

Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China

by Naomi Standen

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It is not unusual for one, including the reviewer, to be greeted with a mixed response of surprise and appreciation for having researched for one's doctoral dissertation a barely known subject such as the Goryeo-Khitans diplomatic relations between the tenth century and the twelfth century. The Goryeo dynasty has remained a rather unpopular area of study within Korean history, or at the very least an area that could have been popular but not to the point of gaining great attention. What about the Khitans? People easily confuse the Khitans with the Jurchens or even the Mongols. They also become confused regarding which people founded which dynasty. By no means is such confusion a cause for reproach, considering that people are generally inexperienced in studying such subjects, particularly when these are not critical issues in Korean history compared to the Japanese invasion and annexation of Korea in the modern period or the Korean War.

Within such a milieu, it was astonishing to be told that a monograph on the Khitan Liao had been written and published outside of Northeast Asia. A series of questions subsequently arose: How did the author manage to find the funding and opportunity to publish such a

book in the United States where the Khitans are most likely barely known? What prompted the author to take an interest in the Khitans? Had the author discovered a way to overcome the lack of primary sources to work with? If so, then how?

Answers to these initial questions may be found in the book's preface and introduction provided by the author. It turns out that it was not the Khitans that Naomi Standen had originally been attracted to, but their lives in the frontier zone. Before moving on, rather than plowing through the preface and introduction here, it is worth noting what caused Standen to take note of frontiers. Standen's personal experience of cycling through Eastern Europe in the 1980s made her think about the creation of borders and the commonly accepted assumptions regarding frontiers. She then applied her ideas and questions to a totally different world called China in the tenth and eleventh century.

This period is typically understood as one of transition from Tang China to Song China. Many scholars, including this reviewer, have unconsciously followed the generally accepted understanding that the two dynasties, Tang and Song, are the main characters in this period of chaos that allowed opportunities for foreign people such as the Khitans to take the stage. Once the center of East Asia, Tang China had begun to lose the power to control its periphery. The absence of a controlling power gave the Khitans a chance to establish a dynasty of their own.

Regarding such a period, Standen makes several refreshing arguments. She marks the uncertainty of this period, an uncertainty that allows changes from what had been before. Standen took an interest in the lives of the individuals who had been living in the periphery during this period and the inevitable consequences brought by their choices to reside then and there. This intriguing period had witnessed a "plethora of leaders." Minor leaders would promise protection from hunger, war, or sudden death in order to attract more followers. Leaders would also occasionally be driven to switch their alliance or join forces with a superior counterpart in order to survive, and all those under their wing

would blindly follow. The Khitans managed to survive among the major alliances and succeeded in establishing a new dynasty, as did the Song. Standen therefore argues that the Khitan Liao should be considered a successor equivalent to Song China in the post-Tang world.

In addition, the author urges readers to consider the Khitan Liao as the major keyword holding up the history of China in the tenth century. She further proposes that Liao should not be studied as one of the conquest dynasties, such as the Jurchen Jin and the Mongol Yuan, which followed the Liao. Although the reviewer personally cannot sympathize with the latter argument, Standen's contention still seems fairly logical. Such persuasive statements claiming the historical importance of the Khitan Liao are indeed rare to find unless one's research on this subject is quite extensive.

Turning to the relationship between leaders and their followers during the tenth century, Standen puts forth the following questions while pursuing the origin and signification of "loyalty" (忠, *zhong*). What happened to the followers of a leader who decided to side with the Khitans, and those whose leader lost in combat against the Khitans and became captives under Liao control? Could such followers be deemed betrayers? Against whom did they commit treachery? Above all, what constituted betrayal? Who assessed them and with what criteria? Are scholars or historians from the eleventh century qualified to evaluate the tenth century? Is it acceptable for modern historians like us to interpret in an identical context words such as loyalty, ethnicity and borders used in the tenth century?

In the book's second chapter, the author pursues the diverse usages and interpretations of "loyalty," researching in both secondary materials and Chinese Classics, such as *Lunyu*, *Xunzi*, and *Yan shi jiaxun*. The notion of loyalty goes back to as early as the Spring and Autumn period. The concepts of *xin* (信), *zhong* (忠), and *dao* (道) were immediately acknowledged according to the needs of their users: the overlords (諸侯), the ministers (大夫), the retainers (士), and the rulers (君主). In the tenth

century, the idea of obeying the mandate (天命) provided excuses for “apostates” who had once faithfully worked for one of the five dynasties before turning to side with the Song government. The idea of committing to loyalty justified the deeds of border crossers, serving the Liao court until the Liao moved beyond their own boundaries. The author asserts that Liao was classified as a conquest dynasty from the moment it acquired lands in the south (the sixteen prefectures of the Yan-Yun region). Intellectuals and historians of later periods, especially those of the Southern Song, marked Liao as “the enemy” and heavily criticized border crossers by applying the criteria of loyalty.

