Proceeding of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium: Urban Industrial Innovation and Resilience-oriented Regional Transformation
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HZ30503

Prophecy and Power in the Liao Dynasty-An Analysis of the Historical and Political Context of Yelü Abaoji's Death Prophecy

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Abstract. In the history of the Khitan Liao Dynasty, the death prophecy of its first emperor Yelü Abaoji, marked a turning point. The Liao Shi (辽史), compiled during the Yuan Dynasty, recorded this event. The argument is that the prophecy was intentional. By predicting the time of his death, Abaoji reduced tribal resistance, secured succession, and made hereditary rule appear legitimate. At the same time, reforms such as the Ordo guard and the dual administration system strengthened central authority and stabilized the dynasty. These changes also supported Khitan control of Silk Road trade and long-term order. The prophecy, therefore, was not merely a personal act but a political instrument that shaped Khitan governance and influenced later nomadic empires.

Keywords: Liao Dynasty, Yelü Abaoji, nomadic governance

1. Introduction

In the Liao Shi (辽史), compiled by Yuan minister Toqto'a from 1343 to 1344, Yelü Abaoji (耶律阿保机, r. 907–926), founder of the Khitan and later Liao Dynasty, is said to have foretold his death near the end of his reign. Initially, this prophecy appears to be a mysterious addition intended to legitimize the dynasty. Yet, why would Yuan compilers, drawing on earlier Khitan records, emphasize a self-aware, possibly calculated prophecy? What political impact did this narrative have on transforming Khitan leadership from an elected, term-limited chieftaincy into a centralized, hereditary empire? This paper argues that Abaoji's death prophecy was a strategic tool to dismantle traditional nomadic power structures. By framing his death as a prophetic ritual, he preempted tribal challenges to succession, creating an intentional tension between honoring tradition and overturning it to secure hereditary rule. This paper will first examine Liao Shi's account of the prophecy, then analyze it within the context of Khitan governance and Abaoji's reforms, and finally assess its influence on later nomadic empires, such as the Jin or Yuan dynasties.

2. Historical background

The Liao Shi (辽史), one of China's Twenty-Four Histories, is the official chronicle of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125), compiled from 1343 to 1344 under Yuan Dynasty grand councilor Toqto'a (脱

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脱). Written over four centuries after the death of Liao founder Yelü Abaoji (r.907–926), it draws on earlier Khitan records [1], most of which are now lost, to document the dynasty's history. Following the Chinese historiographical model, the Liao Shi includes imperial annals (benji), chronological tables (biao), treatises (zhi), and biographies (liezhuan). Commissioned by the multi-ethnic Yuan Dynasty, founded by the nomadic Mongols, it presents a nomadic-origin empire within the framework of Chinese imperial history, likely to affirm the Yuan's legitimacy as rulers of both nomadic and sedentary populations.

The record of Yelü Abaoji's death prophecy appears in the "Taizu Benji" (太祖本纪). In the sixth month of the Tianzan era (924 CE), Abaoji summoned key courtiers, including Empress Shulü Ping, the Crown Prince, the Grand Marshal, two chancellors, and tribal leaders. In a formal address, he declared he would die in three years, during the "first days of autumn" in the Bingxu year (926 CE), to fulfill "two unfulfilled duties".On the renwu day of the seventh month in 926 CE, corresponding to early autumn, Abaoji died at age fifty-five, as predicted [2].

Before Yelü Abaoji, the Khitan state operated as a tribal confederation governed by a rotational leadership system, where the authority was decentralized and dependent on the consensus of a council made up of elites from 8 major tribes [3]. The Eight Tribes Council elects a khan for a limited term, typically around 3 years. This can prevent power concentration in any single tribe. This is similar to other steppe nomads in Inner Asia, such as the Khazars. A famous report by the 10th-century geographer Istakhiri records a dramatic ritual in a Khazar khan's coronation. When a new Khazar khan was enthroned, a silk cord was placed around his neck and tightened until he nearly choked. The ruler then had to say the number of years he intended to reign, and if he lived past that term, he would be put to death upon reaching it [4]. While there is no direct evidence indicating the Khitans ever practiced such rituals, the Khitans still had a similar concept of term-limited rule for one person. Khitan khans were elected through agreement among tribal chiefs and expected to follow the terms strictly.

