

The Influence of Buddhism: Seeing from the System of Succession in the Liao Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the correlation between Buddhism's development and political reform in Liao Dynasty. Being influenced by the inner-Asian culture, the Khitan people maintained the traditional succession system. However, it caused political chaos after the establishment of the Liao Dynasty. By encouraging the development of Buddhism, the Khitan emperors enhanced the degree of feudalism.

INTRODUCTION

Liao Dynasty is created by the Khitan people. It possesses many Inner-Asian traditions, and the traditional succession system is one of them. This succession system includes a series of succession rituals, choosing-within-one-generation rule, and empowered queens. With the development of the Liao Dynasty, the drawbacks of this system appear. It causes political chaos and separates political power. The emperors of Liao attempted to reduce the negative influences. They chose the lineal primogeniture system to replace the original system, in order to achieve the enhancement of feudalism in the Liao Dynasty. During this process, the flourishing of Buddhism impacts the succession rituals, assisting the enhancement of feudalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The flourishing of Buddhism in the Liao dynasty has been analyzed in cultural and political ways. Nevertheless, there are few scholars see the flourishing of Buddhism in the Liao Dynasty as a part of Chinesization. Previous scholars mainly analyze the negative influence of the flourishing of Buddhism in the later period of the Liao Dynasty. For example, according to Liu Pujiang (1996), the flourishing of Buddhism causes the decline of the Liao Dynasty: the population of monks was more than the society's bearing capacity; and the Buddhist thoughts changed the militarism of the Khitan people, causing failures in the wars. To compensate for the previous studies, this paper will concentrate on the positive political influence of the flourishing of Buddhism in the Liao

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Dynasty. This paper will try to connect the flourishing of Buddhism and Chinese influence in the Liao Dynasty as well, in order to gain deeper comprehension in the Chinesization problem of the Liao Dynasty.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE LIAO DYNASTY

Before the Emperor Taizu of Liao established the Liao Dynasty, the Khitan people lived under the tribe system. In the tribe system, tribes gather together, collaborating with one another. There is one Khan who possesses leadership power. However, the connections among tribes are loose. Khitan people are categorized into different tribes. Their belongingness lies in tribes rather than the regime. Under the tribe system, normally, Khans are from the same tribe. The traditional succession system, the choosing-within-one-generation system, occurs based on this circumstance. People who possess rights of succession are called Tegins. They are from the same generation of one tribe that gains a leading position. From another perspective, Khan is the most powerful person from the most powerful tribe. Once this person is no longer the most powerful one, another person from the most powerful tribe will replace him. The throne of Khan switches from elder brothers to younger brothers. When the youngest man from one generation resigns, the position will be delivered to the next generation. This succession system is one of the traditions of the grassland's culture.

After the establishment of the Liao Dynasty, the emperors realize that the choosing-within-one-generation system causes many fights among royal members. They try to change the succeeding system into the lineal primogeniture system.

THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF SUCCESSION IN THE LIAO DYNASTY

The Specific Method of Succession

According to *The Book of Zhou*, the emperor's succession requires steps as followed: firstly, high-ranking officials will use a blanket to cover the new emperor up, lifting the emperor and whirling nine times in a clockwise way; secondly, the new emperor should ride a horse; thirdly, someone will choke the new emperor until he suffocates and nearly sinks into a coma; finally, one official will ask the new emperor how long could he reign. The officials will record the number of years that the new emperor says during suffocation and verify it afterward.

Luo (2021) thinks the description in *The Book of Zhou* is not complete. He raises a question: What if the new emperor lives and reigns longer than the number of years that he says? Will he be killed and replaced by other people? Based on this question, he checks *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* (*Kitab al-Masalik w'al*) written by a Persian geographer living in the tenth century. The book records that in the Volga region, the Khaqan will be killed if he lives beyond the number of years that he said before.

Considering the ritual of Khaqan's succession is similar to the record in the Book of Zhou, Luo regards the consequence of Zhou's emperor living and reigning longer than the number of years he says is similar to death as well. The Book of Zhou records the events of the Northern Zhou Dynasty in the sixth century. The Book of Roads and Kingdoms records the events in the tenth century. Although these two materials are written in different centuries, considering the high similarity, they can replenish each other. From another perspective, the high similarity across four centuries implies that this ritual is a tradition.

Liao History records a succession method that is similar to Northern Zhou's. The Liao History says: The new emperor gets into the rebirth room, conducting rebirth ritual; afterward, the officials of eight tribes company the new emperor to the northern-east corner of the palace; after appreciating the sun, putting the new emperor on the horse while having an elder member from the queen's family takes care of the direction; the new emperor moves fast on the horse until he falls; after his falling, the officials use a blanket to cover him up. Considering the continuous tradition in inner-Asian cultures, in Luo's idea, it is highly possible that the Khitan people have the same succession ritual as the Northern Zhou people. That is to say, the Khitan people have a succession ritual that includes lifting, twirling, riding a horse, suffocating, saying the number, and verifying the number. The number of years that the new emperor says has to be verified, even at the cost of the new emperor's life.

