

The Orkhon Inscriptions: Examining Turk Attitudes Towards Chinese in 8th Century

Zhiping Yang

*Dulwich College Beijing, Beijing, China
kalli.yang@outlook.com*

Abstract: The Orkhon Inscriptions provide a captivating insight into the relationship between the Turks of the Second Turkic Khaganate and the Chinese following increased interaction between the two states. In particular, the Orkhon Inscriptions record the complex attitude of the Khagan towards Chinese influences. This paper therefore aims to explore instances and reasons for the Turk Khagan's acceptance or rejection of Chinese commodities, regime, and people in the Turk setting of Chinese gift giving, Chinese subjugation of Turks, and Chinese officials and artists. The author concludes that the Khagan's attitude towards features of the Chinese are largely dependent on their political and social effects, with those that pose harm to his authority and military power of the Khaganate rejected, and those that consolidate the elite's power accepted.

Keywords: Orkhon Inscriptions, Khagan, Second Turkic Khaganate, Chinese Influences, Turk Attitude.

1. Introduction

In many early Chinese historical sources, the Turks are frequently depicted as significant military adversaries, clashing in numerous conflicts with the Chinese Dynasties, particularly during the era of the Turkic Khaganates. As a result, there is a perception that the Turks and Chinese were predominantly hostile towards each other. However, the relationship between the Chinese and Turkic Khaganates was in truth much more complex, characterized by both adversary and cooperation. This complexity is reflected in the Orkhon Inscriptions. As one of the oldest and few Turk sources, the Orkhon Inscriptions not only shed light on historical Chinese and Turk interactions but also the unique perspective of how they perceived Chinese influences.

Throughout the Orkhon Inscriptions, the Chinese are mentioned multiple times as the Khagan illustrates events of Chinese interactions with the Turks and presents his attitudes towards their influences. As the Orkhon inscriptions include both positive and negative accounts of the Chinese, the Khagan presents a complex, even paradoxical view. Therefore, through exploring specific cases in the Turk setting of Chinese gift giving, Chinese subjugation of Turks, and Chinese artists and officials illustrated in the Orkhon inscriptions, this paper aims to explore the reasons for the Khagan's attitude and reaction towards features of the Chinese culture and regime.

This paper will begin with an analysis of Chinese gifts presented in the Orkhon inscriptions, focusing on their social and political usefulness as a way of demonstrating the reason for the contrasting attitudes of the Khagan. Following, an emphasis into the harms of Chinese subjugation of Turks will attempt to explain the negative tone the Khagan has whilst illustrating the event. Finally,

a focus will be drawn on the Khagan's welcoming of Chinese people of the Emperor, highlighting the power he gains from such recognition.

The translation utilized is largely benefited of "The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's final Danish rendering" by E. Denison Ross.[1]

2. Background

In 1899 an expedition by Nikolay Yadrintsev discovered two great square monoliths in the Orkhon Valley of Mongolia. The western side of the monoliths contains Chinese inscriptions; the other three sides runic characters.[2] These runic characters were part of the alphabet of the Old Turkic Script used by the Göktürks from the 8th to 9th centuries and are the oldest extant of written sources of Turkic writing.[3] First translated in 1896 by Vilhelm Thomsen, the deciphered runic inscriptions are of great historical importance for the early history of the Turks.[4] In addition, the inscriptions- named the Orkhon inscriptions after the Orkhon valley in which they were found- provide the opportunity to study the Turkic world in a different light, as the previously used Chinese sources present a rather subjective picture of Turkic world development and specific issues were not raised in their chronicles.[5]

Referring to the historical context of the Orkhon Inscriptions, they were erected during the reign of the Second Turkic Khaganate (682-744). The term "Khaganate" means "nomadic empire" and the term "Khagan" refers to the leader of the Khaganate. The First Turkic Khaganate (552-603) was founded by the Goktürk people of the Ashina clan and was a large medieval state located in Central Asia formed by a tribal alliance of ancient Turks led by Bumin Khagan.[6] It collapsed in 603 and separated into the Eastern Turkic Khaganate and Western Turkic Khaganate that were both subsequently conquered by Tang Dynasty China. Then, in 682 the Second Turkic Khaganate (682-744) came into being centered on Ötüken in the upper reaches of the Orkhon River and was a dominant nomadic power that threatened major sedentary empires (including China).[3] The Orkhon Inscriptions were written during this period by Yolgı Tigin to commemorate his father Bilgä Khagan and uncle Kül Tigin. However, the Orkhon Inscriptions mentions not only events during the reign of the Second Turkic Khaganate, but also those during the First, Eastern, and Western Khaganates. They are written in the first person view of Bilgä Khagan and any references to "The Khagan" refers to Bilgä Khagan.

