

Status and Influence of the Dual-track System of Political Regions of the Liao Dynasty in the History of Chinese Political System

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Abstract: The dual-track system of the Liao Dynasty offers a new framework for nation-building by military regimes of non-Han ethnic origin. While the Khitay conquered the Han territory by force to establish their rule, they meticulously safeguarded the homeland of their own community as a base. Over the course of Chinese history, the Liao Dynasty united three historical territories into one for the very first time, including the Northeast forest region, the Inner Asian steppe and the Central Plains farming region, thereby bridging the integration and development of the Inner Asian traditions and the Central Plains culture.^[1] This paper discusses the status and influence of the dual-track system of political regions in the Liao Dynasty throughout the history of Chinese political system.

1. Introduction

As a regime founded by ethnic minorities in the Central Plains, Liao has been credited with "inheriting from the Sui and Tang dynasties and pioneering into the Jin and Yuan dynasties".^[2] As the successor of the Sui and Tang dynasties, the Liao Dynasty not only inherited most of the northern territory of the Tang Dynasty, but also inherited the political system of the Central Plains Dynasty. In order to better adapt to the rule in the Central Plains, the Liao Dynasty consolidated the rear tribal alliance of the Qidan nationality. According to the characteristics of the ruling area, it ruled by customs, and implemented the north-south official system—the dual track system of the political district.

2. Status of the Dual-track System of the Liao Dynasty in the History of Chinese System

2.1. Liao Dynasty: Inheritor of Sui and Tang Dynasty

The Khitay people inherited the original system in the process of being integrated into "China". Since the Tang Dynasty, there has been an increasingly close economic and cultural connection between the Khitay and the Han. In the early years of the Zhenguan reign, Mohui, the head of the tribal alliance, led his people to surrender. When Kuge headed the tribal alliance, he requested to be affiliated internally, and the Tang Dynasty established the Songmodu Governorate Office with his land.^[3] Subsequently, with the pacification of Gaojuli by the Tang Dynasty, a large number of Khitay population was relocated to Yingzhou (present-day western Liaoning region). In particular, from the turmoil at the end of the Tang Dynasty to the establishment of the Khitay state by Abaoji in the first year of Shen Long, the northern Han people departed from the Great Wall due to warfare, and Khitay nobles frequently plundered the population from the South. At the beginning of Khitay statehood, Abaoji, following the advice of Han Yanhui and other Han intellectuals, introduced a different model of rule for Han people within the territory from that of the Khitay, retaining the prefectures and counties. Upon Yelv Deguang's occupation of the sixteen prefectures of Youyun, the direct ruling region was expanded to the Central Plains, with an increasing number of Han population in the territory. It is evidenced by Mr. Meng Gutuoli that by the fourth year of Tianqing (1114), the total population of Liao was 8.4 million, of which 1.5 million were Khitay, accounting

for 18%, and 3.3 million were Han, representing 39%. The number of Han people in Liao Dynasty back then was extremely large.^[4] In the time of Emperor Taizong, it was said that "having obtained sixteen prefectures in the Yan Dynasty, the Tang system was adopted with three provinces and six ministries set up in the South again." It can be concluded that Liao Dynasty not only inherits part of Tang's territory and population, but also carries on its system.

2.2. The ruling system of Liao Dynasty in Central Plains

Secondly, there was a breakthrough in the institutional framework since the Han and Tang dynasties with the parallel system of tribes and counties. For the sake of adapting to the development level of the social productivity in the ethnic region, while connecting to the original management model in the Central Plains, Yelv Deguang adopted two systems for North and South administrations to consolidate his regime. On the one hand, a dual-track ruling institution was set up in the central government consisting of the Southern Officials (whose offices were located south of the Emperor's tent) and the Northern Officials (whose offices were located north of the Emperor's tent).^[5] On the other hand, at the local level, the original tribe system was enforced in the native and nomadic regions, while the state and county system was practiced in areas inhabited by Han people, such as the Bohai Kingdom and Youyun. Additionally, there were some Khitan noble royals and ministers who also held military states integrating military and political affairs. Eventually, a dual-track political system was developed, with "five general capitals, six prefectures, 156 cities, and 209 counties" and "52 tribes and 60 subordinate states"^[6]. In the course of Chinese history, the dual-track system of the Liao Dynasty constituted a brand-new framework, which was accommodated to the economic forms and ethnic structures of various regions in the country. During the Han and the Tang dynasties, most of the minority groups in the northern frontier were under the jurisdiction of Ji Mi, which seldom interfered with the internal affairs of the tribes. Under the administration of tribal system, the frontier tribes also functioned as official administrative regions. In the System of Camping and Guarding, it is written that "In ancient times, guards who patrolled in Fang Yue and Wu Fu performed their respective duties, so did the tribes of Liao".^[7] The Liao Dynasty controlled the northern minority groups by setting up the Jiedushi and Xiangwen in each tribe. Such "unprecedented" tribe system achieved the effective rule of minority groups. For the more remote areas, they were governed by the way of subordinate states and regions. For example, the Jiedushi of the Nvzhen in Wan Yan tribe was hereditary, and yet they had very little autonomy over the subordinate states and regions, and were living under high pressure. It is not surprising to discover that this dual-track system is centered on the "rule by custom" ethnic policy, which not only alleviates ethnic conflicts and stabilized the rule of the Liao Dynasty, but also expedites the process of feudalization of the nation.^[8] The "rule by custom" ethnic policy is also borrowed and further developed by the later Jin, Yuan and Qing dynasties.

