century, most of what we knew about the Qidan came by way of Chinese texts. Those literary records describe the Qidan as distinct from their Chinese neighbors, who were frequently described by the Chinese as "barbarians."

Excavation of Liao sites began during the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Those expeditions uncovered the tombs of three Liao emperors, as well as numerous artifacts (Tamura and Kobayashi 1953; Torii 1936). Beginning in the 1950s, widespread excavation of Liao sites was undertaken by local and provincial Chinese teams in Liaoning and Inner Mongolia. Some three hundred Liao tomb sites have been uncovered in the last half-century. The excavated evidence presents a remarkably different and significantly more complex image of Liao society and the Qidan people than do Chinese texts. Above ground, Liao tombs may be marked by simple mounds or expansive paths lined with monumental sculpture. Below ground, burial occurred in a single chamber or a complex of nine inter-related rooms. The walls of those tombs can be unadorned or completely covered with murals and relief sculpture. The corpse may be contained in a single or multilayer coffin, of wood or stone, or it can lie directly on a funerary bed. Cremated remains of the occupant may also be placed in a container. A corpse might be covered with garments or treated in a preservation-enhancing way and encased in a protective covering.

Certain of these burial techniques can easily be linked to practices of the

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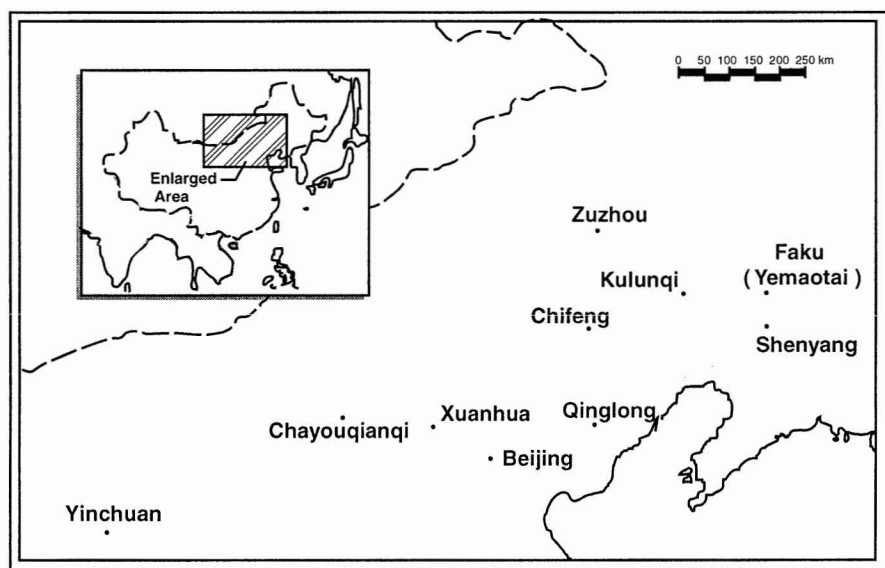


Fig. 1. Map of Asia showing location of Liao empire at its peak and sites mentioned in this article. (Drawn by Andrew K. Y. Leung.)

neighboring Chinese or other sedentary peoples near China's borders. Other postmortem practices are unquestionably native to the Qidan and, in fact, corroborate descriptions of this group in Chinese historical texts. Some of the burial practices not only are distinctively not Chinese, but also are reminiscent of funerary customs associated only with nomadic groups of the Eurasian steppe a full millennium prior to the establishment of the Liao empire and on the western edge of China. Heretofore, the Qidan have not been associated with the Scythians. Archaeological findings from underground are the only evidence that links the two.

TEXTS

Some of the earliest references to the Qidan are in Chinese histories of the fourth through sixth centuries A.D. In them, the Qidan are discussed in the sections on "Eastern Barbarians" (*Donghu*). Both the *Standard History of the Sui Dynasty* and the *Standard History of the Northern Dynasties* relate that when the parent of an "Eastern Barbarian" died, the mourner placed the corpse in a tree. Only after three years had passed would the bones be gathered and burned, after which the mourner would partake of wine libations and make a supplication that "when he went hunting he might shoot many pigs and deer" (Wei Zheng 1973, juan 49: 1881; Li Yanshou 1974, juan 94: 3128).

A Chinese account of the tenth century records the practice of placing a corpse on limbs of trees for three years of disintegration. Referring to the "Northern Peoples," the *Old Standard History of the Tang Dynasty* says, "When a person dies, it is customary not to bury in the ground. Rather, the corpse is sent by horse-drawn conveyance to the great mountains where it is placed on a tree

without mourning garments or identification.” “When a male descendant dies,” the text notes, “the parents and grandparents mourn from dawn until dusk, but when the deceased is a parent or grandparent, sons and grandsons do not mourn” (Li Xu 1971, juan 199/5b).

If the textual accounts of early northern burial practices are accurate, it is remarkable that the remains of the first Liao ruler, Abaoji, were placed in an underground tomb in the year A.D. 926, a full twenty years before the establishment of the Liao dynasty (A.D. 947). According to the dynastic history of Liao, not only was Abaoji buried, but before interment his body lay in a *miao* (temple), and his tomb was located in an “ancestral prefecture” (*Zuzhou*) (Tuotuo 1974, juan 2: 23–24). Both the use of the structure and the enclosure of funerary space in a prefecture are traditional Chinese features.

A separate incident related to the first ruler’s interment is recorded in *Liaoshi*. We are told that upon the ruler’s death his widow broke away from Qidan custom. Rather than accompany her deceased husband into his tomb, she decided to cut off her hand and bury it with Abaoji, saving the rest of herself for regency while raising her young sons (Tuotuo 1974, juan 71: 1200). The text offers no description of the manner in which her hand was placed in Abaoji’s tomb nor of any preparations of Abaoji’s body prior to burial.

Records concerning the postmortem preparation of the corpse of the second Liao ruler, Abaoji’s son Deguang (A.D. 902–947), who died during military activities in China, do exist. According to a Chinese account, upon death, Deguang’s abdomen was cut open and the stomach and intestines were removed. After washing, the body was stuffed with fragrant herbs, salt, and alum. Then it was re sewn with five-colored string. Next, the skin was pricked with reeds to drain all fluid and blood. Then, the text tells us, “a gold and silver mask was used, and copper wire was wound around the hands and feet.” The Chinese writer nicknamed the corpse *diba*, “imperial dried meat” (Wen Weijian n.d., juan 8/49a).

