



## Naming Systems and Personal Names Containing *Nu* 'Slave' During the Khitan–Liao Period (907–1125)

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## Abstract

The Khitans lived on the steppe of Mongolia during the tenth through twelfth centuries. According to Chinese historical records, many Khitan people had names ending in the Chinese word *nu* 奴 'slave'. This study explores why this naming pattern occurred and identifies the Khitan naming systems reflected by this phenomenon. Based on data collected from materials and steles engraved in Chinese and Khitan scripts, the study shows that Khitan names are not simply dichotomized into either inherited Chinese conventions or Khitan customs. Rather, the dataset demonstrates that in their bilingual and bicultural context, the Khitan people used two linguistic approaches to personal naming. They not only continued their own kinship-based naming system by applying three strategic patterns of father–son, brother–brother, and husband–wife linkages. They also integrated elements from the Chinese lexicon and imitated the Chinese onomastic pattern of assigning nicknames containing *nu*. *Nu* thus became a Khitan naming component. This investigation draws on pragmatic and semantic theoretical frameworks in multilingual contexts, and utilizes the sociolinguistic concepts of borrowing and code–mixing. Using this multidimensional approach, this study systematically describes the Khitan naming practice and provides evidence for historical contact onomastics, thereby shedding new insights into the relationships between names, languages, and cultures.

**Keywords:** personal names, contact onomastics, Khitan, Chinese, Mongolia, pragmatics, semantics

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## Introduction

### *Background Information*

The Khitan Empire, also called the “Liao Dynasty”, was established in 907 by the nomadic Khitan people on the Mongolia Steppe. Inhabiting this vast territory were nomadic peoples who were principally made up of the Khitan, as well as farming communities who were represented mainly by the Han Chinese (Tuotuo 2017). As a result, both the Khitan and Chinese languages were spoken in this territory. However, only the Khitan language<sup>1</sup> was called 國語 ‘the national language’ (Tuotuo 2017). Representing this language were two types of Khitan characters with large and small scripts.<sup>2</sup> – both of which were created soon after the founding of the dynasty (Tuotuo 2017). While Khitan was used by the nomadic peoples for everyday communication, Chinese language was commonly used for official or formal purposes, as evidenced by the fact that all historical documents preserved to this day are written in Chinese. Because no historical documentation has been attested in the Khitan scripts, and the Khitan language stopped being spoken after the demise of the Liao Dynasty, the Khitan language and its writing system remained largely unknown until the excavation of Khitan steles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The term “Khitan” began appearing in Chinese historical documents in the fourth century (Wei 1974). Today, it is understood that there was long-term interaction between the Khitans and the Han Chinese, leading to extensive bilingual exchanges between the two civilizations. Evidence of this prolonged contact can be seen by the fact that the Khitan people were able to speak Chinese. For example, the first emperor of the Khitan, Abaoji, was “able to speak Chinese” (Ouyang 1974, 890). The intermingling of Khitan and Han during the Liao Dynasty also led to the formation of bilingual communities. There are many records of adults and children, who were proficient in both Khitan and Chinese.<sup>3</sup> In addition, some epitaphs have been unearthed that are engraved with both Khitan and Chinese characters (Xiang 1995). In view of these findings, the Khitan–Liao Empire appears to have been a bilingual society. As this article will show, this widespread bilingualism may help to explain the emergence of an onomastic phenomenon.

As early as the 1930s, Sinologist Paul Pelliot made an interesting linguistic discovery. In Chinese records from the Mongol–Yuan period (1260–1368), many Mongolian names incorporated *nu* 奴 ‘slave’, such as *jia nu* 家奴 ‘house slave’. Pelliot hypothesized that this naming custom might have originated from a custom at the time of naming a newborn after the first person a mother saw after giving birth (1930). However, Pelliot was not aware that this names featuring *nu* appeared even earlier and were even more widespread during the Khitan–Liao period (907–1125). At this time, *nu* was used not only for common people’s names, but also for emperors, members of royalty, and court officials.<sup>4</sup> Over seventy years after Pelliot’s attestation, Ulhicun reported a similar phenomenon in pre-Mongol Khitan. On the basis of this finding, Ulhicun suggested that the Khitans, like the Mongolians, might have given their children names containing “*nu*, which was a naming custom common to northern nomadic peoples” (Ulhicun 2006, 260). Although plausible, this explanation is still merely speculation. To date, questions surrounding this naming phenomenon remain. The desire to provide answers to these long-standing questions served as the departure point for this study.

Alongside Ulhicun's 2003 discussion of Khitan naming conventions, there are other scholars who have examined the historical use of *nu* in Chinese personal names (e.g., Zhou 2015; Du 2013; Shi 2004). For Khitan personal names, scholars such as Pujiang Liu (2017), Ulhicun (2009), as well as Pujiang Liu and Peng Kang (2005) have reported extremely important findings about Khitan naming conventions. The classification and cultural concepts of Khitan names have also been explored by other scholars (e.g., Sun 2023, 2025; Zhang 1994; Jiang 1982). Though these investigations are crucial, to date, the author is unaware of any study that has either examined the occurrence of *nu* in Khitan personal names, or investigated the Khitan naming system in depth. Precisely these two foci form the objective of this study.

