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The "High Carts": A Turkish-Speaking People Before the Türks

The Türk (Chinese: T'u-chüeh 突厥) appeared for the first time under this name quite suddenly in the middle of the sixth century when they replaced the Juan-juan 蠕蠕 as masters of Mongolia and established their empire in the Eurasian steppes. Their origins remain rather mysterious. One Chinese account considers them to be a branch of the Hsiung-nu 匈奴 and this has sometimes led in the past to the assumption that the Hsiung-nu were Turkish in language. But the connection with the Hsiung-nu is probably based on nothing more than the fact that they played the same kind of role on the Chinese frontier during the Sui and T'ang dynasties that the Hsiung-nu had played in Han. They were the heirs to the traditional pattern of political dominance of the steppe that had begun with the Hsiung-nu, and this is reflected in the culturally important word *tängri* ("heaven") and some titles that were part of this inheritance. Other Hsiung-nu words in Chinese transcription cannot, however, be interpreted as Turkish or as belonging to any other Altaic language.[1]

Elsewhere I have argued that the ancestors of the Turkish-speaking peoples in the Han period are to be identified with certain peoples in southern Siberia that were conquered by Mo-tun 冒頓, the founder of the Hsiung-nu empire, in the course of his expansion to the north and west.[2] These peoples were the Ko-k'un 鬲昆, or Chien-k'un 堅昆, whose name can be identified as an early form of Kirghiz,[3] the Ting-ling 丁靈, and the Hsin-li 薪犁, whose name is probably the same as the Sïr in the Orkhon inscriptions and Hsüeh 薛 (EMC: *siat*) of T'ang sources. Though an identifiable form of the Turkish name underlying Ting-ling has not survived, it is they whose history between Han and T'ang is most fully and continuously documented. Ting-ling elements entered China in Han times as part of the Southern Hsiung-nu, presumably as subject tribes that had been incorporated into

[1] Edwin Pulleyblank, "The Consonantal System of Old Chinese," *AM* NS 9.1 (1962), pp. 58–177, and *AM* NS 9.2 (1962), pp. 206–65.

[2] Edwin Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and Their Neighbours in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times," in David N. Keightley, ed., *The Origins of Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1983), pp. 411–66.

[3] Edwin Pulleyblank, "The Name of the Khirgiz," forthcoming in *CAJ*.

the Hsiung-nu armies, and they played a role in the barbarian dynasties of the fourth and fifth centuries. Meanwhile on the steppe itself, the Ting-ling reemerged toward the end of the fourth century as enemies of the nascent T'o-pa power. A little later they were at war with the Juan-juan. The name Ting-ling continued to be used occasionally but other forms soon became more common. One is the Chinese Kao-ch'e 高車, "High Carts," which is explained as referring to their wagons with very large wheels. The others, Ti-li 狄歷 (EMC: *dɛjk-lɛjk*), T'e-le 特勒 (EMC: *dək lək*), Ch'ih-le 勅勒 (EMC: *trʰik lək*), Chih-le 直勒 (EMC: *drik-lək*), and T'ieh-le 鐵勒 (EMC: *tʰɛt-lək*),[4] which are obviously transcriptions of foreign names, are evidently new transcriptions of the name that underlay Ting-ling. James Hamilton proposes to interpret this as *Tägräg, a word defined in Kashgari's dictionary as "circle, hoop."[5] The Chinese term "High Carts" was therefore probably not merely descriptive of their habits but related to the meaning of the Turkish name.

The T'o-pa are said to have had warlike contacts with the High Carts already in 363 and 370, at a time before the Juan-juan appeared on the scene. Even after the Juan-juan had taken over the hegemony of the eastern steppes, there were still frequent direct contacts between the T'o-pa and the High Carts. According to the official history *Nan Ch'i shu* 南齊書, the Ting-ling (that is, the High Carts) moved south from their former territories about ten years after the Juan-juan had seized the former court of the Hsiung-nu and had forced the latter to move farther south again. It is not clear how reliable this statement is. It seems more likely that there was a gradual drift southward into the partially depopulated steppes after the dispersal of the Hsiung-nu. At any rate the territory of the High Carts in the fifth and sixth centuries was no longer in southern Siberia, but was spread out over western Mongolia, the Altai, and Zungaria.

The High Carts did not constitute a continuous political unity like the T'o-pa and the Juan-juan, but were rather a loose group of related tribes out of which temporary confederacies emerged from time to time under war leaders. A confederacy of twelve tribes arose around 487 under two brothers,

[4] It should be emphasized that the last of these Chinese transcriptions, T'ieh-le, has nothing to do with Tölis of the Orkhon inscriptions, with which it is still sometimes identified, following Hirth and Chavannes. Tölis and Tarduš are not names of tribes but designations for the two main east–west divisions of the Turkish empire. See Peter Boodberg, "Three Notes on the T'u-chüeh Turks," in *Semitic and Oriental Studies: A Volume Presented to William Popper* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1951), pp. 1–11.