Standen’s survey is certainly worth noting and inspires this reviewer’s own research on Goryeo, which was a tributary state to both Liao and Song. On the other hand, there seems to be room to raise objections, particularly on the part covering the survey, perhaps because the author’s reasoning or arrangement of text seems to be the opposite of the style that the reviewer has been trained under and grown accustomed to. The most notable pattern is to start off by stating the author’s argument as if it is an already verified and established theory and then present evidence and references to support preceding statements. This is not to say the author’s arguments are pointless. On the contrary, her table on the development of types of loyalty in Chinese politics is something scholars studying the same period will find well worth consulting.

After examining the formation of the criteria deployed to classify border crossers, border crossing itself is analyzed in the third chapter. Standen collected 225 cases of border crossing from *Liao shi*, *Jiu Wudai shi*, *Zizhi tongjian*, *Xin Wudai shi*, *Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian*, and *Song shi*, and supplied details on each case in chronological order with full citations in the appendix. This appendix is a testament to the intensity that permeates the author’s research: the dates and places where each crossing occurred and the changes in frequency each year can all be located easily from a table in the appendix.

The third chapter also contains a table that categorizes types of

crossings to the Liao into four groups, each represented in percentages, as well. The four categories are crossing for alliance, voluntary crossing, crossing under duress, and involuntary crossing. The categorization would have been more convincing had the procedure through which the enormous data was arranged, all cleanly falling into no more than four groups, been disclosed alongside the table. The number of cases in which records could not be retrieved regarding how borders had been crossed, information that the author omitted in order to maintain focus on the act of crossing, might have reinforced the author's methodology and conveyed a stronger touch of reality to those who only superficially sympathize with the difficulty of studying the period covered in the book.

The border crossing cases are further examined by comparing military crossings to civilian crossings and the crossings of the Han population against non-Han people. The author then moves on to real-life stories of individual border crossers. It seems the author most enjoyed writing this section, the first three chapters in part two of the book. As briefly mentioned in the preface, Standen delves into how the lives of individuals who happened to inhabit the frontier during the period she is focused on were "defined, deployed, subverted and ignored" in the face of changing times and observers.

A total of five cases are unveiled: the lives of Han Yanhui (882-959), Zhang Li (d.947), Zhao Yanxhou (d.948/9), Li Huan (d.962), and Wang Jizhang (d.1022). On one or two accounts of historical research, it would not be a stretch to say it is fortunate for scholars sharing similar research interests to have records and interpretations of such cases. All five individuals crossed the border from the south and served at the Liao court. Some of them contributed to the Liao government in building a Chinese-style state and in winning battles and negotiations. Some were unconcerned about their cultural identity while others failed to assimilate. The choices these five individuals made were as unique as the consequences of their decisions. Standen introduces and compares in

detail how each individual's respective lives were evaluated by later intellectuals and historians who traced them.

Nearing the end of the book, doubts about Standen's differentiation of the Liao from Jin China and Mongol Yuan still linger. The author maintains that it is rather inappropriate to categorize the Liao as a conquest dynasty. But then how fitting is it for the Jurchens to be considered as one when the two seem to have more in common than not? Also, the narrative style of deductive reasoning that prevails throughout most of the book makes the reading experience less comfortable.

Besides these few cavils, the author's clearly inspiring arguments warrant the book to be a pleasant challenge. Possessing geographical and cultural attachment to a topic such as that of this book can sometimes hinder one from thinking beyond the confines of their pre-established set of assumptions. In such cases, it may not be easy to separate individuals from the state or dynasty they belong to. However, the author's approach in dealing with this topic is quite refreshing in that she paid attention to both individuals as well as their affiliated states. She also distinguished border crossings in the tenth century from evaluations of them conducted later on.

Standen's book, especially the first part, seems to be a recommendable read for researchers just beginning to study Chinese history, regardless of their nationality. It can be a good opportunity to develop a bird's-eye view on the region in the tenth to eleventh century and easily compile a glossary and list of basic primary sources any researcher working on topics related to this period of Chinese history needs to be familiar with.

Despite the fear that this has become yet another typical recommendation, it is ultimately up to those who read the book to determine whether they agree or not.