To achieve these aims, this investigation cross-examines ancient Chinese documents and inscriptions. Using this method, this study provides evidence that Khitans had given names not only in Chinese, but also in Khitan. Thus, it is contended here that the Khitan naming system was far more complex than previously asserted. The widespread bilingualism of the Khitan society and naming system often resulted in individuals possessing multiple alternative names, which led to confusion and even numerous errors in the *Liao Shi* (Fu 1984), one of the twenty-four official histories of China.<sup>5</sup> Although it is well attested that Khitan people often had multiple names (e.g., Sun 2023; Zhang 1994; Jiang 1982), this study demonstrates that the assignment of Chinese and Khitan names was neither disorderly nor random. Rather, the Khitan people systematically followed naming conventions originating from two distinct systems.

### *Personal Names in Bilingual and Bicultural Khitan Society*

Unlike the Chinese people, who have many family names, according to the *Liao Shi*, the Khitan allowed only two: either *Yelü* 耶律 'the emperor's clan' or *Xiao* 蕭 'the empress's clan' (Tuotuo 2017). Therefore, in historical records, if a Khitan was not surnamed *Yelü*, it can be automatically assumed that the person's surname was *Xiao*; and vice versa. A person's surname was customarily inherited from one of the two intermarrying groups who had created the individual's familial Khitan tribal alliance.

By comparison, Chinese naming customs were regulated by Confucian classics, such as the *Liji* 'Book of Rites'. Chinese family names have remained essentially unchanged throughout history. The pattern and construction elements involve the following: (1) *xiaoming* 小名 / *xiaozì* 小字 "childhood name" or "nickname"; (2) *ming* 名 "given name"; and (3) *zì* 字 "courtesy name". Chinese people usually have a *xiaozì* "nickname" before receiving their *ming* "given name", and then their *zì* "courtesy name". Usually, the *xiaozì* and *ming* differ from one another; and the *ming* and *zì* are meaningfully related.

Among the available Chinese records that offer information about the Khitan-Liao history, the standardized Chinese transcriptions of Khitan names that are found in the *Liao Shi* are the most informative (Liu & Kang 2008). The *Liao Shi* uses the Chinese terms *xiaozì*, *ming*, and *zì* to transliterate Khitan "nickname", "given name", and "second (courtesy) name". These transliterations therefore provide evidence that the Khitan, like the Chinese, also carried three types of names (Tuotuo 2017). Ulhicun (2006) suggests that among the Khitan, their *ming* "given name" was typically Chinese name, whereas the *zì* "second (courtesy) name" and *xiaozì* "nickname" were Khitan. This suggestion seems consistent with the Khitan emperor names recorded in the *Liao Shi* (Tuotuo 2017). As shown below, the Khitan emperors often also had a posthumously given Chinese "temple names" or *miaohao*.

**Table 1:** Names of the Khitan Emperors in the *Liao Shi*

	Period of Reign	Chinese		Khitan	
		<i>miaohao</i> "temple name"	<i>ming</i> "given name"	<i>zì</i> "courtesy name"	<i>xiaozì</i> "nickname"
1	907-926	<i>Tai Zu</i>	<i>Yi</i>	<i>Abaoji</i>	<i>Chuolizhi</i>
2	927-947	<i>Tai Zong</i>	<i>De Guang</i>	<i>Dejin</i>	<i>Yaogu</i>
3	947-951	<i>Shi Zong</i>	<i>Ruan</i>	-	<i>Wuyu</i>
4	951-969	<i>Mu Zong</i>	<i>Jing</i>	-	<i>Shulü</i>
5	969-982	<i>Jing Zong</i>	<i>Xina</i>	<i>Xianning</i>	<i>Mingyi</i>
6	982-1031	<i>Sheng Zong</i>	<i>Long Xu</i>	-	<i>Wnshu Nu</i>
7	1031-1055	<i>Xing Zong</i>	<i>Zong Zhen</i>	<i>Yibujin</i>	<i>Zhigu</i>
8	1055-1101	<i>Dao Zong</i>	<i>Hong Ji</i>	<i>Nielin</i>	<i>Chala</i>
9	101-1125	<i>Tianzuo Di</i>	<i>Yan Xi</i>	<i>Yanning</i>	<i>Aguo</i>

Note: Unless otherwise specified, all Chinese characters hereafter are Romanized in hanyu pinyin. Blank rows indicate that no records were found.

As shown in table 1, each of the nine Khitan emperors had a Chinese ming “given name” and a Khitan xiaozi “nickname”. Three emperors, whose miaohao “temple name” were *Shi Zong*, *Mu Zong*, and *Sheng Zong* respectively, had no zi “second (courtesy) name”. This absence might have been due to omissions in the *Liao Shi*. If so, this might suggest that the Khitan xiaozi was just as important as the Chinese ming “given name” and that the Khitan zi “second (courtesy) name” was less important.

### *Personal Names in the Buddhistic Khitan Society*

The rise of Buddhism in the Khitan–Liao period began even before the Empire was established. Later, Buddhism flourished under the Khitan emperors and became the national religion. This development led to the spread of Buddhism across the entire northeastern Mongolia Steppe (He 2012). Over time, Buddhism blended with the traditional beliefs of the Khitan people and Confucianism.

Many Khitan emperors considered themselves to be “Bodhisattvas” or enlightened beings or “Chakravarti”, devout followers and great patrons of Buddhism. As such, they actively propagated the Buddhism throughout the Empire (Yun 2012). The *Liao Shi* reports, for example, that the sixth emperor, Shengzong, was a scholar of both Taoism and Buddhism (Ye 1985). Given the great influence and status of Buddhism, it is little wonder that members of the royal family and nobles often gave their children names in the form of [Buddha’s name + *nu*]. In view of this history, it is clear that an examination of the use of *nu* in Khitan naming necessarily involves not only taking into consideration the impact of prolonged Chinese–Khitan cultural and linguistic contact, but also the potential influence of Buddhism.