In another account, when a member of the imperial Qidan aristocracy named Yelu Jian died a sudden death in Song territory, his corpse was hung upside down so that bodily fluids could drip out of his mouth and nose. A writing brush was used to prick his skin to allow additional internal fluids to drain out. Next his body was treated with alum “to guard against disease” and only then was he returned north for burial (Li Yiyou 1991: 90).

The Chinese text that records the preparation of Deguang’s corpse states that the removal of bodily fluids and their substitution with vegetal ones was a precautionary measure used to protect the corpse during conveyance in the summer’s heat. The preparation of Deguang’s corpse and the burial underground of Deguang’s father, Abaoji, are evidence of a dramatic change in mortuary custom: A natural process of disintegration was abandoned in favor of a multi-step system of corporeal preservation and eventual interment. This suggests a confrontation of value systems, associated ideology, and practice. The Chinese are and were renowned (since the second millennium B.C.) for elaborate burial preparations in tombs built of permanent materials such as brick, and for specific practices such as encasement of bodies in jade suits during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220). In predynastic Qidan times, subterranean burial was likely learned from China, although, certainly, elaborate tombs were constructed by peoples north and northeast of China at that time. However, the process of corporeal preservation

of Emperor Deguang's body that was so emphatically noted by the Song writer turns out to have been fairly widespread among Liao-period Qidan. Not only was it not a Chinese custom, it was the link between the Qidan and their north Asian predecessors.

IMPERIAL TOMBS

Since the Japanese excavations of the tombs of the sixth, seventh, and eighth Liao emperors (Longxu, Zongzhen, and Hongji) in Qingzhou, Inner Mongolia, funerary architecture has been used as evidence for a belief that the establishment of a Chinese-style dynasty by the Qidan signaled a drive toward sedentary ways (Tamura and Kobayashi 1953). The layout of the underground tombs, as well as the joined timber-frame architecture in the Liao western capital, Datong, have been seen as indications that the Liao built according to the Chinese system. Main structures were placed along an axial line, subsidiary structures were symmetrically placed in relation to that line, and buildings and walls followed the principle of four-sided enclosure. Japanese reconstructions of the arrangement of architecture above and along the paths to the three imperial Liao tombs showed the same pattern as the building plans used for monasteries in Datong.

Three investigations have been undertaken of the funerary city at Zuzhou used by the first Liao ruler, Abaoji (Mullie 1922; Zhou Jie 1966; Wei Changyou 1989). This research revealed that 100 years before the interment of the first of the three rulers at Qingzhou, permanent architecture, perhaps even a temple such as is described in the *Standard History of Liao*, as well as a multiple-walled city of Chinese inspiration, were constructed above ground at Abaoji's burial city. The second ruler, Deguang, was similarly buried beneath a funerary city, Huaizhou, which excavation has shown to have consisted of two wall-enclosed architectural compounds, both further enclosed by an outer wall (Zhang Songbo 1984).

From all indications, then, the visible funerary architecture of Qidan rulers was that of China. At least one relative of the Qidan rulers, Yelu Cong, had monumental stone sculpture along the approach to his tomb in the year A.D. 979 (Pl. I). Similar to the plans and buildings of the funerary cities of the Qidan rulers, this "spirit path" (*shendao*) suggests the adoption of Chinese funerary practices, including monumental tomb architecture, soon after the movement of Qidan into Chinese territory. However, the visible structures may have provided an architectural facade, for the texts reveal that a human limb was placed in the grave of Abaoji, and Deguang's body was decimated and reconstituted before it was placed below the ground.

The texts and the buildings that have molded views and assumptions about Liao and their relation to their sedentary neighbors are a thousand years old. Only recently has it been possible to probe the Qidan world behind and beneath the Chinese buildings and walls. However, even though tomb excavation has become standard practice in China, the opening of Liao tombs has lagged far behind Chinese archaeology in general. One reason for the limited interest in Liao material culture is the location of the Liao empire in Inner Mongolia and former Manchuria, distant from the best-supported research bureaus in China. Other reasons have to do with the Liao itself, and the history of the region after the fall of Liao in A.D. 1125.



Pl. I. (above) Stone sculpture along the approach to the tomb of Liao official Yelu Cong, who died in 979, Chifeng county, Inner Mongolia. (Photo courtesy of Tian Guanglin.)



Pl. II. Princess of Chenguo and Xiao Shaoju as they were found by excavators, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Inner Mongolia. The corpses were adorned with metal wire suits, golden crowns and face masks, and gold and silver boots. (After Li Zehngzhi n.d.)

Liao was the first of three dynasties of semi-nomadic origin to rule the region in succession, culminating in the Mongolian takeover of all of China. Although Chinese rule was restored in China proper under the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644), much of the territory of the Liao empire was beyond the Ming borders. From the mid-seventeenth century until the fall of the imperial government, China was again in non-Chinese hands, and once again, these rulers, the Manchus, traced their roots to territory that had been part of the Liao empire. The associations of “barbarian” imperialism thus never really left this region, the culminating blow occurring with the temporary loss of Chinese territory to the Japanese in the 1930s. Many excavations of Liao sites are conducted and supported by local, regional, or provincial teams, and are published in local or provincial journals of the northeast and Inner Mongolia. Except for gold and silver objects from Liao tombs that have captured the attention of exhibition organizers outside of China (Deydier 1990, 1991), Liao material culture remains remote, elusive, unresearched, and relatively unpublished.

Below we shall focus on the contents of four Liao tombs. They have been selected because they exhibit the range of Liao burial practices and, it will be suggested, associated ideologies.