This discovery reminds Luo of the death of Emperor Taizu of Liao (Ye Lv A Bao Ji). The Emperor Taizu of Liao predicts his death three years before it happens. He says: Three years later, at the time of Bingxu (AD 926), in the season of autumn, I will have someplace to go (Liao History, Benji the second, Taizu). He did die in AD 926. The Liao History records: In July of autumn, on the day of Jiaxu, the emperor goes to Fuyu (name of a city), feeling sick; At night, a star falls in front of the emperor's tent;; It is the day that the emperor dies with an age of 55 years old. Luo doubts that based on the fact that predicting one's death specifically is scientifically unconvincing, is there a possibility that some reasons force the Emperor Taizu of Liao to commit suicide?

If this hypothesis holds, the unnatural death of Emperor Taizu of Liao is caused by the ritual. He did not speak up a number that is large enough during the suffocation, and thus, he had to die before the natural death, in order to fit in the number that he said in the ritual.

The Consequences of the Traditional Succession System

Political chaos is one of the consequences. According to the traditional system of the Khitan, after the death of an emperor, his brothers possess the right of succession. In normal cases, the emperors of Khitan have at least two or three brothers. As a result, these brothers fight against each other in order to accede to the throne. What makes the condition worse are the fights that happen in the next generation. According to Liao History, the second emperor of Liao is the second son of Emperor Taizu of Liao. However, the second emperor is supposed to be the first son of Emperor Taizu of Liao. After the death of the second emperor, the grandson of Emperor Taizu of Liao whose

father is the oldest son of Emperor Taizu of Liao claims to accede. He only reigned for four years and was killed by the oldest son of the second emperor. This is a typical fight between cousins. Later, the oldest son of the third emperor claimed to succeed and killed the fourth emperor who was his uncle. This is a fight between two royal members from different generations. In Khitan culture, these behaviors are acceptable, because everyone we have mentioned here possesses the rights of succession. They all reign orthodoxly. If the system continues, similar fights will be endless.

Moreover, the traditional system of Khitan also includes the empowered queens, making the succession more uncontrollable. For example, after the death of Emperor Taizu of Liao, Queen Shulv came into power, but not the oldest son of the Emperor Taizu of Liao. Having the oldest son of the previous emperor succeeds is the Chinese system of succession. Meanwhile, having the queen of the previous emperor be in authority for a while is the traditional system of succession in Khitan. These two systems represent two political groups. These political groups fight against each other. After the Emperor Taizu of Liao died, some officials proposed that the oldest son should accede to the throne. Queen Shulv denied the proposal and put the primary officer that endorsed the oldest son in jail (Liao History, Book 5, biography of Ye Lv Duo Zhen). This fierce fight between two political groups lasted for one year and four months, ending up with the victory of Queen Shulv and the traditional Khitan nobles. The second son, instead of the first son of the Emperor Taizu of Liao acceded to the throne, being supported by the Queen. However, the victory was temporary, and the chaos lasted to the next generation, as we have mentioned in the previous paragraph.

From another aspect, the house of the king and the house of the queen are in competitive relationship. That is to say, the phenomenon of the empowered queens does not occur individually. It relates to the competition between two houses. According to Sun (2018), the house of the king and the house of the queen are almost equally weighed in Liao Dynasty. This condition creates a dual political system. Changing the succession system will deprive the authority of the house of the queens. In a word, the revolution of the succession system confronts a huge opposition. In a word, the house of the king supports the Chinese system of succession, while the house of the queen supports the traditional system of succession in Khitan. Nevertheless, some members of the house of the king endorse the traditional system. They want to sustain their rights of succession.

Generally, political chaos is caused by two characteristics of the traditional succession system: (1) the expanded rights of succession among royal members, and (2) the empowered queens leading to competitive political groups. Under this circumstance, the emperors of Liao realized that the succession system must be changed, otherwise, the political chaos will destroy the country.

The interference of religious authority is one of the consequences as well. The traditional system of succession pays attention to the gods' will. The new emperor's reign should be justified by the gods, otherwise, it is unorthodox. This opinion makes religion crucial in policy, and thus, religious authority is influential in society. In the early stage of the Liao Dynasty, the religious authority endorsed the political group that opposed the emperor's ideas. The religious authority hindered the emperors from conducting revolutions. These revolutions aimed at enhancing the centralization of

political power, using the Chinese political system instead of the traditional ones. Changing the succession system into lineal primogeniture is one of the revolutions. Once the society accepts the lineal primogeniture system, the religious authority will lose the power to interpretation gods' will in succession rituals. Once the society accepts the Chinese culture or has other religions to believe in, the original religious authority will lose its political influence.