### Methods

The empirical basis for this study comes from a collection of personal names gathered from extant historical texts and stele inscriptions. The primary source for searching, verifying, and cross-referencing the historical texts was the online Scripta Sinica database (<https://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm>) was . For stele inscriptions, the study utilized personal names assembled into a stele database established by the researcher.

This study examined the names of 2,721 individuals recorded in the *Liao Shi* (Tuotuo 2017)<sup>6</sup>, as well as ca. 4,000 personal names inscribed on 295 epitaphs. From these sources, a total of ca. 7,000 personal names of persons with Khitan and Han Chinese heritage during the Khitan–Liao period were investigated. Among the epitaphs, 28 were inscribed in both Khitan and Chinese characters; 43 were inscribed entirely in a Khitan script; and 224 were written soled in Chinese. Among all the personal names investigated in this study, a total of 383 names containing the Chinese character 奴, *nu*, were identified. Of these, 97 are recorded in the *Liao Shi*, accounting for 3.56% of the total number of personal names found in the *Liao Shi*. The study focuses on the transfer of *nu* from Chinese into Khitan, as this process is related to the central issue of transfer from one language to another in the emerging field of contact onomastics.

This study specifically explores the following research questions: 1.) What were the naming systems of the Khitan people? Were they the same as those of the Han Chinese?; 2.) Were the naming practices of the Khitan people influenced by Han Chinese customs? If so, to what extent?; 3.) Why did many Khitan names include *nu* ‘slave’? What was the relationship between this and Han Chinese names that include *nu*?; and 4.) How are bilingualism and biculturalism in Khitan–Liao society reflected in the Khitan naming systems and the use of *nu*?

### Results

#### *Dual Sets of Names in Khitan and Chinese for Khitan People*

Patterns of Khitan names extend beyond those seen in the emperors’ names recorded in the *Liao Shi*. Ullhicun (2006, 261) has confirmed that unlike Chinese naming customs, where one’s nickname is usually different from one’s given name, Khitan xiaozi “nicknames” were usually the same as their ming “given names”. One interesting entry can be found in the epitaph of Yelü Yuanzuo, which noted that Yuanzuo’s son was “Khitan xiaozi Dula, and Han xiaozi Yaoshi Nu when he was five years old” (Liu *et al.* 2009, 20). This epitaph shows that Yuanzuo’s son had two nicknames: one in Khitan and one in Chinese. The tomb owner was a member of

a famous Han 韓 Chinese family that had been granted the royal surname *Yelü*. This was a Khitanized family using the naming habits of Khitanized Chinese, showing inherited naming traditions from both cultures. According to the Khitan rule that a *xiaozhi* “nickname” could also be *ming* “given name”, when this five-year-old child became an adult, he could have two *ming*: *Dula* and *Yaoshi Nu*. If he were called *Yaoshi Nu*, he would have had a Chinese *xiaozhi* “nickname” as his *ming* “given name”. Alternatively, he might have used a Khitan *xiaozhi* “nickname” *Dula* as his *ming* ‘given name’. Further examples from the *Liao Shi* and stele epitaphs can be found in table 2.

**Table 2:** Khitan Individuals’ Dual Sets of Names in Khitan and Chinese

	Surname	Khitan			Chinese	
		<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “courtesy name”	<i>xiaozhi</i> “nickname”	<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “courtesy name”
1	Yelü	<i>Hezhu</i>	<i>Niangun</i>	<i>Hezhu</i>	<i>Cong</i>	<i>Boyu</i>
2	Yelü	<i>Dabuye</i>	<i>Hudujin</i>	<i>Dabuye</i>	<i>Qingsi</i>	<i>Ximei</i>
3	Yelü	<i>Liang</i>	<i>Xiian</i>	<i>Su</i>	<i>Bai</i>	–
4	Yelü	<i>Lifan</i>	<i>Chaoyin</i>	<i>Lifan</i>	<i>Zongjiao</i>	<i>Xigu</i>
5	Yelü	<i>Chage</i>	–	<i>Chage</i>	<i>Zongzheng</i>	<i>Quhui</i>
6	Xiao	<i>Delidi</i>	<i>Jiulin</i>	<i>Delidi</i>	<i>Fengxian</i>	–
7	Xiao	<i>Hui</i>	<i>Guanning</i>	<i>Tuogusi</i>	<i>Hui</i>	<i>Boren</i>

Note: Blank rows indicate that no records were found.

Although a few names are missing, table 2 shows that the Khitan people had given names or *ming* in both Khitan and Chinese, which could be written in either or both forms. The examination of the names also indicate that, in both documents and steles engraved in Chinese and Khitan scripts, Khitans could be identified by their Khitan name, Chinese name, or a mixture of the two. For example, as shown in example 4 of table 2, Yelü Zongjiao’s epitaph (Liu *et al.* 2009, 211) used his Chinese *ming* “given name”, *Zongjiao*, and not his Khitan names. The *Liao Shi* mixes the Chinese *ming* *Hui* and the Khitan *zi* *Kuanning* (example no. 7) for *Xiao Hui* (Fu 1984, 288–289). The *Liao Shi* (Tuotuo 2017, 1,455) also records Yelü Cong’s Khitan *ming* *Hezhu* and Khitan *zi* *Niangun* (no. 1) and his son’s Khitan *ming* *Dabuye* (no. 2), while his Shinto monument contains the complete Chinese *ming* and *zi* of both the father and son *Xiang* (1995, 57). Meanwhile, the Khitan and Chinese names (no. 3) of Yelü *Liang* (Tuotuo 2017, 1538, 1545); and *Xiao Delidi* (example no. 6) are mixed in the *Liao Shi* (Fu 1984, 295–299). These examples provide evidence that the bilingual Khitan society utilized parallel naming systems, in which it was common to have both Khitan and Chinese names. The two sets of names could be used either individually or in mixed forms and were recorded via both the Khitan and Chinese writing systems.