2.3. Breakthrough of the System of Administrative Regions in Ancient China: the Dual-track System of Political Regions of the Liao Dynasty

Following the development of China's great unification dynasties, the single-track system, which had been dominated by the prefectures and counties system since the Qin Dynasty, reached its limit in the Tang Dynasty and was no longer able to cope with the new co-existence situation of multiple ethnic groups in cultures and economies. Given the needs of the multi-ethnic social structure in the North, it was imperative for the rulers of the Liao Dynasty to construct a political district model differing from the single-track system of the Central Plains. The dual-track system of the Liao Dynasty broke through for the very first time the administrative framework of the Han and Tang dynasties, which had been dominated by the Han prefectures and counties system. This system was more inclusive than the single-track county system. Under the dual-track system, various other non-Han people also emerged as effective ruling regions of the central government, laying the foundation for the development of the subsequent great unified dynasties.

3. Influence of the Dual-track System of Political Regions of Liao Dynasty in the History of

Chinese Political System

As the creator of the dual-track system of the political district, the Khitan tribal system is perfectly connected with the advanced Central Plains culture. At the same time, this highly adaptable district system has also had a great impact on Chinese history.

3.1. The Dual-track System of Political Regions of the Liao Dynasty Offers References to Future Dynasties

Many international scholars are accustomed to referring to the Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Qing dynasties as "conquering" dynasties.^[9] It is undeniable that the regimes after the Liao shared many similarities in their political systems, which belonged to minority groups establishing regimes on the periphery of the Han. Mr. Yao Dali considers that "This Inner Asian frontier empire model also differs greatly from the Han and Tang empire model."^[10] The Han and Tang dynasties before Liao attempted to encompass the whole territory with Han culture under one political system. In contrast, the states of Liao and later adopted various management systems for different ethnic groups within the empire with regard to their characteristics, which is commonly referred to as ruling by custom. "Following centuries of development from the Northern Dynasty of the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Tang Dynasty, the principle of "cultivating its teaching without compromising its customs, and harmonizing its government without compromising its interests" was officially formed in the Liao Dynasty as a relatively complete and effective system of "ruling by customs".^[11]

Upon dominating the Central Plains, Yelv Deguang, as a ruler, had to be cautious in dealing with the discrepancies between "the South and the North" in light of the local fragmentation in the Central Plains during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and the power struggle within the Khitay tribes during the Taizu reign. The enforcement of the tribe system would undoubtedly provoke resistance from the Central Plains people, thus losing the rule of the Central Plains. However, the implementation of the prefectures and counties system in the Han region might undermine the original social foundation of the tribes. This was a common problem encountered by all non-Han regimes dominating the Central Plains. The Liao rulers appropriately addressed this concern through the dual-track system of political districts. Moreover, it served as a reference in setting up political districts for the Jin, Yuan and Qing dynasties, which subsequently dominated the Central Plains.

3.2. Merging of the Tribe System with the Central Plains System, Strengthening the Authoritarian Imperial Power

Under the dual-track political system of the Liao Dynasty, the tribe system influences the subsequent Central Plains dynasties profoundly. Ren Aijun in *Khitan, Shazili, Tokmak and the Nu Jiang - Khitay and Khitay People in History* discusses the innovation of the Khitay people in the feudal political system, arguing that the "partition" was grounded in the merging of the Southern and Northern political systems. In other words, the Khitay emperor assumed both the majesty of an emperor and the identity of a khan.^[12] As can be observed, there was an inherent family element in the Khitay nation, and the Khan's identity was retained within the tribe system under the dual-track political system, which was inherited by the later Jin, Yuan, and Qing dynasties.

