

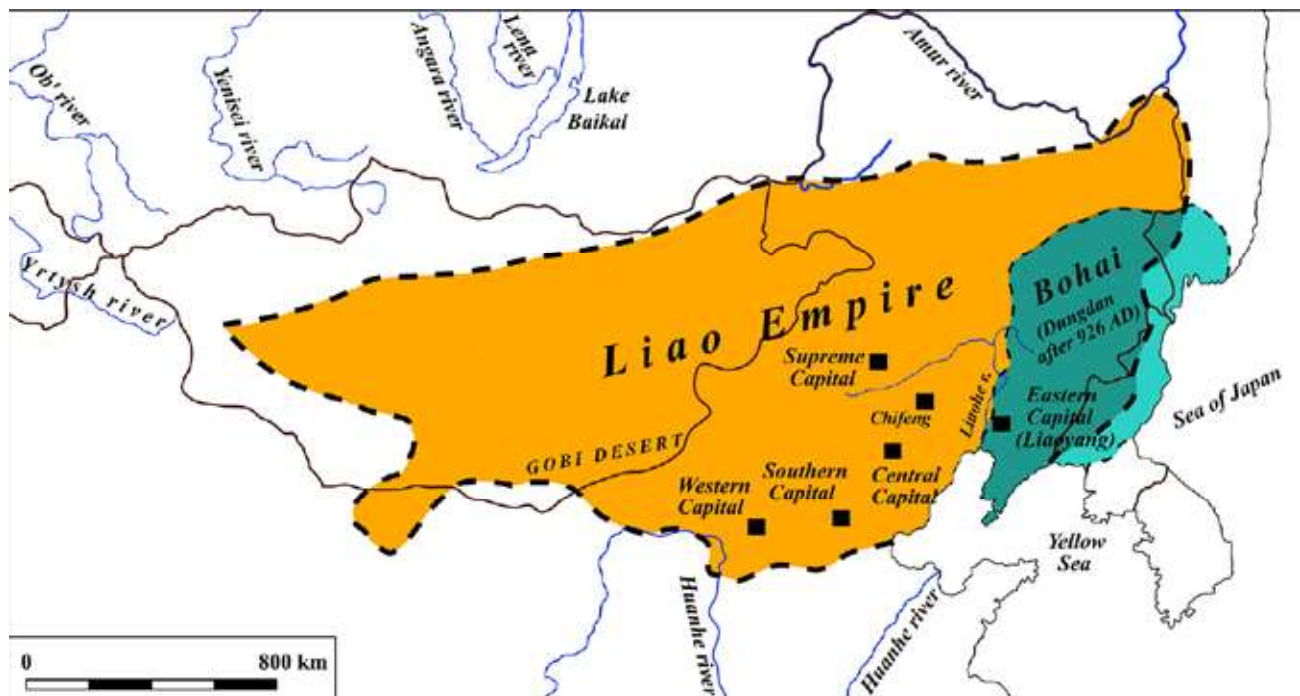
## LIGHT ON THE LIAO

In summer 2009, I was fortunate to participate in a summer seminar, "China's Northern Frontier," co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation, Yale University and Beijing University. Lecturers included some of the luminaries in the study of the Liao Dynasty and its history. In traveling through Gansu, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Liaoning, we traversed much of the heartland of the Liao Empire (907–1125), founded by the first of its dynasty, the K(h)itan Abaoji in what is now Liaoning Province. At its peak, the Liao Empire controlled much of North China, Mongolia and territories far to the West. When it fell to the Jurchen in 1125, its remnants re-emerged as the Qara Khitai off in Central Asia, where they survived down to the creation of the Mongol empire (for their history, see the pioneering monograph by Michal Biran). While they began as semi-nomadic pastoralists, the Kitan/Liao established five capital cities of considerable size. The rich architectural legacy and stunning artifacts excavated in recent years from Liao tombs attest to their involvement in international trade and the sophistication of their cultural achievements. As with other states established in "borderlands" they drew on many different sources to create a distinctive culture which is now, after long neglect, being fully appreciated.

These pictures touch but a few high points, leaving much else for separate exploration, which, it is hoped, they will stimulate readers to undertake on their own. The history and culture of the Kitan/Liao merit your serious attention, forming as they do an important chapter in the larger history of the silk roads. With the exception of the map and satellite image, the photos are all mine, a very few taken in collections outside of China, but the great majority during the seminar in 2009. Captioning is minimal, but the bibliographic essay at the end provides leads for learning more about the Liao and finding many of the same images with descriptive text in various catalogs. Where there is an image or discussion in a published catalog, I have indicated as much with an abbreviation and page number next to my photos.