There are 978 names (of both persons and places) listed on the Chongshan Monument Stele, which was unearthed from a site near the Khitan capital of Shangjing (Liu *et al.* 2009, 306–310). The unearthed epitaphs used in this study are the most direct and reliable surviving data as all known documentary materials, including genealogies, were destroyed during the fall of the Dynasty. This combined set of names offers further insight into the general practice of naming in the Khitan society. The stele inscribed a total of 696 Chinese personal names, with eighteen (2.58%) individuals bearing Khitan-style names. Among the thirty-five identified Khitan people, twenty-seven (77.14%) appeared with Chinese-style names (Fu 2019). The respective numbers and percentages demonstrate that, within the historical evidence examined, the proportion of Khitan individuals displaying their acquired Chinese names far exceeded the proportion of Chinese displaying their Khitan-style names.

### Three Patterns of Linkage Naming within Families

As attested above, the Khitans who appeared in the records examined often had *zi* “courtesy names” in both Khitan and Chinese. However, some Khitans had no *zi*, such as *Chage* in table 2 (no. 5). One may wonder what the purpose of a *zi* was for the Khitans. To answer that question, scholars have drawn their attention to examining the origins of *zi* in hopes of determining whether it was modeled after Han customs (Nie 2001; Ulhucun 2003; 2006) or was endemic to the Khitan people (Liu & Kang 2008, 2017). Many efforts have been made to supplement the limited documentary records with data from unearthed tombstones. This work has led to the discovery of Khitan naming customs that differed from those of the Chinese. One such important discovery concerns the existence of a patronymic linkage system. By examining Khitan scripts with methods used in cultural anthropology, Liu and Kang (2008) and Liu (2017), for example, identified a Khitan father–

son naming system. This system appears to have involved the onomastic custom of the eldest son being bestowed a given name/nickname (as the two were the same for the Khitans) that ultimately became the source of his father’s *zi* “courtesy name”. As a result, in the Khitan society, the father’s *zi* and his eldest son’s *ming*/*xiaozhi* were all cognates. According to Liu and Kang (2008), the Khitan father–son patronymic linkage was underscored by the eldest son’s name being marked with a genitive suffix.

Interestingly, the terminology found in the Khitan small script indicates that the Khitan system of hyphenated names was one in which the father was envisioned as being joined to the son, rather than the reverse. Passages in the Khitan small script commonly refer to what can be translated into a “child’s name: these were the original names given in infancy; and “second names” which was given to a man following the birth of his own son (Ulhicun 2003; Liu *et al.* 2017). Logically, if a man had no son, he was never given a “second name”. Corroboration for this inference can be seen in the case of Chage, whose Chinese *ming*/*xiaozhi* “given name”/ “nickname” and *zi* were *Zongzheng* and *Quhui*, respectively. However, because he had no sons (Xiang 1995), he had no Khitan *zi* “second name” (table 2, no. 5). This finding counters the claim that the *zi* of adult Khitan men was an important marker that “was unrelated to whether or not they had sons” (Ulhicun 2009, 150). This historical example also shows that a Khitan man could have a Chinese courtesy name, but not necessarily a Khitan “second name”, if he remained without sons.

Table 3 shows the connection between the names of fathers and their eldest sons. As can be seen, the fathers’ *zi* and their eldest son’s *ming* typically shared the same root—the main difference being that the fathers’ *zi* was affixed with the suffix *-n*. Scholars have argued that this suffix had the grammatical function of indicating the genitive case (Liu 2017). Importantly, in table 3, there are three instances (nos. 2, 3, and 5) where there is no *zi* “second name” for three sons. This omission was possibly due to these sons not having had sons of their own at the time that their fathers’ epitaph was carved. As such, they had no Khitan *zi* “second name” to record. These omissions, in turn, provide more evidence that a father’s second name depended on his son’s given name.

In some ways, this onomastic custom is not unique to the Khitan society. In many patronymic systems, part of an individual’s personal name is based on the given name of their father. For example, the Icelandic patronym *Björnsson* indicates that the individual’s father was named *Björn*. The Khitan naming custom was, however, the exact opposite. In this system, the second names of Khitan fathers were derived from the given names of their sons, using the formula “son’s name + *n*”. For example, in the first example provided in table 3, a man whose first son was named *Helubu* was given the second name *Heluben* ‘Helubu’s father’.