Right because of this situation, the emperors of Liao advocated Buddhism.

BUDDHISM'S INFLUENCE ON THE SYSTEM OF SUCCESSION

From Cruciality to Rituality

The belief in Buddhism changes people's attitudes toward the suffocation ritual. Buddhism claims that the events are generated by Karma (casual relationship). The length of an emperor's reign should be based on the things he/she has done. Believing in Buddhism implies that people refuse to accept the gods' will for no reason. God's will has to be reasonable. That is to say, the will of gods becomes the thing that requires verification. Under this circumstance, the logical chain changes. The emperors do not need to die based on the prophecy.

Previously, the logical chain is constructed in the following way: for instance, the gods order the new emperor to reign for ten years, then after ten years of reigning, the new emperor should resign and die, because the gods only allow this emperor to reign for ten years. Afterward, the logical chain is constructed in a different way: at the moment of the ritual, based on the things that the new emperor has done before, the gods ordered him to reign for ten years; but the order of gods is changeable according to the accumulated karma in the future.

Moreover, Buddhism claims the idea of emptiness. Emptiness indicates that nothing exists permanently. The forms only exist temporarily. The Heart Sutra says: Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; form is not different from the emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. These forms, for sure, contain the phenomena of rituals. Buddhists believe that the wills of Buddha exist everywhere while exist nowhere. People are not capable of figuring them out in reality. Thus, the predicted number in the suffocation ritual does not express the will of Buddha, because the predicted number is a form as well.

This idea makes people pay less attention to the suffocation ritual. Instead of fully conducting the process of suffocating, the officials tend to muddle through. That is to say, the officials will not actually suffocate the new emperor but will conduct it emblematically. In this case, the new emperor is able to control the ritual. Once the new emperor controls the ritual, he can ensure that the predicted number of years is large enough.

According to Liao History (Book of Taizong), the second emperor of Liao had a ritual called rebirth. The rebirth ritual is thought to be part of the ritual of succession in former scholars' ideas. However, the second emperor of Liao had a succession ritual at

the time he acceded to the throne (929). After nine years, in the year of AD 938, he had the rebirth ritual again. Former scholar, Zifang Zhu, questions this conflict. If the rebirth ritual is part of the ritual of succession, why did the second emperor of Liao have a rebirth ritual twice? What is the difference between the succession ritual and the rebirth ritual?

In Zhu's opinion, the occurrence of the second rebirth ritual is caused by the establishment of the Later Jin Dynasty. The emperor of the Later Jin Dynasty, Shi Jingtang, built the regime under the assistance of the second emperor of Liao. Shi Jingtang is also related to the second emperor of Liao. Thus, Shi respectfully addressed the second emperor of Liao as the father emperor, while he was the son emperor. Zhu believes that the second rebirth ritual was to celebrate this victory, for the second emperor of Liao spread his influence on more areas. (Zhu Zifang, 1985, Essay on Chai Boo Li in Liao Dynasty)

However, this statement is doubtful. The first emperor, Emperor Taizu of Liao, became the Khan of Khitan at first, becoming the emperor of Liao after establishing the dynasty. Following Zhu's idea, Emperor Taizu of Liao must have conducted the rebirth ritual, because he built a new regime. In fact, Emperor Taizu of Liao did not conduct the rebirth ritual. Moreover, later emperors of Liao seldom had succession rituals and never separately had rebirth rituals. The third emperor of Liao invaded the Later Jin Dynasty and gained victory in AD 947. He did not conduct a rebirth ritual based on this condition. Somebody may argue that it is because the third emperor died right after he defeated Later Jin's army. Nevertheless, the fourth emperor of Liao did not conduct the rebirth ritual for the land of the Later Jin regime either. Thus, the rebirth ritual is not related to gaining more lands.

What does the rebirth ritual relate to? In my opinion, it is related to suffocation in the succession ritual. When the second emperor of Liao succeeded, he did not have the political power to control the ritual. This is because he acceded to the throne under Queen Shulv's assistance. Queen Shulv preferred the third son (Li Hu) over the second emperor who was the second son (Gengtao, 2019). Queen Shulv chose the second emperor because she compromised with the other political group after depriving the right of succession of the first son, otherwise the political chaos would last. That is to say, Queen Shulv will not help the second emperor gain a longer reigning time. In her idea, the best solution is: to let the second emperor succeed but reign for limited years. When the second emperor of Liao dies, she can elect the third son to succeed. Thus, Queen Shulv will try her best to control the ritual, suffocating the second emperor, and let the predicted number of years be as small as possible.