– Daniel C. Waugh

Map credit: Kradin et al., in *The Silk Road* 12 (2014): 90.



## THE "WHITE PAGODA" IN THE LIAO ANCIENT CITY OF QINGZHOU



Images:  
Google  
Earth

Nestled in a valley leading into a mountainous region, Qingzhou was an important site for the Liao, since a number of the imperial tombs were located nearby (unfortunately, not open to us in 2009, but see Steinhardt 1997, pp. 256-63 for details). Today, as with most of the Liao cities, all that remains on the surface are the walls, with the exception of the "White Pagoda", erected by dowager empress Zhangsheng in 1047, clearly visible in the Google Earth photo.





The pagoda's exterior displays many of the decorative features common to Liao masonry pagodas. At the time of the restoration in 2009, some of the original sculptures, bells and mirrors were placed on display in the Balinyouqi Museum.



Attached to the top and the upper levels of the pagoda were more than 800 mirrors, which, when struck by the sun, would have suggested light radiating from within.

Liao architects were known for their inventive elaboration of bracket sets in their wooden buildings (on the *right* here the facade of the famous Liao temple at Fengguosi). In the White Pagoda, the brackets were rendered as a decorative element in brick.





Sculpted relief on the exterior includes symbolic representations—the elephant and lion—of the bodhisattvas Samantabhadra and Manjushri, apsaras, and guardian deities flanking doors and windows.







Steles recorded (here on the *left*) the names of the craftsmen and information on construction procedures for the pagoda, and (on the *right*) the names of officials and Buddhist clerics who had sponsored the work and donated relic deposits.

The pagoda is of particular interest for the contents of its relic chamber, opened in 1989 during extensive restorations, the artefacts now on display in the Balinyouqi (Balin Right Banner) Museum (see GS, esp. pp. 74–79, 242–51, 266–69). The donations of precious offerings included a range of aromatics and numerous miniature pagodas containing scriptures. Streamers, some rather roughly cut out of silk in human form, were attached to each miniature pagoda.







As Hseuh-man Shen explains (GS, pp. 244, 248, 250), the copper sheet, *second from bottom on right*) was rolled to form a core for the woodblock-printed *dharaṇi* shown below it. At *top* here is the 112 cm-long gilded silver scroll with other *dharaṇi* texts; below it a detail of one portion. On both the copper core sheet and above it on the gold sheet, the main texts are in Sanskrit. One of the silk wrappers, shown *above*, is inscribed with an indication that these sutra texts are “relics”.

The texts include the *Dharaṇi inside the Cavity of Chattra Parasols* and excerpts from the *Great Dharaṇi Sutra of Stainless Pure Light*. This emphasis connects Liao Buddhism with that in Korea and Japan. See also Youn-mi Kim’s important long essay in *The Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*.







The relics included swatches of silk, a silver spoon engraved with an inscription referring to eternity, fine porcelain dishes, some filled with lilac blossoms, and others containing a range of exotic aromatics attesting to the long-distance contacts of the Liao: sandalwood, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, betel nuts, frankincense. See the tabulation of the inventory in GS, p. 78.