3. The Khagan accepts and rejects Chinese Gifts

Concerning Chinese Gifts, the Khagan initially rejects them for fear of losing his subordinates but goes on to mention instances where he accepts the tributes, as they are beneficial to his authoritative image. To begin with, the Khagan begins by addressing his people to the East, South, West, and North of Mount Ötüken, mentioning them by tribes. Differing from such brief addressment, the Chinese people he describes in comparatively more detail, focusing on the dangers they pose to the Turks. The Khagan introduces a feature he deems particularly deceptive of the Chinese: their gifts.

The Chinese people, who give in abundance gold, silver, millet (?) and silk (?), have always used ingratiating words and have at their disposal enervating riches.

Mentioned here are precious goods (in particular gold, silver, and silk) that the Chinese had under their disposal and used as gifts. Besides being of high value, they were also used to symbolize position and wealth. Specifically, gold and silver, which were scarce and durable, functioned as currency and were a fundamental part of trading, further increasing their value.[7] With this in mind, the following sentence is perhaps unexpected.

While ensnaring them with their ingratiating talk and enervating riches, they have drawn the far-dwelling peoples nearer to themselves.

Here, instead of pleasure towards the Chinese high-value gifts given to his people, the Khagan possesses a negative view as he accuses the Chinese of luring the far-dwelling peoples- the Turk people- away from Turk territory and into Chinese lands where they will live a sedentary life. He highlights the method by which the Chinese do so.

When they are far away they give bad gifts; when they are near they give good gifts. Thus did they urge them on.

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the production of silk heavily increased as a result of heightened investment in silk by Chinese emperors.[8] This led to immense varieties of silk, such as the increased varieties of twill damask and gauze as well as the invention of damask, velvet, kesi, and brocade.[9] The “bad gifts” and “good gifts” mentioned likely refer to the different variations of silk, with those of better quality of design being better and more sought after. Besides being widely popular due to higher quality, “good gifts” also had great social significance, as hinted in the Orkhon Inscriptions.

When thou art hungry, thou dost not remember what fullness is; but once thou art full-fed, thou hast no thought of what hunger is.

For the Turk people who were not urged on by the “good gifts”, the Khagan treats them well and ensures that they are “full-fed”. Even still, some Turks would still choose to leave their forests and settle in Chinese plains. As a result, the “good gifts” must have offered some form of significant benefit for the Turks to have risked their existing security and economic stability. A reasonable assumption would be a significant social benefit.

Socially, “good gifts”, referring to silk, functioned as an important status symbol. Even though silk ceased to be an exclusive product for royalty after the Qing Dynasty, it was still most common among the rich. People of lower positions tended to wear cotton, considering silk was expensive. Within the higher ranks, the color or type of silk formed an important guide to social rank.[10] As ninth-century poet Zheng Gu said, “When the cloth is plain, grand families will certainly not even look at it”. [11] Such was the value of “good gifts” in presenting power and position. For the Turks, they were no doubt enticing gifts. Staying in the nomadic khaganates, such significant gifts (gold and silver as well as silk) would be given to the heads of state in exchange for peace or in appreciation of loyalty.[12] Normal Turks would have limited access. However, they would be able to gain access to these precious goods if they left their lands and followed the trail of Chinese gifts.

Considering the Chinese gifts were so beneficial, why then, does the Khagan still urge the Turks to be wary of Chinese gifts? The answer is in fact within the Orkhon Inscriptions.

If thou then go forth to that land, O Turkish nation, thou wilt come to destruction; but if thou stay in the land of Otügen, and sent out caravans, thou wilt never suffer any need.

The reason for the Khagan’s attitude is not within the gifts themselves, but of worry of Turk reactions to the gifts. The Khagan fears for the loss of his subordinates and their movement away from the “land of Otügen”, which is under his control. True to his worry, many of the Turks did settle in Chinese plains after being “urged on” by the gifts, and many more might have done so easily. Since nomads are highly mobile and militarily powerful, there is a higher degree of comparative political autonomy to agricultural sedentary states, meaning Turk nomads have greater capacity in deciding where to be and who to follow, regardless of the orders of their Khagan. This may result in a massive loss of followers to a sedentary state. For the Khagan, it is not ideal as it signifies weakened military power and political authority since the Khaganate cannot be strong without its warriors. Military power is especially highly regarded in a nomadic state as it ensures that the nomads have the upper hand against neighboring sedentary states and can exact tribute. Chinese gifts therefore severely threaten the Khagan’s authority and the state’s overall power. The Khagan would be much more inclined to be the one distributing the gifts, strengthening his potential influence and prestige as

“generous”.[13] In addition, he would be inclined to accept the gifts himself, and an instance where he does is in fact recorded in the Orkhon Inscriptions.