EXCAVATIONS

Tomb of the Princess of Chenguo and Her Husband

One Liao excavation that has attracted attention beyond China's borders in recent years is the tomb of the Princess of Chenguo and her husband, Xiao Shaoju. They were buried together in A.D. 1018, the year of her death and one year after his, near the site today known as Qinglongshan in Naiman Banner, Inner Mongolia. The most spectacular discoveries in this tomb were the princess and prince themselves. Lying on a brick funerary bed that had originally been decorated with silver, virtually every inch of their bodies was covered with metal or metal netting (Pl. II). On their heads were golden crowns and on their faces were golden death masks joined by silver wire to the body netting. Gold and silver boots covered their feet. Precious objects hung from metal belts at their waists. The burial garments are in all likelihood similar to those made for Emperor Deguang in A.D. 947.

The burial chamber in which the princess and her husband lay was circular, 4.38 m in diameter. Its vaulted ceiling rose to a height of just under 4 m. The round shapes of the main chamber and two side niches were in accordance with the tomb's early eleventh century A.D. date (Xiang Chunsong 1981). Like the three imperial Liao tombs in Qingzhou and countless Chinese tombs, the ceiling and walls were covered with murals. On the ceiling of the antechamber, the sun, moon, and stars were painted against a dark blue background. Pillars, beams, bracket sets, and roof tiles were painted or sculpted on the walls (Fig. 2). These are all evidence that, like their Chinese neighbors, this royal Qidan couple sought to recreate a terrestrial world for the next life, and did so using features of the contemporary Chinese timber frame, a practice employed by the Chinese since earliest times. Yet here, the architecture, exemplified by the bracket sets, was accurately and specifically Chinese, more accurate than the sketchy references to

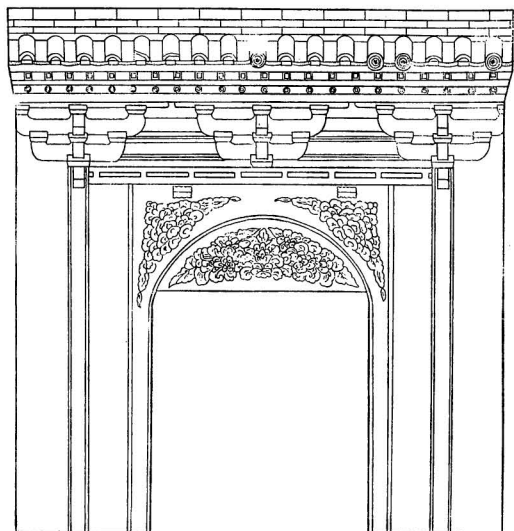
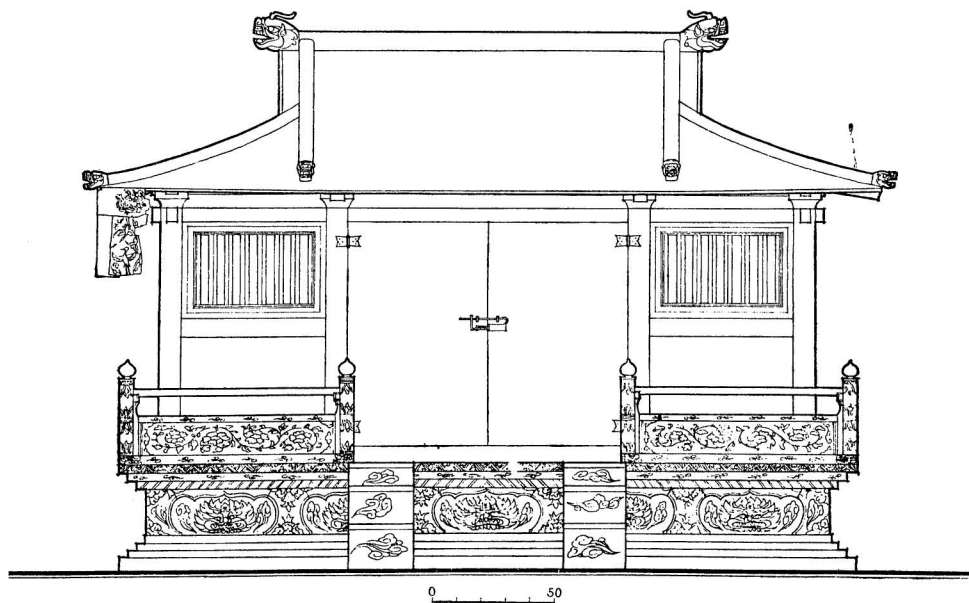


Fig. 2 (at left). Line drawing of relief sculpture of Chinese bracket sets attached to lintels at entry to tomb of the Princess of Chenguo and her husband. (After Li Zhengzhi 1993: fig. 6.)

Fig. 3 (below). Line-drawing of the front elevation of the cypress-bark house excavated at Yemaotai Tomb No. 7. (After Cao Xun 1975: 54.)

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architecture in many native Chinese tombs. However, as we have observed aboveground in tombs of Qidan rulers, here, too, the Chinese architecture was a facade. In front of this facade, Qidan royalty paraded in and out of the tomb in native dress with their customary shaved heads and long sideburns (Pl. III). Behind the elaborate lintel, in the burial chamber, the princess and her husband were encased in metal suits, funerary garments unknown in China, but used for Emperor Deguang's corpse.



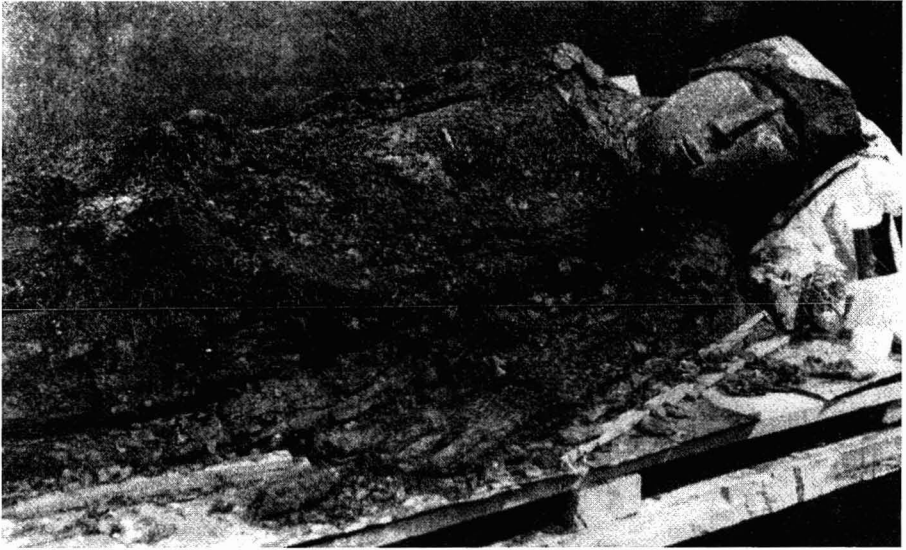
Pl. III. Qidan attendant leading horse, on northern side wall of approach to tomb of the Princess of Chenguo and her husband. (After Meishu quanji 1989: pl. 152.)