3. Abaoji's prophecy and political reforms

Yelü Abaoji's reign from 907 to 926 CE is a change from the norm. Initially, he refused to step down at the end of his first three-year term as Khan [3]. This triggered multiple rebellions among the Khitan tribal elites [5] who viewed his ambitions as a threat to Khitan political customs. In response, Abaoji started a radical change of governance to completely and permanently dismantle the original elective system. He established the Ordo palace guard [6], which is essentially a military force loyal to Abaoji himself rather than the tribal chiefs. This directly stripped the tribal leaders of their independent military capacities, clearly linking the creation of the Ordo to the erosion of tribal autonomy and paving the way for his broader administrative reforms.

Moreover, Abaoji created a dual administrative system that combined nomadic practices and sedentary governance inspired by neighboring Chinese dynasties [5]. In 916, when approaching the 3rd term of his 9-year rule as khan, Yelü Abaoji declared himself as "Emperor" of the Khitan Dynasty [3] (This would be later changed to Liao by Abaoji's son Yelü Deguang). He then adopted imperial era names and founded multiple capital cities - including Shangjing(上京) and Dongjing(东京) to better control his empire. This hybrid system consisted of a Northern Administration designed for nomads and preserving their customs, while the South Administration was based on a Chinese-style bureaucracy to rule settled populations.

Following his death in 926, Abaoji's reforms were reinforced by Empress Shulü Ping. Recognizing the continued threat from the tribal elites, the empress conducted a brutal purge at Abaoji's funeral, executing over one hundred nobles in a ritual known as xunzhang(殉葬), which is

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a forced sacrificial burial of the nobles. This eliminated the possibility of an electoral and rotational governance system revival, securing the transition to hereditary succession under Abaoji's son, Yelü Deguang.

Thus, Abaoji's 924 CE death prophecy, recorded in the Liao Shi, can be explained in the context of this political transformation. Occurring towards the end of a 3-year cycle, the prophecy was strategically done to align Abaoji's death with established Khitan cycles of governance. By publicly declaring his death in advance and stating he had two remaining tasks before his death, Abaoji not only legitimized his extended 3 year reign, but also reframed his transition of power as a divinely controlled, inevitable event rather than a breach of tradition. This manipulation of traditional expectations had mainly two purposes. One to defuse immediate elite resistance by presenting his extended rule as divinely endorsed rather than usurpatory and also to ritualize succession, making the handover of power to his heir appear cosmic and consensual.

4. Implications for succession and empire building

Beyond internal political reform, Abaoji's death prophecy and the internal stability coming with it had far-reaching implications for the Khitan state's role along the Silk Road. The Liao Dynasty controlled key regions on the eastern end of the trade routes, which facilitated exchange between northern China, Central Asia, and even the Middle East.

The new centralized administration and ordained hereditary rule under the Yelü line enhanced stability and continuity along these corridors. Merchants and nomadic intermediaries relied on predictable policies regarding taxes, border passes, and caravan safety [7] assurances that a rotational system, prone to crisis at each transition, could not consistently provide. The dual-administration system maintained Khitan mobility and nomadic customs in the north while administering sedentary trade centers in the south—including Shangjing (上京), founded by Abaoji in 918—and city markets that dealt in silk, tea, horses, furs, and crafts.