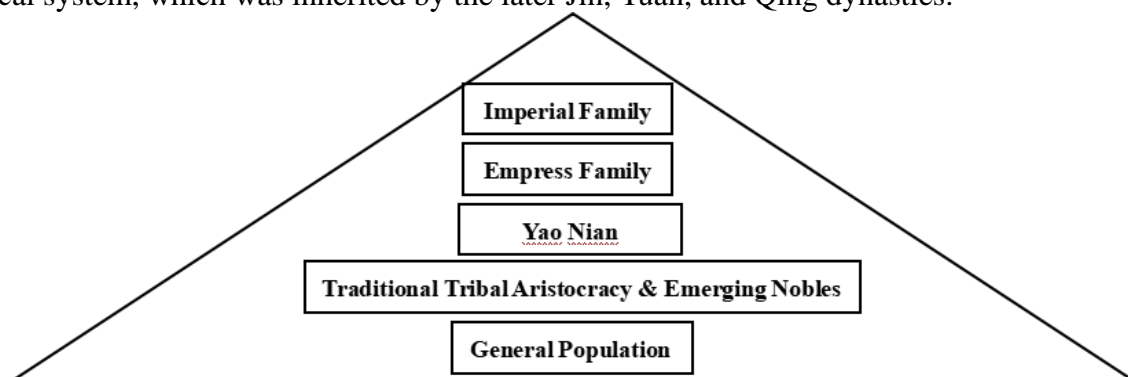


Figure 1: Hierarchy under the Tribe System of Liao Dynasty^[13]

On the one hand, under the tribe system, the authoritarian imperial power was strengthened, with the imperial power striving to restrict other tribes, as recorded “Appointing tribesmen to restrain the imperial family; Enhancing the Yi Tribe and the Er Yuan organization (the Wu Yuan and Liu Yuan of the Imperial Family) to counteract the imperial family of the Xi Tribe”.^[14] All the tribes were under the command of the imperial power. On the other hand, the integration between the family and the state was much tighter. The figure below illustrates the hierarchical division under the tribe system in the Liao Dynasty. Obvious hierarchies within the tribe system are evident in the dual-track political system of the Liao Dynasty, which has undoubtedly strengthened the authoritarian imperial power. For examples, in the Northern Song Dynasty, courtiers addressed the emperor as official (Guan Jia); while under the tribe system of Liao and Jin, courtiers referred to the emperor as master (Zhu Zi), and in the Yuan and Qing dynasties, the change in the relationship between rulers and courtiers is more obvious, as Qing courtiers often addressed themselves as lackeys and referred to the emperor as master (Zhu Zi) in their submissions to the emperor.

3.3. The Dual-track System of Political Regions in the Liao Dynasty Is the Origin of the Province System

The dual-track system of the political regions in the Liao Dynasty influences the relationship between the central and local governments. Later dynasties have perfected the system on this basis and ultimately propelled the creation of the province system. According to the History of Liao and the Hundred Officials, "As for Taizong, he controlled China and the officials were divided into South and North, ruling the Khitay with the national system and dealing with the Han with the Han system. The national system was simple, and the Han system existed as well."^[14]

Under the dual-track system, officials of the Wujingdao of the Liao Dynasty were appointed and dismissed by the emperor. However, owing to the centralized and hybrid dual-track system of political districts, there were many types of political districts with obvious hierarchies.^[15] For example, there were seven administrative states in Zhongjingdao, all of which were at the level of Jiedushi; in Nanjingdao, there was only one administrative state, which was at the level of the prefectural governor; in Xijingdao, there were eleven administrative states, including three levels: Jiedushi, the prefectural governor, and Bulie.^[15] It can be noticed that the setting of officials in the political districts of Liao Dynasty is rather confusing, with obvious misplaced changes among various political districts. Under the dual-track system, there is a crossover of powers between officials such as the prefectural governor and the Jiedushi.

Yet, the setting up of political districts in the Liao Dynasty has brought the central and local governments closer together. The drawbacks of the excessive power of the local Jiedushi that remained from the middle and late Tang Dynasty have been alleviated, while the trend of strengthening local governance has been continued by later dynasties. At the beginning of Jin Dynasty, the Bojilie system was implemented, which followed the system of Southern Court in Liao Dynasty upon entering the Yan State. During the reign of Emperor Xizong in Jin Dynasty, on the basis of the original system of political districts, the Xingtai Shangshu Province was set up in Bianjing and Yanjing, till the second year of Hailing Tiande that the Xingtai Shangshu Province was dismissed.^[16] The subsequent Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties consolidated the central government's control over localities through the refinement of the province system.

4. Conclusion

In June of the second year of Tianzan (923), Yelv Abaoji, the founding emperor of Liao Dynasty, had once remarked, "The holy lord and wise king is one in a million years. Since I have undertaken the order of God from above and unified the masses from below, every conquest is carried out in accordance with the will of God since the operation of our state, I will be the parent of the masses."^[17] Obviously, Abaoji considered himself as the lord of the world. Just like the previous rulers of the Central Plains dynasties, he targeted to achieve great unification. Despite the fact that the Liao Dynasty failed to unify China, its 200 years of stable rule in the Northern region has changed the war-torn and scattered situation in the North. It has laid the foundation for the

unification of the Yuan Dynasty and thus has shaped the "great multi-ethnic China" in the 13th and 14th centuries during the Yuan Dynasty.^[18] It is precisely the dual-track framework of the Liao Dynasty political system that has guided China to the path of a multi-ethnic and unified state.

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