It has not been possible to determine if the soft tissue from the Princess of Chenguo's abdomen or her husband's had been removed and replaced in the manner described for Emperor Deguang. Excavation does confirm, however, that Deguang and Yelu Jian were not the only Qidan whose bodies were prepared in the manner described in Song Chinese records.

Haoqianying Tomb No. 6

In the early years of the People's Republic, ten tombs encircled by mountains were identified at the site of Haoqianying, about 20 km southwest of the city of Jining in Chayouqian Banner, Inner Mongolia. The tomb known as No. 6 was excavated in 1981. Haoqianying Tomb No. 6 was simpler than the Princess of Chenguo's tomb, with only a single, subterranean chamber, but the chamber was octagonal, suggesting a date later than A.D. 1018 (Xiang Chunsong 1981). It also was distinguished from the majority of known Liao burials by the use of stone for the lining of its interior walls and ceiling.

The most outstanding feature of Haoqianying Tomb No. 6 was its occupant. A single female was found lying on her left side on a coffin bed. Resettlement due to mud and water damage over the centuries is believed to have caused the body to turn sideways. Evidence from other excavated tombs, including the Princess of Chenguo's, has led to the inference that the Qidan were laid to rest on their backs (Lu and Du 1983: 2). The corpse was covered with copper wire netting and the face with a gilt-bronze mask (Pl. IV). The Haoqianying female's wire suit consisted of six parts: headgear, chest and back gear, arm covers, pants, shoes, and



Pl. IV. Female buried in Haoqianying Tomb No. 6, Chayouqian Banner, Inner Mongolia, as she was found at the time of excavation. (After Lu and Du 1983: pl. 1, 1.)

gloves. Beneath the metal suit, she wore a silk garment embroidered with flowers and lined with a thinner silk layer; a short, sleeveless tunic and pants, both also of silk; silk boots; a belt with a clasp; a hat; and a crotch-cloth. Between the copper wire netting and silk garments was a layer of coarse, brown silk gauze that appeared to have been wrapped from top to bottom, with each limb also wrapped downward. The gauze had been tapered to her body size, about 22 cm thick around her thighs, 15–16 cm around the ankles, and only 2 cm around the toes and fingers. Beneath all this, the body was in an excellent state of preservation, including hair, which remained wrapped in a bun on top of her head.

The only apparent tampering with the hair was the shaving away of a patch about 5.5 cm in width. Upon examining the body, excavators found traces of blood on the right side of the chest and on top of the right shoulder. The two openings in the body seem to point to the practice described for the burial of Emperor Deguang, confirming a text that, although explicit, might otherwise have left one to wonder if the Chinese writer had not exaggerated the funerary practices of the “barbarians.”

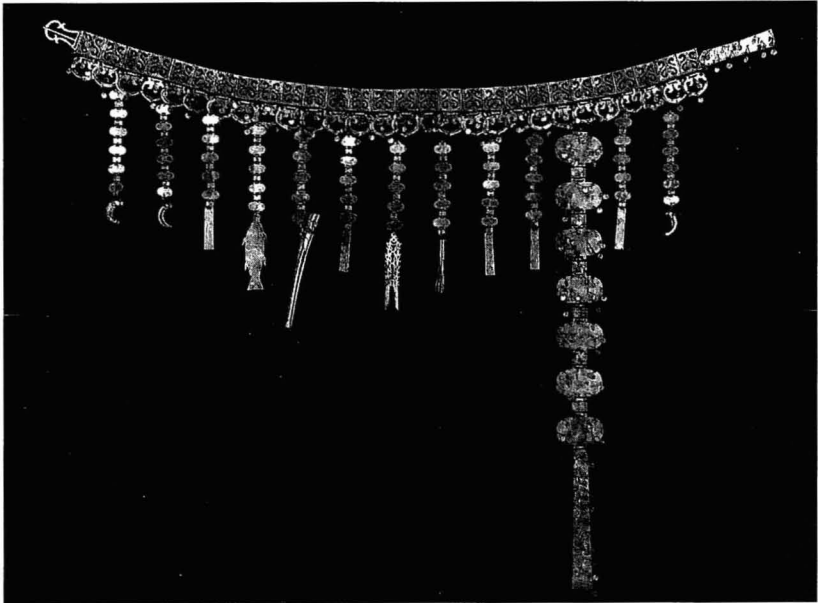
In the account of the preparation of Deguang’s body, the Chinese text makes no reference to the opening of head skin. In the Haoqianying tomb, there is no doubt that the head and abdomen had been opened and then patched back up, and that this was not the result of injury or attack. Evidence of the posthumous removal of brain tissue, a process known as trepanation, is rare. Yet it was practiced in Siberia in approximately the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C. This practice was rare enough that its occurrence among the Qidan is a possible link with peoples and places distant from former Manchuria.