From the Chinese Emperor came Ishiyi and (?) LiKäng. They brought in immeasurable quantity precious things, gold and silver [to the value of] a tūmān [10,000].

By accepting high-value Chinese gifts himself, there is a form of diplomatic recognition that authorizes his image as “Khagan” of the state. Moreover, the wealth in such objects contributes and emphasizes his high position.

4. The Khagan rejects Chinese Subjugation of Turks

In the following paragraphs, the Khagan presents his fury towards Chinese Subjugation of Turks in the time of his predecessors. The Eastern Khaganate fell to the Tang Dynasty in 630; the Western Khaganate fell soon after. In the Orkhon Inscriptions, the Khagan mentions these events and the devastating effects they had on the Turk people. This time, he is resentful towards the actions of past Khagans.

After them their younger brothers became kagans, and their sons became kagans; but the younger brothers were now not like their elder brothers, the sons were not like their fathers. It was incapable kagans that mounted the throne, it was bad kagans; their buyruks were likewise incapable and they were bad.

The decrease in military power was what defined a Khagan as “bad and incapable” or not. The Tang attack on the Eastern Turks forced their Khagan Jieli Khagan to flee, and he was later captured; the leader of the Western Khaganate Ashina Helu was delivered to Tang after being rejected political refuge. The once powerful Göktürk empire was now a subordinate of the Tang empire.[14]

Besides the Khagan’s anger towards Chinese subjugation of Turks being simply because of the loss of state, much of his criticism originates from his predecessors’ lack of military power, hereby highlighting the gravity of military power in a nomadic state. Only strong military power can protect the nomadic pastoralist lifestyle of the Turks, without it, the Khaganate loses its advantage against agricultural sedentary states, such as of Tang Dynasty. The Turk nomadic pastoralist lifestyle in turn guarantees strong military power with the access and use of horses, creating an interdependent cycle. As a result, the Khagan is hostile towards the Chinese regime for threatening the Turk way of life despite the fact that some Turks identified as Tang to some extent and that Tang foreign policy allowed Turk self-governing.[15] Nevertheless, the Khagan presents the effects of Chinese subjugation of Turks as devastating, specifically for the nobles.

The sons of the nobles became the bondsmen of the Chinese people, their unsullied daughters became its slaves. The Turkish begs gave up their Turkish names [or titles?] and bearing the Chinese names [titles?] of Chinese begs they obeyed the Chinese Emperor, and served him during fifty years.

He demonstrates that the nobles experienced considerable changes in life following the loss of position, as they were reduced to serve the Chinese Emperor. The method in which they served the Emperor was through fighting for him, and the Tang Dynasty army was staffed with Turk warriors. They were also stripped of their names and titles, losing their elite identity.

To conclude, the Khagan’s resentment towards Chinese subjugation of Turks not only stems from the loss of state, but also reflects his profound concerns towards the weakened and limited nobility during the time of his predecessors.

5. The Khagan accepts people of the Chinese Emperor

From the Chinese Emperor I have had artists to come, and have set them to work. My request has not been refused (?). They have sent the Emperor’s court painters. I have bidden them set up a separate [or excelling?] hall, and inside and out I have had them to make various (?) [remarkable?] paintings.

In Tang Dynasty, there were many court painters. Their paintings often directly served the ruling group,[16] with their main works including figures or portraits.[17] The Khagan likely requested the artists for the purpose of producing said works. Although there is no record of the identity of the subject (or subjects) of the paintings, whether it was the Khagan or his relatives or both, it is highly likely the people drawn were of high position and part of the elite.

To build the hall, carry out the works of art [the paintings?] and the inscribed stone there came the Chinese Emperor's Chikans and Chang Sängün

After the death of the Khagan's brother Kül Tegin, the Chinese Emperor sent men for his funeral. The "Chikans" and "Chang Sängün" could have been people involved in some form of professional mourning as "Chang Sängün" is similar phonetically to the Chinese characters *chàng sàng* which translates directly as "sing mourning". They could also have been highly skilled laborers who worked at preparing the funeral. Whatever the case, they would have been to some degree connected to the Chinese regime and its elite.