**Table 3:** Fathers’ and Sons’ Linked Khitan Names

	Surname	Father		Son	
		<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “second name”	<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “second name”
1	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Hou</i>	<i>Heluben</i>	<i>Helubu</i>	<i>Xiening</i>
2	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Nu</i>	<i>Guoning</i>	<i>Guoyin</i>	–
3	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Mawei</i>	<i>Pulin</i>	<i>Pulu</i>	–
4	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Balide</i>	<i>Hailin</i>	<i>Haili</i>	<i>Liuyin</i>
5	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Yaliguo</i>	<i>Dinian</i>	<i>Dilie</i>	–
6	<i>Xiao</i>	<i>Dabuye</i>	<i>Temain</i>	<i>Temo</i>	<i>Wugulin</i>
7	<i>Xiao</i>	<i>Dilu</i>	<i>Dinian</i>	<i>Dilie</i>	<i>Hanzhen</i>

Note: Table 3 was adapted based on data from Liu and Kang (2008, 150, 2017, 114–115). Blank rows indicate that no records were found.

Liu (2017) also discovered the existence of another strategy for acquiring a second name in Khitan society: brother–brother linkages. Table 4 shows examples of these fraternally linked names that were identified in the current investigation. Like the father–son linkage pattern, the names of elder and younger brothers shared a root, and the elder brother’s second name contained the suffix *-n* to indicate the genitive case. For example, *Wulizhen* (table 4, no. 1) means ‘Wuli’s elder brother’.

**Table 4:** Brothers’ Linked Khitan Names

	Surname	Elder Brother		Younger Brother	
		<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “second name”	<i>ming</i> “given name”	<i>zi</i> “second name”
1	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Dilie</i>	<i>Wulizhen</i>	<i>Wuli</i>	<i>Yindishen</i>
2	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Kongguli</i>	<i>Wugulin</i>	<i>Wuguni</i>	<i>Nielin</i>
3	<i>Yeliü</i>	<i>Jiuli</i>	<i>Yilan</i>	<i>Yilie</i>	<i>Xunning</i>

Note: Table 4 was adapted based on data from Liu (2017, 116–120).

There is evidence that Khitan women had the same naming convention for given names as men (Jiang 1982). Like men, women could also have names ending in *nu*.<sup>7</sup> Ulhicun (2009), an expert on Khitan scripts, has deciphered some Khitan small scripts and found cases of a Khitan husband–wife linkage naming pattern. Similar to the other patterns described, in this case, upon marriage, a man’s second name would have the same root as his wife’s given name but would be affixed with either *-n* or *-in* (Ulhicun 2009, 139–60). For example, *Dirən* (table 5, no. 1) means ‘Dirə’s husband’.

**Table 5:** Husband–Wife Linked Khitan Names

	Husband		Wife
	ming “given name”	zi “second name”	ming “given name”
1	<i>Niamgu</i>	<i>Dirən</i>	<i>Dirə</i>
2	<i>Əursi</i>	<i>Dirən</i>	<i>Dirə</i>
3	<i>Əsən</i>	<i>Qan-In</i>	<i>Qan</i>
4	<i>Asar</i>	<i>Sabon</i>	<i>Sabo</i>
5	<i>Həugu</i>	<i>Urləbun</i>	<i>Urlə</i>

Note: Table 5 was adapted based on data from Ulhicun (2009, 140).

The identified husband–wife, brother–brother and father–son linkage naming patterns can all be classified as a model of “displaying family relationships” (Finch 2008).

Although the set of Khitan names contained the same general items as the Chinese, among the Khitan, the “second name” could be acquired through three forms of kinship: father–son, brother–brother, and husband–wife. These onomastic patterns were purely Khitan tradition and had nothing to do with Chinese naming customs. However, as will be shown in the following section, the appearance of *nu* in Khitan names indicates the introduction of Chinese linguistic elements into the Khitan naming system.

### *Nu in Chinese Names: Semantics and Pragmatics*

Unlike the Greeks and Romans where slaves were often denied official names (Pulgram 1954), slaves in Chinese history had their own names and were never named *nu*.<sup>8</sup> This section investigates how *nu* emerged in Khitan names. Specifically, it asks whether it originated organically from the steppe customs of the Khitan or Mongolian, or whether it was a result of intentional imitation of Chinese naming practices.

The use of *nu* in Chinese personal names can be traced back to documents from the third century, which significantly predates its appearance in Khitan or Mongolian names. Initially, the incorporation of *nu* in Chinese names was meant as an insult. During the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BC–220 AD), the central regime referred to the surrounding ethnic groups that were hostile (or perceived as hostile) as *Xiongnu* ‘fierce slaves’, *Mannu* ‘barbarian slaves’, *Zeinu* ‘thief slaves’, *Liaonu* ‘fanged slaves’, and *Xiangnu* ‘surrendered slaves’. Clearly, *nu* in these names had a pejorative connotation, and the names were thus derogatory terms.

However, later, the number of personal names incorporating *nu* increased considerably in Chinese official documents.<sup>9</sup> There are also many personal names containing *nu* in Dunhuang documents (敦煌文書), which recorded information about ordinary people spanning hundreds of years from the fourth century onward. Gradually, *nu* lost its pejorative connotation and was even used in the reduplicated form, “*nu nu*” (Du 2013) to express affection. These historical developments would seem to indicate that names incorporating *nu* were derived from Chinese and not from Khitan.