Through continued rulership, the Liao maintained peace treaties and trade agreements with the Song, Goryeo, and Tangut states—as well as with Central Asian polities—helping to secure the Chanyuan Peace Pact of 1004 [8], which sustained over a century of stability between the Liao and Song states. Traders, too, benefited; tea, silk, and horses remained reliable commodities along caravan routes, while the Khitan military-tributary system [8] ensured crucial connectivity.

In short, Abaoji's strategic use of prophecy did more than cement internal authority; it anchored the Khitan state as a stable intermediary on trans-Eurasian routes. By ritualizing succession, he ensured the Liao Dynasty could weather dynastic transitions without disrupting the flow of goods, ideas, technologies, and cultures that defined the Silk Road world of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

5. Comparisons

When we look at the Liao Dynasty in comparison to other nomadic groups of Inner Asia, some clear similarities and differences emerge. Like many nomadic tribes, such as the Mongols, Turks, and Khazars, the Khitans initially relied on a tribal confederation where power rotated and was limited by time. The Mongols, for instance, traditionally selected khans through a kurultai (tribal assembly) and held expectations that khans would gain approval from tribal leaders. Similarly, Turkic nomadic groups often chose leaders based on their ability to maintain consensus among the tribal elite, rather than inheriting power automatically through bloodline.

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However, what set the Khitans apart under Yelü Abaoji was their successful shift from this traditional rotational structure toward a stable, centralized, hereditary empire. While most steppe nomadic tribes resisted permanent centralized authority to maintain tribal autonomy, Abaoji challenged this tradition. For comparison, the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan also centralized authority but remained highly dependent on tribal alliances; when Genghis Khan died, the Mongols faced violent succession struggles that eventually fragmented the empire [9]. Unlike Abaoji's ritualized succession plan, Genghis Khan left no clear mechanism for dynastic continuity, which led to fragmentation of the Mongol Empire into several khanates after his death.

The Khazars can be compared as well. For the Khazars, the famous ritual during the coronation ceremony, described by Istakhiri, involved ritual strangulation to predict the length of a khan's rule, and was strictly enforced. While the Khitans did not have a documented practice exactly like this, both groups had a clear concept of limited rulership. However, the Khazars never evolved into a fully hereditary imperial structure as the Khitans did. Their leadership remained strictly bound by terms, further showing how Abaoji's reforms effectively overcame these nomadic political constraints.

In terms of administrative structure, Abaoji's dual system was also somewhat unique among nomadic empires. Unlike purely nomadic states, such as early Mongol tribes, the Khitans developed separate administrations explicitly designated to both nomadic and sedentary populations. The Mongols would later adopt something similar after conquering sedentary territories, but their approach was far less structured and often reactive rather than strategically planned. The Khitans, under Abaoji, deliberately combined nomadic and Chinese administrative methods from the start, creating stability and durability that allowed for a more successful and lasting empire.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the account of Yelü Abaoji's death prophecy as recorded in the Liao Shi is far more than an anecdote or a simple attempt at posthumous glorification. Instead, it was strategically designed for Abaoji's radical transformation of Khitan political organization from an elective, rotational confederation into a stable, hereditary empire. By publicly foretelling his death and framing his final years as fulfilling divine mandates, Abaoji effectively diminished elite resistance and ensured the smooth hereditary transfer of power to his descendants.

This strategic maneuver differentiated the Khitans from groups such as the Mongols, Turks, and Khazars, who retained elective leadership traditions longer and struggled with turbulent successions. The stability created by Abaoji's reforms not only consolidated internal authority but also enhanced the Liao's role along the Silk Road. By maintaining political continuity and predictable governance, the Liao Dynasty secured prosperous trade and cultural exchange across Eurasia.

Thus, Abaoji's prophetic ritual was not simply about personal legacy—it reshaped a nomadic culture into a lasting empire. In doing so, influencing later nomadic-founded dynasties, notably the Jin and Yuan. Abaoji's calculated prophecy demonstrates how a carefully constructed narrative can facilitate profound political change, leaving a lasting legacy across centuries and cultures.

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