[5] James R. Hamilton, "Toquz-oγuz et On-uyγur," *JA* 250.1 (1962), pp. 23–63.

A-fu-chih-lo 阿伏至羅 (EMC: *ʔa buwk tɕiʰla*) and Ch'iung-ch'i 窮奇 (EMC: *guwŋ giă*), and revolted from the Juan-juan to whom they had previously been subject. They defeated their former masters and for a time were a major power in the Western Regions. An envoy from Southern Ch'i reported that Shan-shan and Khotan, on the southern road around the Tarim basin, had been overrun by them. They came into conflict with the Hephthalites, who killed Ch'iung-ch'i and captured his son Mi-o-t'u 彌俄突 (EMC: *mjiă ŋa dwət*). Later the Hephthalites successfully intervened in a struggle for leadership among the High Carts and placed Mi-o-t'u on the throne. Mi-o-t'u was at first defeated by the Juan-juan ruler Fu-t'u 伏圖 (506–508), but then defeated and killed the latter. He was finally defeated and killed by Fu-t'u's successor, Ch'ou-nu 醜奴, who made a drinking bowl of his skull in Scythian or Hsiung-nu fashion.

With the support of the Hephthalites, Mi-o-t'u's younger brother I-po 伊匐 (EMC: *ʔji-bək*) was set up as ruler and recognized by the Northern Wei court. He defeated the Juan-juan but later suffered defeat at their hands. There followed internal conflicts over the succession and further wars with the Juan-juan. The defeat of the High Carts by the Türk, vassals of the Juan-juan, around 546 was the first appearance of the name Türk on the stage of history. The High Carts became subject to the Türk but remained distinct, and frequently revolted in the Sui and T'ang period. In the seventh century a new confederacy appeared known to the Chinese as the Nine Surnames (*chiu hsing* 九姓), that is, the Toquzoγuz, and were more enduring than earlier configurations. Their leading tribe were the Uyghurs, destined to succeed the Türk as the imperial power in Mongolia around A.D. 740.

The official compilations *Wei shu* and *Pei shih* contain a description of the High Carts as they were in the fifth century. After some typical antiquarian speculation identifying them with the Red Ti of the Spring and Autumn period and a statement, which is not to be taken seriously, that their language was more or less the same as that of the Hsiung-nu, there is an origin myth in which they are said to be descended from the union of a daughter of a Hsiung-nu *ch'an-yü* 單于 and a wolf. This has been translated by Groot.[6] There follows a description of their customs that, as far as I can discover, has not previously been translated into English.[7] It is seems to be

[6] J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of the Chinese* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892–1910) 4, p. 266.

[7] The following extract is translated from *Pei-shih* 北史 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1974) 98, p. 3271. Accounts of non-Chinese nations in the Chinese Standard Histories have been conveniently assembled in Chien Po-tsan 翦伯贊 et al., *Li-tai ko-tsu chuan-chi hui-pien* 歷代各族傳記會編 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1958).

based on direct observation and goes beyond the usual *topoi* found in standard Chinese descriptions of nomadic peoples.

> They have no supreme ruler. Each tribe has its own chief. Their nature is rough and fierce. Being of the same race, they have common sentiments, and when there is an occasion for marauding or meeting an external threat, they combine forces. When they fight, they have no regular formations or order, but each man rushes in and out against the enemy on his own and they cannot maintain a firm line of battle.
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> It is their custom to squat on the ground and behave unceremoniously, without any inhibitions or restraints.
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> In contracting marriages, they offer cattle and horses as the bride price, to display their wealth. After the agreement has been settled, the man's party makes a ring of carts surrounding their horses and lets the woman's party choose the ones they want. [The prospective groom] mounts a horse bareback and comes out of the corral. The owner of the horse stands outside the corral and waves his arms to frighten the horse. If the rider does not fall off, he keeps the horse. If he falls off, he chooses another. When the agreed number is reached, they stop.
>
> They have no cereals and do not brew liquor from them. On the day they go to receive the bride, men and women together carry kumys and joints of cooked meat to the bride's family. The host welcomes the guests and without any order of precedence they sit in a crowd in front of the tent and drink and feast all day long. They stay overnight and the next day take the bride home. Afterwards the groom's party returns and they go into the family's herds and take as many as they can of the best horses. Though parents and brothers begrudge them, they never say a word.
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> They greatly avoid marrying widows but look on them with pity.
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> Their animals all have marks of ownership and even when the animals are ranging freely on the steppe, they never wantonly take what is not their own.
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> They are unclean in their habits.
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> They like bringing[8] [sic] thunder. Whenever there is thunder (a lightning strike?), they shout and shoot arrows at the sky, then abandon the place and move away. The next year in the fall, when the horses

[8] *Hsi chih chen lei* 喜致震雷 surely reflects textual corruption. The nomads fear lightning, which is likely to strike man or beast on the flat treeless plains; they would hardly wish to bring it. The ceremonies described are obviously to exorcise the evil omen.