Both the Han Chinese and Khitan people believed that language possessed supernatural power, and that naming therefore was involved a process of exerting divine power. In premodern times, the living circumstances on the Mongolia Steppe were harsh, and the child mortality rate was high. Parents believed that children with vulgar or unattractive names would survive more easily. To ensure their children’s safety and health, parents often gave their sons and daughters nicknames based on large-animal livestock, poultry, dirt, or other “lowly” entities. Shi (2004) attests protective children’s names that meant ‘dung heap’, ‘piglet’, ‘chicken’, ‘pot’, ‘bowl’. In accordance with this concept, scholars (Du 2013; Zhao & Xian 2023; Zhou 2015) have suggested that, in line with this naming custom, *nu* might have been used as in children’s nicknames because of its lowly associations. For example, Han Xiang nicknamed his sons *Nu Zi* ‘slave’s son’ and *Da Mao* ‘big cat’ (Liu *et al.* 2009, 66). Liu Chengsi nicknamed his sons *Da Zhu* ‘big pig’ and *Xiao Zhu* ‘little pig’ (Xiang 1995, 48). The idea of giving children “cheap nicknames for good living”<sup>10</sup> was also present among Chinese people during the Khitan–Liao period.

This is not the only explanation for the rise of *nu* in Khitan personal names, however. A counter argument asserts that when *nu* appeared in a name, it did not have mean “slave”. Instead, it is pointed out “*nu*” also connotes being “obedient” and “submissive”. As a result, its practical meaning came to encompass the meanings of “to be loved” or “cute”. Hence, children names with *nu* were meant “lovely”, “cute”, or “precious” (Zhou 2015, 462). In fact, the ancient Chinese had already documented such an explanation. The *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) records that Sima Xiangru’s nickname was *Quan Zi* 犬子 ‘dog’s kit’. Mengkang, who lived in the third century, annotated that *Quan Zi*’s nickname was given out of love (Sima 1983). Based on these observations, another explanation for names including *nu* can be the following. Pragmatically, *nu* had the function of a blessing or shielding a child by giving them a name that featured the name of a spiritual power such as Buddha with the suffix *-nu*.<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism was extremely prevalent on the Mongolian steppe. Consequently, it became quite popular for people to have their children’s names assigned by monks (Wang 2010; Zhang 1987). As many of these monks were also Chinese, it is understandable that they were influenced by Chinese semantics when naming Khitan children. In this context, it is clear how names combining Buddha’s name with *nu* became a common means for demonstrating religious devotion. This trend can be seen in names linked to other world religions. For example, the ancient Greek name *Theosebeia* means ‘service or fear of god’ (Robertson 1998, 102). In Arabic, nicknames may also express adoration or reliance on God or lineage from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). As such, they form compound structures pairing words that mean “slave” or “servant” with *Allah* to produce names meaning “servant of God” or “worshipper of God” (e.g., *Al-Din*, *Al-Islam*, *Al-Dawlah*, and *Abd*) (Al-Sa’ati 2012, 107). With reference to the Khitan, as will be shown in the next segment, after *nu* had undergone pragmatic–semantic changes in Chinese names (Traugott 2002), it went on to be now further modified by factors of historical context, culture, and society (Durkin 2009).

### *Nu in Khitan Names: Borrowing and Code-Mixing*

Relevant evidence includes cases of names incorporating *nu* often appearing alongside the nicknames of those individuals’ family members. These Khitan-style nicknames included, for example, *Wangjia Nu* (Liu et al. 2009, 123), *Boshen Nu* (Xiang 1995, 96), and *Xiejia Nu* (Tuotuo 2017, 1088). The emergence of *nu* in the Khitan naming system likely began incorporation as a nickname; then, as nicknames and given names were often the same, *nu* became more common as in Khitan given names.

The question is, did the Khitan people borrow the semantic meaning of *nu* from Chinese when it entered the Khitan naming system? According to Ulhicun (2006) the Khitan word for “slave” was transcribed in Chinese text as *Wuyu* 兀欲, *Guyu* 骨浴, or *Guyu* 古昱. Studies have also revealed that, in addition to Khitan, the Jurchen and Mongolian languages also had their own words for “slave” and naming customs incorporating them. Hong (1986) states that in the *Songmo Jiwen* Jurchen called slaves *yahai* (29). The *Jin Shi* reportedly contains the following passage: “Ahe is a human slave” (Tuotuo 2022, 3051). Pelliot (1930, 45) asserts that Mongolian used the name *Bo’ol* to mean “slave”. Given these usages, one might ask what was the purpose of borrowing the Chinese *nu*? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the description provided earlier; namely, the Khitans likely borrowed *nu* from Chinese because of the newer, more auspicious, pragmatic meanings of the term after it had been divorced from its original pejorative meaning of “slave”.<sup>12</sup>

Notably, Khitan names featuring *nu* were later re-adopted into Chinese. By the time this happened, *nu* had already lost its earlier semantic-pragmatic meaning in Chinese naming and *nu* had become a form of Khitan sound transcription. This fact can be evidenced by, for example, the Khitan name *Ruyi Nu* 如意奴, which can be transcribed into Chinese as *Rui Nu* 蕊奴 (Tuotuo 2017). Here, *Rui* is only a phonetic transcription of *Ruyi* and does not carry the meaning of the Chinese word *Ruyi*. In this case, *nu* served the same purpose of phonetic transcription.

Importantly, when the names of the Khitan people were presented in Chinese characters, they did not carry the original Chinese meanings of those characters and became mere transliteration; these characters could be replaced by homophones. For example, the Khitan nickname 驢糞 ‘donkey feces’ would have had the aforementioned function of a protective name. However, in the *Liao Shi*, the noun phrase “donkey feces” was transcribed as 旅墳 ‘travel grave’; table 2, no. 4), which is a homophone. Similarly, the name *Zhangjia Nu* can be represented by two Chinese homophones (張家奴 and 章家奴); and Kehan 可汗 can be represented as 可鞞 because the Chinese characters 鞞 and 汗 are pronounced the same, although they are semantically unrelated. The Chinese characters therefore only transcribed the sounds of Khitan names without retaining their original semantics and pragmatics.