Evidence of trepanation was uncovered at Kurgan (mounded-tomb) No. 2 in Pazyryk, Siberia, in the late 1940s by Sergei Rudenko, who coined the phrase

“frozen tombs” because the contents of the graves had been preserved in ice that had seeped in after robbery (Rudenko 1970). Determining specifically to whom Kurgan No. 2 belonged is impossible, for its occupants, one male and one female, left no written records. We do know that Pazyryk was one of the Altai tomb sites used by groups of nomads, such as the Scythians, who roamed the Russian steppe (Pontic Scythia) and Siberia in the mid-first millennium B.C. These sites are known for their gold and inlaid objects in “animal style” and for the felt and “frozen horses” exhibited at the Paris World’s Fair in 1936. The tombs are associated with a textual description by Herodotus of Chinese funerary practices that has tantalized Westerners much in the same way Chinese readers have reacted to the Song scholar’s description of the burial of Deguang. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus wrote about the removal of organs and the cleansing and resewing of the stomach cavity in his description of nomadic funerary practices. The excavation of Kurgan No. 2 at Pazyryk was important confirmation of this account in Greek history. Hypotheses regarding the purpose and meaning of the procedure were put forth by Russian excavators and in subsequent publications (Jettmar 1967: 117–118; Rolle 1989: 27–32). All of the comparisons have limited their considerations to groups from the north, especially northwest Asia, approximately 2000 years ago.

Trepanation is not the only death ritual shared by the north Asian steppe nomads and the medieval Qidan. Both groups also placed death masks over the faces of corpses. Numerous examples of Scythian death masks are presently in the collection of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Other components of Qidan burial costume can also be traced to north Asian sources centuries before the Qidan. However, the sources are located in northeast Asia, specifically the Korean peninsula. The belt excavated in the Princess of Chenguo’s tomb is a common find in Qidan excavations. It is also common in excavations of tombs from the Silla Kingdom in Korea during the fifth through the seventh centuries A.D. (Pl. V).

The evidence from tomb excavations shows that the Qidan practiced funerary customs and employed burial garments similar to earlier north Asian groups on both sides of the Asian continent. Qidan ritual preparation of the corpse included the opening of body parts and replacement of easily disintegratable soft tissue with vegetal substances. Following the traditions of their geographic neighbors, the more sedentary peoples of the Korean peninsula, the Qidan fashioned belts for burial from which precious objects were suspended. Because these features indicate that cultural traditions of north Asia were maintained, the aboveground structural facade of a Chinese tomb is all the more significant at the imperial Qidan sites. In the privacy of their death rituals, Qidan royalty retained traits that linked them to older north Asian traditions, or alternatively, they followed practices foreign to China but transmitted from their neighbors in northeast Asia. These features were hidden beneath the Chinese-inspired mounds and funerary temples, enclosed by permanent walls of a Chinese ancestral prefecture, and at the end of Chinese-style passageways to tombs. Were it not for the record-keeping of Song China, we would have had no inkling prior to excavation of these sites that Qidan chose to enter the next life prepared and dressed as north Asian semi-nomads. Were it not for excavation, the evidence might well have been dismissed as an unreliable and unverified Chinese account of groups who were considered inferior.



Pl. V. Gold belt with gold and silver pendants excavated at north mound of the Great Tomb (Tomb No. 98) at Hwangnam, Kyongju. (After Goepper and Whitfield 1984, pl. 92. Published with permission of Kyongju National Museum.)

The evidence from excavated Qidan tombs is that, from Abaoji on, the corpses of Qidan rulers and aristocracy were consistently placed in underground chambers rather than on the limbs of trees. The evidence from these tombs suggests that the cultural and historical sources of Qidan burial custom were multiple, stemming from China, Korea, northeast Asia, and northwest Asia.

Yemaotai Tomb No. 7

Faku County in Liaoning province has been an important source of Liao finds since the beginning of archaeological research in northeastern China. A tomb excavated at Yemaotai in 1974 attracted a flurry of attention among art historians worldwide because two silk paintings were uncovered that dated to earlier than A.D. 1100 (Yang Renkai 1975, 1984; Cahill 1980). This same tomb, Yemaotai No. 7, is equally significant for the study of Chinese architecture and the Qidan ideology of death.

Similarly to the tomb of the Princess of Chenguo, Yemaotai Tomb No. 7 had one main chamber and niches adjacent on either side of the antechamber. In this case, all rooms were nearly square, an indication that the tomb had been prepared "early" in the Liao dynasty, probably before the reign of Emperor Shengzong (A.D. 983–1031) (Xiang Chunsong 1981).

In the back of the main chamber of Yemaotai Tomb No. 7, excavators found a wooden architectural model. Measuring 259.1 × 168 cm at the base and 184.5 cm in height, the structure was raised on a 44-cm-high platform. The two paintings mentioned above had been suspended from its inner side walls. Plate VI

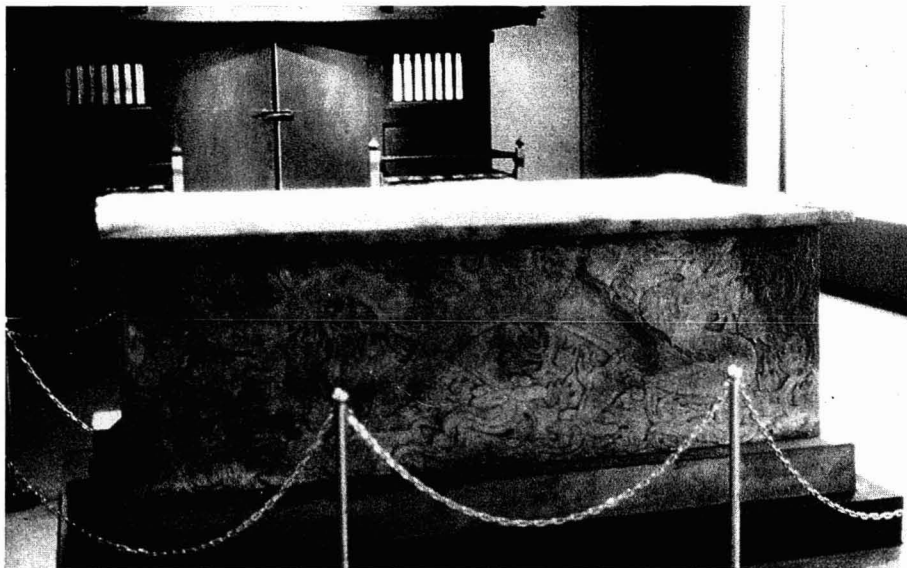


Plate VI. Cypress-bark "house" and stone sarcophagus found inside of it, excavated at Yemaotai Tomb No. 7, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. (Steinhardt photograph.)

shows the cypress-bark "house" as it has been reconstructed for display in the Liaoning Provincial Museum in Shenyang.