According to Liao History, the second emperor of Liao reigned for 21 years. Before the separated rebirth ritual, he reigned for 9 years, and after the separated rebirth ritual, he reigned for 12 years. It is possible that in the succession ritual, the second emperor said a predicted number of nine. After 9 years of reigning, he conducted the rebirth ritual, making another predicted number. In this way, he expanded his reigning years. During these 9 years, he developed his own political power, being less impacted by Queen Shulv, fully controlling the second ritual. Thus, he successfully solves the problems caused by the suffocation ritual.

According to Zhu (1985), the third and later emperors of Liao seldom conduct the succession ritual. In every case that they have the succession rituals, it must be years after they truly succeed. From this condition, it is seeable that the succession ritual becomes merely rituality instead of cruciality.

Changing the Idea of Shifting Among Brothers

Once the predicted number of years is large enough, there will be less chance for the throne to shift among brothers.

Shifting the throne among brothers is one of the Khitan traditions. As we have mentioned in the political background part, it is called the choosing-within-one-generation system (Shi Xuan Zhi). The emperor's brothers are named Tegin(s), and they all have the right to succeed after the emperor resigns. Specifically, if the new emperor reigns for ten or less than ten years when he resigns, it is likely that his brothers are still in their prime of lives. Meanwhile, the sons of the new emperor are still young kids who are not capable of fighting against their royal uncles. If the new emperor reigns for twenty or more than twenty years, when he dies, his brothers are likely to be elderly while his sons are in their prime of lives. In Khitan culture, there is a tradition of admiring the strongest and the most powerful person. In a word, the longer time the emperor reigns, it is more likely that the throne will be conveyed within one blood branch.

Enhancing the Feudalism

The establishment of the lineal primogeniture system helped the emperor to centralize political power, leading to the enhancement of feudalism. To build the lineal primogeniture system, the emperors require a low possibility for the throne to shift among brothers, which means letting the throne convey within one blood branch. The social influence of Buddhism assisted the emperors to narrow down the range of people possessing succeeding rights. Thus, Buddhism helps the emperors of Liao enhance feudalism.

From another perspective, according to Liao History, the fifth emperor is the second son of the third emperor; the sixth and later emperors are all the oldest sons of the previous emperors. These records imply that the lineal primogeniture system was established under the reign of the fifth emperor and was solidified under the reign of the sixth emperor. Although in Liao Dynasty, the oldest son of an emperor was not named as the crowned prince, he gained the position of sole heir.

Buddhism flourished during the time of the sixth emperor of Liao. According to the archaeological discoveries, up till now, there are two buildings with Buddhism lection and joss built under the reign of the fifth emperor being unearthed, and there are nine buildings with Buddhism lection and joss built under the reign of the sixth emperor being unearthed. (Wang Shanshan). The total number of unearthed buildings with Buddhism lection and joss build under the reigning of Liao's first, second, third, fourth, and fifth emperor is merely eight. That is to say, the sixth emperor paid much more attention to

the development of Buddhism than previous emperors. According to Liao History (Book Ten), the sixth emperor once provided food for more than ten thousand monks to celebrate victory in wars. The sixth emperor financially supported a once interrupted inscription career as well.

The flourishing of Buddhism and the establishment of the lineal primogeniture system happened in the same time period. It might be a coincidence. We cannot assert that the establishment of the lineal primogeniture system is the consequence of the flourishing of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the sixth emperor of Liao supported Buddhism and the lineal primogeniture system at the same time, meaning these two things have similar social impacts. In a word, they both enhanced the feudalism in Liao Dynasty.

Royal members of the Liao Dynasty tend to use “servant of Buddha” as their nicknames. For example, according to The National Records of Khitan, the second son of the fifth emperor of Liao has the nickname “the servant of Bodhisattva” (Pusanu); according to Liao History, the sixth emperor of Liao has a nickname “the servant of Manjusri” (Wenshun). This behavior indicates that the royal members try to attribute themselves to Buddhists. This attribution increases the sanctity of the royal family. In this way, the royal members make a connection between secular power and religious authority.

The second son of the fifth emperor of Liao and the sixth emperor of Liao are from the same generation. Therefore, by inference, during this time period, the royal members centralize the political power by promoting the development of Buddhism.

CONCLUSION

The impacts of Buddhism specifically showed in the changes in the succession ritual. This ritual used to be crucial yet later became merely rituality in the political field. Under this circumstance, the lineal primogeniture system was able to be built.

The emperors of Liao support the development of Buddhism to centralize the political power and idolize themselves as the messengers of the Buddhas. This series of policies assisted the enhancement of feudalism in the Liao Dynasty. The flourishing of Buddhism changed the Khitan people’s thoughts, reducing the inner-Asian cultural factors in Liao’s society.

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