In both instances, the Chinese Emperor sent people of the Chinese regime to the Khagan, and in both instances the Khagan accepted them, even praising them in the case of the artists. This pleasant attitude arises from the benefits the foreigners bring to the Khagan and other Turks of high position: power. For the Khagan to have received tribute from a foreign state conveys that the Chinese Emperor recognizes his rule of the Khaganate as rightful. Considering that the Chinese Emperor agreed to the Khagan's request for artists implies the Chinese Emperor viewed the Khagan's state as rather powerful and wanted to establish diplomatic relations. This recognition by the Chinese Emperor contributes to the image of a legitimate and strong Khagan, strengthening his control over Turks of lower positions.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses three features of Chinese influences and explores the reason for differing Turk reactions and attitudes toward these aspects in the Orkhon Inscriptions. First, the Chinese gifts, which hold significant weight in symbolizing position, embody both acceptance and rejection by the Khagan dependent on who the gifts are given to. Second, the Chinese subjugation of Turks, which the Khagan is furious of for it harms the elite and poses dangers to the Turk nomadic way of life. Finally, the Chinese Emperor's people, characterized by artists and those involved in funerals, are welcomed for their contribution to the image of a legitimate and respected Khagan. The author summarizes that the reasoning behind the Khagan's attitude towards Chinese commodities, regime, and people seen in the Orkhon Inscriptions are dependent on the political and social effects they have on the Khagan's authority and military power of the Khaganate. Turk rejection is largely due to the dangers posed to their nomadic pastoralist lifestyle and the Khagan utilizes the foreign influence to consolidate the elite's power. As the author has attempted to reduce the Chinese influences in the Orkhon Inscriptions into the three main groups, she is aware that this paper may lack exploration of other specific aspects of the Chinese. Further analysis of the Orkhon Inscriptions will certainly contribute to greater understanding of the Turk perspective towards the Chinese in the 8th Century.

References

- [1] E. Denison Ross and Vilhelm Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's Final Danish Rendering," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, vol. 5, 1930,
- [2] Zekerya Batur, "Orhun Yazıtlarında Anlama ve Anlatma Bec," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 8, no. Volume 8 Issue 4 (January 1, 2013): 313–33,
- [3] Ross and Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's Final Danish Rendering."

- [4] Alya Oskembay, Bakytzhan Kelgembaeva, and Baurzhan Yerdembekov, "Research on the Turkic Peoples," n.d.
- [5] Nasriddin Nazarov, "THE ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL CONDITIONS IN TURKIC RUNOLOGY," *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, vol. 17, 2020.
- [6] H. Chen, J. M. Ouellet, and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "A History of the Second Türk Empire (ca. 682–745 AD)," *Acta via Serica*, vol. 8–8 (Brill, June 2023),
- [7] Mfea Team, "Ancient Trade Routes: The Silk Road and the Spread of Precious Metals - MFEA," MFEA, April 2, 2024,
- [8] "A Passion for Silk - Silk from the Tang Through the Qing Dynasties | Indra and Harry Banga Gallery," n.d.,
- [9] Designed and Produced by Wanhua Network, "China Silk Museum," n.d.,
- [10] Mayfairsilk Online, "The History of Silk: The Story of the Luxurious Fabric," Mayfairsilk, July 1, 2022,
- [11] BuYun Chen, *Empire of Style* (University of Washington Press, 2019).
- [12] Mark Cartwright and Hardouin, "Silk in Antiquity," *World History Encyclopedia*, September 6, 2024,
- [13] Leonid E. Grinin, Dmitri D. Beliaev, and Andrey V. Korotayev, *Hierarchy and Power in the History of Civilizations: Ancient and Medieval Cultures* (URSS, 2007).
- [14] Qihan Long, "The Relations between the Tang Dynasty and the Gök Turks and Did It Lead to Turkish Western Migration?" 2019 International Conference on Cultural Studies, Tourism and Social Sciences (CSTSS 2019), 2019,
- [15] Long, "The Relations between the Tang Dynasty and the Gök Turks and Did It Lead to Turkish Western Migration?"
- [16] Jin Xiaoyun, "Research on the propagation effect of the painters art in the Tang Dynasty," 2019 3rd International Workshop on Arts, Culture, Literature and Language (IWACLL 2019), 2019,
- [17] Marcel Baer, "History of Sumi-e – Art and Painting in China in the Tang Dynasty (Tang Dynasty/ Tang Chao/T'ang Ch'ao)," *ASIAN BRUSHPAINTER*, January 19, 2021,