The wooden frame of the structure consisted of ten straight pillars, each four-sided in section, surrounded by a balustrade (Fig. 3). The house had windows and doors in the front. The doors were attached by butterfly-shaped iron joiners. The roof was framed by nine pieces of wood that made it possible for the eaves to project at 45° angles, unusually sharp for a Chinese structure, in which the projection of roof eaves is rarely more than 28°. The roof was held together by bamboo nails, undoubtedly imported from China since bamboo was not available in Liao territory.

The structure of this architectural model, from the interlocking of its wooden pieces to their specific measurements, perfectly matches an architectural form known as "nine-ridge small-scale container" (*jiuji xiaozhang*). The name is found and described in the earliest extant Chinese architectural manual, *Building Standards* (*Yingzao fashi*), an early-twelfth-century text commissioned in the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279). This form is described in one of forty-three entries in the chapters titled "Lesser Carpentry" (*xiaomuzuo*), a reference to wooden constructions in miniature (Li Jie 1974, juan 10: 121). Although scholars have made specific connections between passages in the *Building Standards* and actual building parts, the wooden model uncovered in the Liao tomb is at this time the closest match between an entire structure and a written description. Thus the nonnative Liao reveal themselves to have been conscientious borrowers from the Chinese literary tradition, as well as implementors of it in three-dimensional form. In this case, no known text would have anticipated what excavation yielded.

The contents of the wooden model from the Yemaotai tomb reveal more about Liao burial practices. The cypress-bark house was the outer layer of a

double coffin. The concept of burial in multiple coffins might have been learned from China, where funerary rites prescribed as many as nine coffins for rulers and decreasing numbers for lesser-ranked mortals (Poo 1990). Filling most of the space of the cypress-bark container was a stone sarcophagus with dimensions of 2.15×1.25 m at the base and 80 cm in height. On its interior and exterior sides were carved and painted dragons and other Chinese animals and floral motifs.

The bones of an elderly female remained in the sarcophagus at the time of excavation, along with more than ten pieces of silk burial garments and a waist belt from which were suspended precious objects of the same variety found in the tomb of the Princess of Chenguo. The woman was draped in a silk cloth sewn with gold thread, held a crystal ball in her hand, and had a silver plug in her nostrils. A lacquer box had been placed on top of the stone sarcophagus. In front was a stone table with more than ten vessels, some still containing food, and wooden tables were at two of the corners. Such furnishings are consistent with Chinese burial practices of a thousand years ago.

However, no example of burial in stone inner and wooden outer coffins, or in a timber-frame replica of a Chinese hall, has thus far emerged from excavations in Chinese territory to the south of Liao. One reason for this may be that the majority of residents of Song China were Buddhists and the preferred system of burial was cremation. Among excavated Liao remains, the wooden outer container for a corpse is not unique. A much simpler, windowless, timber-plank burial house was found in a tomb in Beipiao, Liaoning (Fig. 4). The floorboards of that structure were made of palm fiber, a material available only in South China.

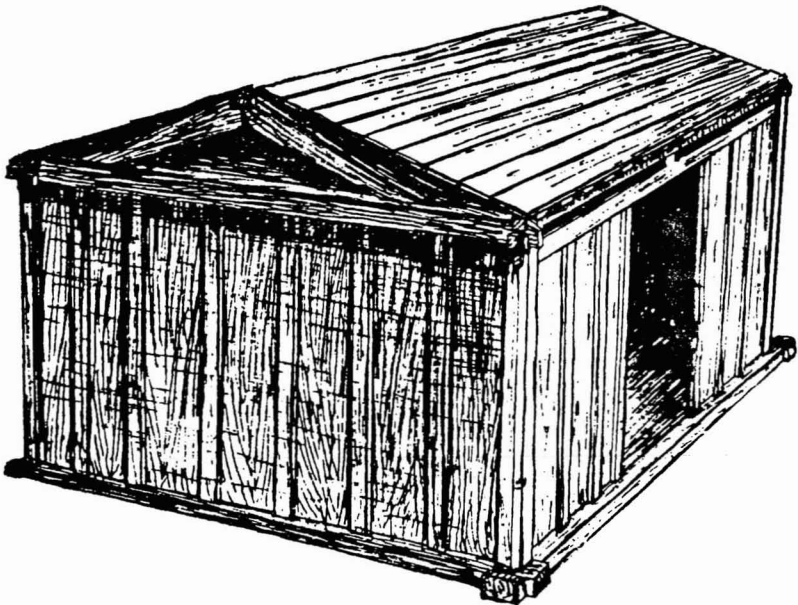


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the wooden sarcophagus excavated at Liao tomb in Beipiao county, Liaoning province. (After Zhang and Li 1990:26.)

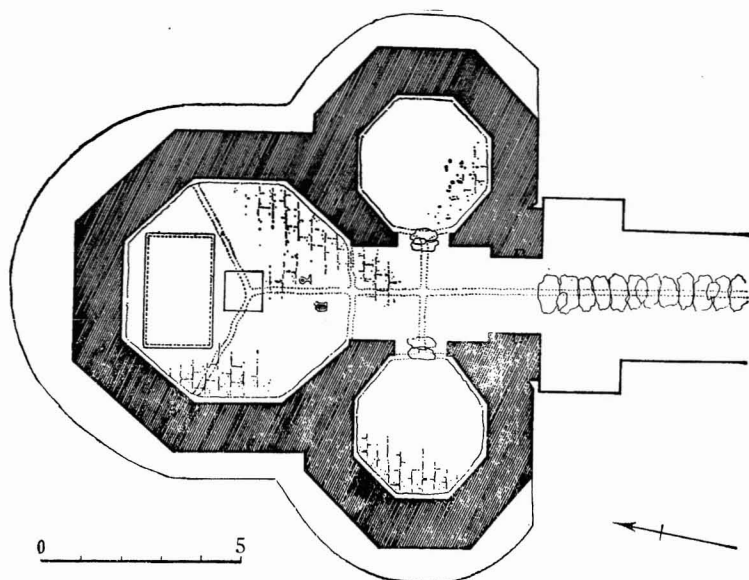


Fig. 5. Plan of the tomb of Xiao Yi, excavated in Faku county, Liaoning province, showing drainage canals carved into the floor. Xiao Yi was buried in A.D. 1112. (After Wen Lihe 1989: 325.)