> are fat, they again gather and watch at the place where the thunder struck. They bury a black wether, light a fire, and draw their swords. A female shaman makes incantations, just like an exorcism in China. In a mass they gallop their horses round and round a hundred times before stopping. The men take bundles of willow branches[9] and plant them around the spot and pour curdled milk over them.
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> The women wrap sheep bones in skin and wear it on their heads, intertwining it with their hair, so that it looks like the cap of a high Chinese official.
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> Their method of burying the dead is to dig a pit in the ground and sit the corpse in it. They stretch out the arms [as if] drawing a bow, suspend a sword from the belt and place a spear under the arm, just as in life. They leave the pit open and uncovered. When some one dies by lightning or by pestilence, they pray for his good fortune. If the death is peaceful, of natural causes, they offer thanks. They kill many animals and burn their bones in a pyre. They race their horses around as many as several hundred times. Men and women, young and old, all gather. Those who have not suffered bereavement, sing and dance and show their joy. The family that is in mourning cries and laments.
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> They migrate in search of grass and water. They dress in skins and eat meat. Their cattle and sheep are just like those of the Juan-juan. But the wheels of their carts are high and have very many spokes.

The title assumed by A-fu-chih-lo when he established himself as their supreme leader is also given. He did not use the imperial title *qayan*, which was already in use among the T'o-pa, the Juan-juan, and the T'ü-yü-hun at this period and which was later adopted by the T'ü-chüeh Türks. Instead he called himself Hou-lou po-le 侯婁匐勒, interpreted in Chinese as *Ta t'ien-tzu*, "Great Son of Heaven." Hou-lou (EMC: *ɣəw ləw*) must transcribe Turkish *uluy* ("great"), and *po-le* (EMC: *bək lək*) must stand for *bägräk*, "lord." This title, which Hamilton translates as "très grand seigneur, très seigneurial, très noble" and derives from *bäg*, "seigneur," plus a superlative suffix *-räk*, does not occur in the Orkhon inscriptions but is not uncommon in other Old Turkish material.[10]

This is important because it seems to establish very clearly the Turkish-speaking character of the High Carts: otherwise such connection depends

[9] This reads *chih* 枝, as in *T'ung-tien* 通典 (Shih-t'ung edn.) 197, p. 1067, instead of *i* 椅.

[10] James Hamilton, *Le conte bouddhique du bon et du mauvais prince en version ouïgoure* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, 1971), p. 111.

on the assumption that they were ancestral to the Uyghurs and on the probable, but still unverified, Turkish etymology of Ting-ling, Ti-li, T'ieh-le, and the others. The title also seems to indicate that in spite of the Chinese translation "Great Son of Heaven" A-fu-chih-to thought of himself as no more than the supreme leader of the High Carts and did not have the ambition to challenge the Juan-juan or the T'o-pa for imperial overlordship of the steppe lands.

Ch'iung-ch'i's title was Hou-pei 侯倍 (EMC: *ɣəw-bəj*), interpreted as *ch'u-chu*, "viceroy" or "crown prince." James Hamilton has suggested to me (private communication) that it might be a defective transcription of *uluɣ bäg*. I have no alternative suggestion to offer at present.

There is more evidence that the High Carts spoke a Turkish language. Hu-lü Chin, whose great-grandfather Pei-hou-li 倍侯利 came over to Northern Wei from the High Carts, was also called A-liu-tun 阿六敦 (EMC: *ʔa luwk twən*), which must be a transcription of Turkish *altun*, "gold," corresponding to this Chinese name Chin.[11] The Mongolian form is *altan*. The use of the syllable *liu* (EMC: *luwk*) to represent the consonant */l/* without a following vowel is in accordance with regular practice in transcriptions of foreign words at that period.[12] The name Pei-hou-li also appears simply as Pei-hou (EMC: *bəj ɣəw*) and we can perhaps interpret it as Old Turkish *bayaɣu*, translated by von Gabain as "begüterter," "richer, better endowed." The final syllable, *li*, which means "profit, advantage" in Chinese, is probably a translation.[13]

What connection the T'u-chüeh Türk, who emerge suddenly as a new political force on the steppes in the middle of the sixth century, had with these Turkish-speaking predecessors remains as obscure as ever, but it is interesting to glimpse into the earlier history of peoples who spoke the same language.

[11] Boodberg, "Three Notes," p. 3.

[12] Edwin Pulleyblank, "The Chinese Name of the Turks," *JAOS* 85.2 (1965), pp. 121–25.

[13] Hu-lü Chin was a companion of Kao Huan, the founder of Eastern Wei, and in 546 when the latter was defeated and fell ill, he sang a "Ch'ih-le" song for him; *Pei Ch'i shu* 北齊書 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1972), p. 23. Louis Ligeti, "Le Tabghatch, un dialecte de la langue sien-pi," in idem, ed., *Mongolian Studies* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1970), p. 283, supposed that this was a Hsien-pei song, but this is impossible even on his mistaken assumption that Ch'ih-le = tölös. Further in the passage the dying emperor refers to Hu-lü Chin as a Ch'ih-le in contrast to another, Hsien-pei, elder statesman.