Another interesting example is the name 斯奴古 or *Sinugu* (Tuotuo 2017, 1398). As can be seen, the name features *nu* in middle. However, the same person is referred to in the *Liao Shi* with a name without *nu* (e.g., *Xingu* 辛古) (Tuotuo 2017, 95, 101). The difference appears to have been due to the fact that the “u” was lost in the Chinese phonetic transcription, leaving only the “n” behind. These and other examples support the argument that etymological meaning is largely irrelevant in the practical context of name usage (Ainiala & Östman 2017), which is especially true in the context of transcribed names.

To recapitulate, *nu* appears to have been adopted by the Khitans through two possible pathways borrowed from the Chinese. The first involved the Khitans borrowing many Chinese names ending in *nu* as nicknames (e.g. *Dawang Nu* 大王奴 ‘king’s slave’ or *Qianjia Nu* 千家奴 ‘slave of a thousand houses’). The second involved the Khitan people incorporating *nu* as a component of their nicknames (e.g., *Dada Nu* 達打奴 and *Kehan Nu* 可漢奴).<sup>13</sup> In the second instance, the appearance of *nu* was the result of onomastic “code-mixing” in which the Chinese lexical element *nu* was mixed into the Khitan lexicon to form new hybrid names.

Once borrowed into the Khitan onomasticon, *nu* could appear in one of three different ways: 1.) as a suffix; 2.) a component of a name phrase; or 3.) on its own. Yelü Nu (table 3, no. 2) serves as an example of the latter. Yelü Nu’s given name was *Nu*, and his courtesy name was *Guoyinning*. As the majority of Khitan names were polysyllabic, the *nu* in *Yelü Nu* was most likely a borrowing from Chinese — first used as a nickname and later becoming his given name. The presence of *nu* borrowings in Khitan names is an excellent historical example of contact-induced language change (Winford 2007).

The integration of *nu* into the Khitan system of personal names was, to a certain extent, similar to that in the process seen in bilingual areas in ancient Greek and late Roman times. One peculiar custom in these areas was that locals added a symbol—a by-name—to their name and translated their own names into Greek or Latin names. Despite the adapted phonetic structure, these names “lacked all etymological connection” (Pulgram 1954, 12). Something quite similar appears to have occurred in the bilingual Khitan context. Although *nu* was written with the Chinese character, it no longer had its original Chinese meanings. Thus, whether appearing at the start, middle, or end of a name (e.g., *Nu Gua* 奴瓜, *Pu Nu Ning* 蒲奴寧, *Rui Nu* 蕊奴) (Tuotuo 2017, 116; 1448, 303), *nu* was only used for transliteration. The function of *nu* at the end of the name was the same as when used at the beginning or middle of a name. For example, in the names, *nu* was also used only to transcribe the Khitan sound and had nothing to do with either the meaning of the Chinese word or the native Khitan words for ‘slave’.

As this investigation has shown, the naming system of the Khitan is multidimensional. The intricacy of this system is made all the more complex through the historical processes of borrowing and mixing. Assistance in illustrating this system comes from research conducted in another bicultural bilingual setting. Based on an in-depth examination of Norwegian borrowing and Sámi names, Helander (2009) proposed a three-strategy model. Using contact onomastic theory, borrowed names in Helander’s model can be classified as semantically motivated, totally integrated, and partly integrated. For analyzing Khitan names featuring *nu*, these three strategies cannot be used separately, however. Instead, in the Khitan process of borrowing, different strategies were comprehensively and situationally employed. The resulting model is illustrated in figure 1.