Two other Qidan tombs excavated in Faku county of Liaoning bear signs of the implementation of features of Chinese tomb construction by Liao builders. The tomb of Xiao Paolu, excavated in 1965, and the tomb of Xiao Yi, opened in 1976, both had drainage canals carved into their chamber floors (Fig. 5). Flooding had been a concern of Chinese builders long before the Qidan came to build tombs, and drainage canals can be found in tenth-century and earlier Chinese tombs. However, viewed in combination with ceiling design and structure, these waterways may have served a symbolic purpose as well as a practical one.

It was noted above that heavenly bodies were painted on the ceiling of the burial chamber of the Princess Chenguo's tomb. Such a ceiling, in Liao or Chinese tombs, is interpreted as part of a systematic program of recreating the universe outside the tomb underground. Although ground-level waterways were at this time rarer in Chinese tombs than ceilings on which heavenly bodies were painted, it seems logical to interpret the floor coupled with the ceiling as a microcosm of the heavenly and terrestrial boundaries of the deceased's former life.

Xiabali Tombs

Ongoing excavation of tombs in Xiabali village, in Xuanhua county of Hebei province, strongly supports this interpretation. As of June 1998, twenty tombs had been identified in a cluster around the first of the group to be excavated, the tomb of Zhang Shiqing. In all likelihood, this was a family cemetery, more populated than others identified so far from the Liao period, such as the one at Kulunqi (Wang and Chen 1989). Of the tombs excavated by 1998, all believed

to be burials of Chinese who lived and worked in Liao territory in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. (one tomb is dated A.D. 1144, twenty years after the fall of the Liao dynasty), at least five have domed ceilings on which were painted explicit representations of heavenly bodies (Zheng Shaozong 1975*a*, 1975*b*, 1993, 1996*a*, 1996*b*; Xia Nai 1976; Tao Zongzhi et al. 1990; Liu Haiwen et al. 1992; Su Bai 1996; author's site visit 1998).

Occupants of the five tombs had the family name Zhang, although only four, Zhang Shiqing (Tomb No. 1, A.D. 1116), Zhang Gongyou (Tomb No. 2, A.D. 1117), Zhang Wenzao (Tomb No. 7, A.D. 1093), and Zhang Kuangzheng (Tomb No. 10) can be confirmed as relatives. (No. 3, occupied by Zhang Shibei and his wife, is the tomb constructed in A.D. 1144.) All were buried with their wives. Based on the funerary epitaphs, murals, cremated remains, and passages from Buddhist scriptures written on a wooden coffin, it is evident that Zhang Wenzao and Zhang Shiqing, at least, were devout Buddhists. Perhaps burial in Liao territory encouraged Chinese to conceal their Buddhist ways behind the facade of a tomb that ultimately might be traceable to China, but one which by the late eleventh century might just as well have been thought of as a Liao funerary facade. Paintings of heavenly bodies existed in the coffin chambers of all four tombs. Most ornately decorated was the ceiling of Zhang Gongyou's tomb, which displayed five concentric rings of subject matter (Pl. VII). Innermost was a bronze mirror encased by a lotus flower with two sets of eight petals each. Beyond the flower were the twelve signs of the Western zodiac. Next were twenty-eight configurations of stars known in Chinese as the "lunar lodges" (*xiu*). Last were the duodenary calendrical animals of China, each in human

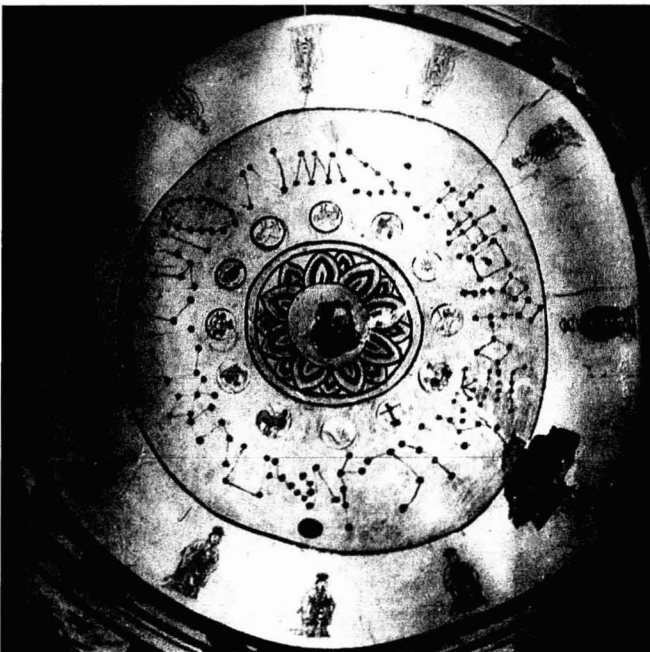


Plate VII. Painting on the ceiling of the tomb of Zhang Gongyou, Xiabali, Xuanhua county, Hebei, showing heavenly bodies and signs of the Western zodiac. Zhang Gongyou died in A.D. 1144. (After Tao Zhongzhi et al. 1990, colorplate 2).

guise. The sun and moon were painted on either side of the ceiling between the lunar lodges and twelve figures.

The lotus with two sets of petals encasing a mirror, lunar lodges, and the sun and moon were found on the ceilings of all five Xiabali tombs (Nos. 1, 2, 3, 7, and 10). All but Tomb No. 7 had evidence of the central mirror. The Western zodiac symbols occurred in Tombs No. 1 and No. 2. As for the calendrical animals, they were painted in Tomb No. 2 and appeared in sculptural form in Tomb No. 10.

The most intriguing element of the paintings are the Western zodiac symbols, for although the combination of motifs is rare, each of the individual rings of representations except the zodiac signs has an extensive pre-Liao history in Chinese funerary art. Indeed, only a few examples of the Western zodiac are known east of west Asia from any time period.

