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

The Türk (Chinese: T’u-chüeh 弥縵) appeared for the first time under this name quite suddenly in the middle of the sixth century when they replaced the Juan-juan 姬巖 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 tungri (“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 魁顕, 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 柯昆, or Chien-k’un 當昆, whose name can be identified as an early form of Kirghiz,³ the Ting-ling 丁零, and the Hsin-li 新犁, whose name is probably the same as the Sir in the Orkhon inscriptions and Hsüeh 許 (EMG: nat) 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

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'ê (考車), “High Carts,” which is explained as referring to their wagons with very large wheels. The others, Ti-le 蒂勒 (EMC: dej-lej), T'e-le 特勒 (EMC: dok lak), Chiin-le 輔勒 (EMC: t'lekk lak), Chih-le 直勒 (EMC: drik-lak), and T'ieh-le 衛勒 (EMC: t'et-lek), 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 *Tagrag, a word defined in Kashgari's dictionary as “circle, hoop.” The Chinese term “High Carts” was therefore probably not merely descriptive of their habits but related to the meaning of the Turcic 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 southwestward 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 confederation of twelve tribes arose around 487 under two brothers,

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4 It should be emphasized that the last of these Chinese transcriptions, *Tieh-le*, has nothing to do with Tališ of the Orkhon inscriptions, with which it is still sometimes identified, following Birt and Chavannes. Toliš and Tardališ are not names of tribes but designations for the two main east–west divisions of the Turkic empire. See Peter Boodberg, “*Three Notes on the T'uchu Turkic*,” in *Semitic and Oriental Studies: A Volume Presented to William Pepper* (Berkeley: U. of California Pr., 1951), pp. 1–11.


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The following extract is translated from *Pa-thiḥ* 北史 (Peking: Chung-hua-shu-chï, 1974), 98, p. 3271. Accounts of non-Chinese nations in the Chinese Standard Histories have been conveniently assembled in Chien Po-tun 習伯宏 et al., *Li-li ko-tua shuan-chi hui-pien* 歷代各族傳記會編 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1958).
based on direct observation and goes beyond the usual input 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 senti-
ments, 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.

It is their custom to squat on the ground and behave unceremoniously, without any inhibitions or restraints.

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.

They greatly avoid marrying widows but look on them with pity.

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.

They are unclean in their habits.

They like bringing [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
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* and plant
them around the spot and pour curdled milk over them.

The women wrap sheep bones in skin and wear it on their heads,
twisting it with their hair, so that it looks like the cap of a high
Chinese official.

Their method of burying the dead is to dig a pit in the ground and
sit the corpse in. 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.

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 geyan, 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-chih Türks. Instead
he called himself Hou-lou po-le (侯柔骨勒, interpreted in Chinese as Ta
pjen-tzu, "Great Son of Heaven." Hou-lou (EMC: yau law) must transcribe
Turkish uluy ("great"), and po-le (EMC: bak lak) must stand for bγarγak,
"lord." This title, which Hamilton translates as "très grand seigneur, très
seigneurial, très noble" and derives from bγiγ, "seigneur," plus a superlative
suffix -γak, does not occur in the Otkhon 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

*This reads chik 棋, as in T'ung-hoan 遼漢 (Shih-t'ung edn.) 1977, p. 1087, instead of i 棋.
10 James Hamilton, Le conte bouddhique du bon et du mauvais prince en version ouïgoune (Paris:
on the assumption that they were ancestral to the Uyghurs and on the probable, but still unverified, Turkish etymology of Ting-ling, Ti-li, Tieh-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 Chars and did not have the ambition to challenge the Juan-juan or the T'o-pa for imperial overlordship of the steppe lands.

Chi'ung-ch'i's title was Hou-pei 侯僕 (EMC: yau-haj), interpreted as ch'u-chiu, "viceroy" or "crown prince." James Hamilton has suggested to me (private communication) that it might be a defective transcription of ulley hag. I have no alternative suggestion to offer at present.

There is more evidence that the High Chars spoke a Turkish language. Hu-lu Chin, whose great-grandfather Pei-hou-li 候侯利 came over to Northern Wei from the High Chars, was also called A-liu-tun 阿六敦 (EMC: ?a luok tuan), which must be a transcription of Turkish altun, "gold," corresponding to this Chinese name Chin. The Mongolian form is altan. The use of the syllable luo (EMC: luok) to represent the consonant ⟨l⟩ without a following vowel is in accordance with regular practice in transcriptions of foreign words at that period. The name Pei-hou-li also appears simply as Pei-hou (EMC: haj yau) and we can perhaps interpret it as Old Turkish bayaya, translated by von Gabain as "begüterter," "richer, better endowed." The final syllable, li, which means "profit, advantage" in Chinese, is probably a translation.

What connection the Tu-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.
13 Hu-lu 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'i-hie" song for him; Pei Chi-shu 北齊書 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1972), p. 23. Louis Ligeti, "Le Tabghatch, un dialecre de la langue scén-pi," in idem, ed., Mongolium Studiis (Amsterdam: Gruner, 1970), p. 289, supposed that this was a Hsien-pi song, but this is impossible even on his mistaken assumption that Chi'hie = tolos. Further in the passage the dying emperor refers to Hu-lu Chin as a Ch'i'hie in contrast to another, Hsien-pi, elder statesman.