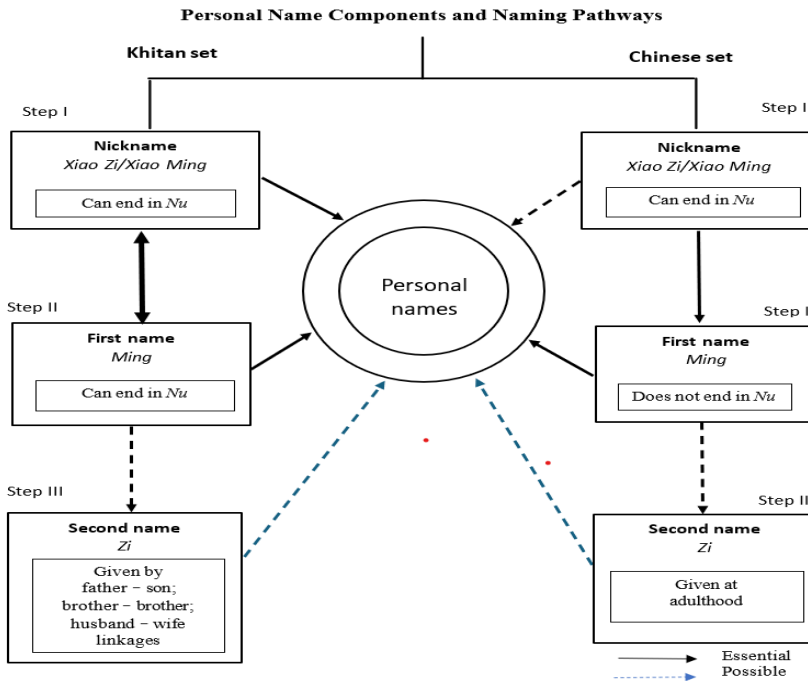


Figure 1: Formation of Khitan Personal Names Featuring *Nu*

## Summary and Conclusion

This study has examined the personal naming systems of the Khitans through the lens of personal names including the Chinese character *nu*. It has revealed that in the bilingual Khitan–Liao society, two pathways were used for assigning personal names, and Khitan people recorded their names via two writing systems, Chinese and Khitan. This research has also shed light on how the Khitans retained their native naming practices which linked fathers and sons, brothers, and husbands and wives and thereby reflected the centrality of these relationships. The kinship-based name patterns provide an excellent example of how naming practices can “serve to ground the individual within family relationships” (Finch 2008). Moreover, as this work has also shown, the examination of Khitan names featuring *nu* provides insights into the spread and influence of Buddhism as well as the effects of Chinese–Khitan bilingualism and biculturalism.

As presented in this work, the Khitan people were adept at selecting appropriate items from two available sets to name their children or themselves (in adulthood) according to their needs. By integrating *nu* into their naming system, the Khitans indicated their social status, demonstrated their specific identity, or associated themselves with a particular group(s) through their *ming*, *zi*, or *xiaozi*, in either Chinese or Khitan. These varying functions helps to explain why one often finds different names for the same person in historical documents or epitaphs from the Khitan–Liao period. This variation is not always an error or omission on the part of the document compilers or the epitaph inscribers, as has been assumed by scholars in the past (e.g., Fu 1984). Therefore, this study not only contributes to the literature on contact in onomastics and sociolinguistics but also provides new insights for analyzing historical materials about the Khitans.

The binomial system employed by the Khitan and the popularization of *nu* in names in the Khitan–Liao period are illustrative historical examples of contact onomastics. However, the Khitans’ use of *nu* was not simply an adoption of Han Chinese customs but also reflected the characteristics of their own conventions. This reflects the ideas of cultural fusion theory (cf. Croucher and Kramer 2017), which claims that cultural integration involves both acculturation and cultural maintenance. Although there has been much attention to the phenomena of onomastic borrowing and code-mixing in medieval European texts (Blomqvist 2020), this study has demonstrated that similarly complex processes have taken place among nomadic people on the medieval Mongolian Steppe. During this period, the Khitans adopted

much of the culture of the dominant Han Chinese. However, they still maintained much of their unique cultural identity. Methodologically, this study responds to the call to examine names or name variants with a greater diversity of origins. It also helps to address the need for more research on the interplay between names and multilingualism (Ainiala & Östman 2017).

The issues that require further research regarding Khitan naming practices include the family relationship-centered naming process in different situations and the details of the conventions and contexts of mixed or switched use of names of Khitan and Chinese. It is hoped that this future research will help to reveal the social, linguistic, and cultural reasons behind these naming choices. The present study has primarily focused more on exploring and describing the unique historical facts of the Khitan naming system. This information then served as the basis for the development of a basic model of how Khitan personal names featuring *nu* were formed. It is hoped that this research can assist in the development of more generalized models and theories that can be used in contact onomastics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Khitan language is “Para-Mongolian” (Janhunen 2006, 391).

<sup>2</sup> Of the two national scripts, (國字) (Tuotuo 2017), the “large” one was modeled on Chinese principles. By contrast, the “small script” used symbols for the initial or final sounds in words (Kane 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Xiang (1995) offers evidence about a boy who died at age 15 and could reportedly read both Khitan and Chinese.

<sup>4</sup> The sixth emperor of Khitan was nicknamed *Wenshu Nu* (Tuotuo 2017). His younger brother (Ye 1985) and two daughters were nicknamed with *nu* (Ye 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Due to the Liao Dynasty’s strict book banning policies and massive fires during the conquest of Khitan-Liao, most historical documents were lost. By the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Tuotuo supervised the compilation of the *Liao Shi*. Although there were very few materials available, in just eleven months, a history of Liao which spanned more than two hundred years are completed. In the process, numerous omissions and errors took place, leading to the *Liao Shi* being one of the most criticized of the twenty-four histories of China compiled.

<sup>6</sup> The figures are based on the *Liao Shi Renming Suoyin* (Zeng 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Women’s names including *nu* are found on steles (Xiang *et al.* 2010).

<sup>8</sup> There are records of slave names in documents, such as “Gan Fu” (Ban 1962).

<sup>9</sup> There are many relevant records in, for example, the *Sanguo Zhi* (Chen 1982), *Jin Shu* (Fang 1974), *Wei Shu* (Wei 1974), *Xin Tang Shu* (Ouyang & Song 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) stated that children were often called “cheap” as a nickname when their parents wanted them to grow up without great challenges (Anonymous 1985, 12).

<sup>11</sup> Many such names can be found on steles (e.g., Xiang 1995).

<sup>12</sup> The popularity of nicknames ending in *nu* and their relationship to Buddhism among the Khitan people further suggest that *nu* was borrowed for both its sound and pragmatic uses. This supposition is different from so-called “semanticized loans” or “phonosemantic matching” (Zuckermann 2004), which are referred to as “pragmaticized loans” and “phonopragmatic matching” in this study. As *nu* was increasingly adopted by Khitans for naming, its Chinese semantic meaning appears to have disappeared.

<sup>13</sup> *Dada (Tatar)* was a name given by the Khitans to a group of Mongols. “Kehan” was a Khitan title that referred to a king.

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