The signs of the Western zodiac also appear on a painting of the Star Mandala, alternately known as the Big Dipper Mandala, found early this century at Khara-Khoto (Pl. VIII). Although today located in Inner Mongolia, when the mandala was painted this site was a capital of the Tangut empire (A.D. 1038–1227), which spanned the lands of present-day Ningxia, Tibet, Gansu, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia.

It appears that in the privacy of death, members of the Zhang family buried in Xiabali chose a specific representation of the cosmos described in Buddhist scripture, one that was available on either side of north Asia during the time of Liao rule. So far, there is no evidence that this mandala was prescribed in east Asia before the eleventh century A.D. At present, a Tang-period tomb in the Astana cemetery, in Xinjiang province (Chinese Central Asia), contains the easternmost example of a ceiling on which the symbols of the Western zodiac were painted (Li Zhengzhi 1973).

SUMMARY

Liao archaeology leads us across north Asia and back again, from the last millennium B.C. into the first centuries of the second millennium A.D. In the privacy of death, the Qidan revealed their ties to north Asian and Korean customs, as well as their discriminating adoption of sedentary ways and other customs of the Chinese. Above these chambers, however, the facade was thoroughly Chinese, as were the walled cities and palaces conquered and sometimes inhabited by Qidan lords. With time, the Qidan intermingled different forms of burial practices, notably multiple coffins and tomb decoration, with their own. There is no evidence to document whether the Qidan continued to use tree limbs as beds for corpses once underground burial was the norm. Neither can we be certain that underground burial in metal wire suits masked with silver and gold had continued without break in north Asia since the time of the Scythians. Nor can we prove that the change in burial custom was accompanied by ideological change. Excavation of the Liao tombs does confirm details left to us in Chinese texts. It also confirms the powerful role of architecture above and below ground in representing the transformation of northern groups to Chinese ways. Excavation of Liao tombs also provides evidence that points to more creative and interpretative

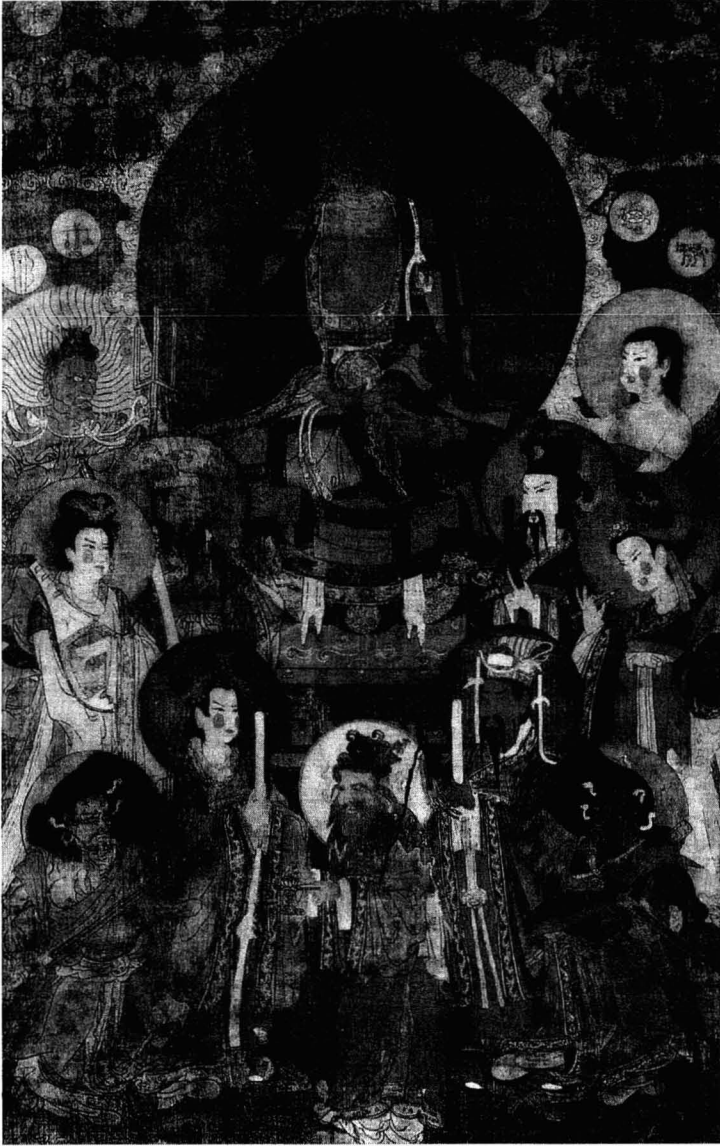


Plate VIII. "Star Mandala," dated to the eleventh century, found during Russian reconnaissance of the Tangut city of Khara-Khoto in the early decades of the twentieth century. The planetary deities surround the enthroned Buddha and signs of the Western zodiac appear in circles in the background. (Published courtesy of Electa.)

modes of burial among the Chinese who lived within the Liao empire, even Chinese Buddhists, than are so far known on native Chinese soil.

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ABSTRACT

The death and burial practices of the semi-nomadic Liao empire (A.D. 947–1125) of China and Inner Mongolia are explored to determine whether, once the north-

east Asian group known as the Qidan established their dynasty in Chinese territory, they came to follow the customs of the Chinese afterlife as they had done in their transformations from nomadism to city dwelling and from native practices to Buddhist worship; or, if in the privacy of death they retained their native rites and customs. Evidence pertaining to this issue comes both from Chinese texts and from excavations of Liao-period tombs.

Chinese texts about Qidan burial practice are cited, showing that from the Chinese point of view, the burial customs of the Qidan classified them as barbarians. Evidence from Qidan tombs, however, seems to contradict the Chinese textual accounts. The tombs of the Liao emperors, it will be shown, employed Chinese architecture in dramatic fashion even in the early tenth century. Excavated evidence from nonroyal Liao tombs also shows the use of Chinese building traditions. Beneath or behind the architectural facades, however, native Qidan practices often persisted.

In addition, it is argued that burial practices suggest that the Qidan not only deviated at times from Chinese funerary practices, but also were influenced by practices of other peoples of north and northeast Asia, including the first-millennium B.C. Scythians. **KEYWORDS:** Chinese archaeology, north Asia, northeast Asia, mortuary practices, ethnicity.