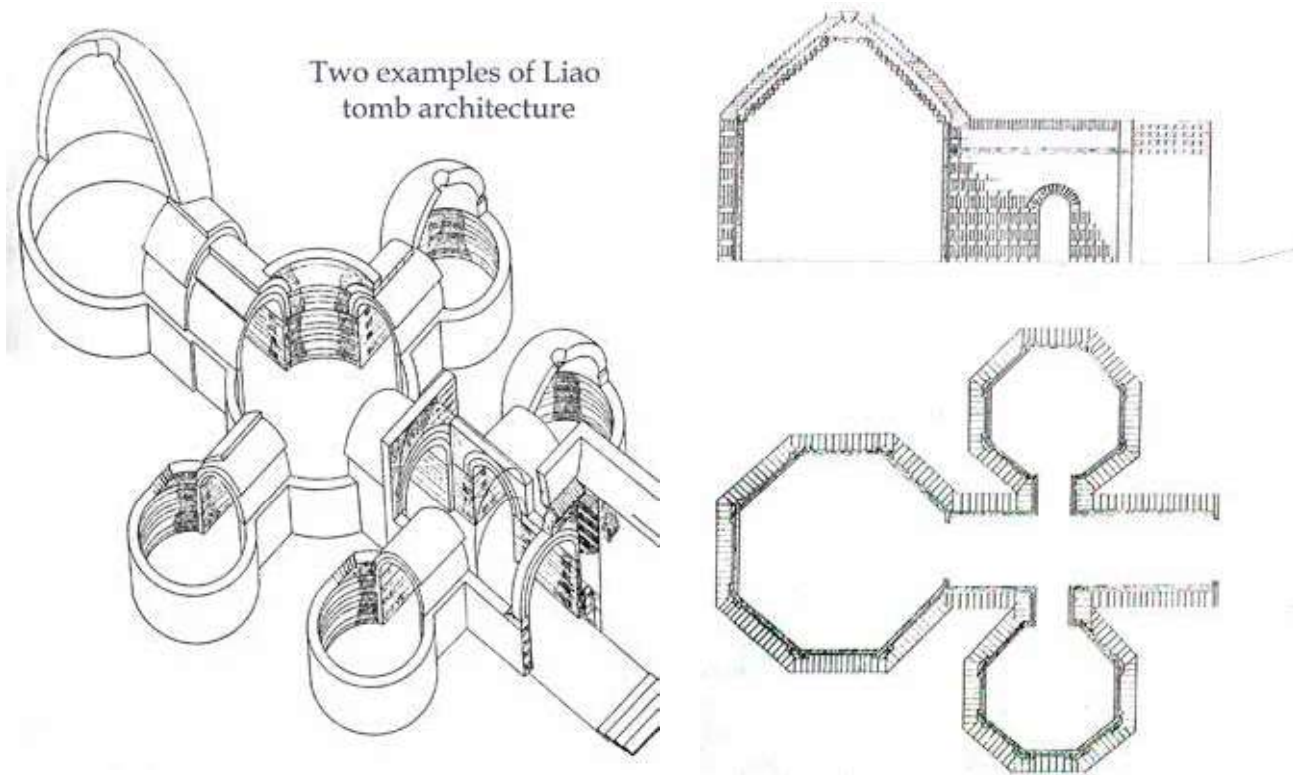




Deposits included an elegant gold-sheathed wooden statue of the Buddha Shakyamuni and three depictions of the Buddha in *parinirvana*, the one below recovered in the local community after it had been removed from the pagoda in modern times. For the Buddha in *parinirvana*, see NM, p. 120.



Liao tombs and burial customs display, as one might expect, a combination of borrowed features and elements of Kitan indigenous traditions. In keeping with their imperial pretensions, the Liao adopted many aspects of Chinese funerary display (in the same way that the Xiongnu, centuries earlier, had done in Mongolia). Typical for the Liao burials of the elite was enclosing the body in a suit of mesh and placing a sculpted mask with stylized features over the face. Some burials contained wooden manikins into which relics of the deceased would be placed. The elite burials, famously that of the Princess of Chen and Xiao Shaoju, have yielded an astonishing array of “Gilded Splendor”, including crowns and gilded silver dishes. Not least in interest is the presence of glassware imported from the Middle East and a great deal of jewelry incorporating carved amber whose raw material was imported all the way from the Baltic Sea.



A cutaway reconstruction of part of a Liao tomb in the display at the Aohan Banner Museum which also includes some of the tomb paintings shown below, their position in the original tomb sketched here in the model. Steinhardt 1997 devotes a major section of her book (Chs. 10-13) to tomb architecture and mortuary practice.





Within the brick burial chamber was normally a wooden sarcophagus, the architecture of which might follow Chinese models or resemble a nomad yurt. For the afterlife, miniatures of domestic furniture might be provided, and the body placed on a raised bed within the chamber. Some burials included elaborately decorated wooden coffins (for that *on the left below*, see AK, pp. 107–11), others much simpler ones, in this case one containing a wooden manikin.









The range of funerary traditions can be seen clearly here. On the one hand, there is a cremation urn shaped like a nomadic yurt and decorated with deer. The cover slab for a burial *on the left* displays the constellations, and the two rare examples of Liao wood carving represent two of the four animal symbols for the cardinal directions which were common in central China beginning in the time of the Han Dynasty. See GS, pp. 118-19, 198-205; for the urn, the inscribed slab and the epitaph under it, TC, pp. 83, 144-45.





While it seems unlikely that the sculptured and painted decoration of tombs provides us with portrait likenesses, any more than do the masks, nonetheless, the imagery may convey an accurate sense of many aspects of actual Kitan life. For the two carved slabs below, from the tomb of Mme. Xiao and her husband Yelü Woli, see GS, pp. 210-13; TC, pp. 126-29.







Of course most of this imagery follows established convention, the *lower sculpted panel on the left* here almost identical in its pose with one of the paintings on the wall of a tomb excavated in Aohan Banner (see AK, p. 95). The poor preservation of many of the paintings often makes it difficult to see detail and requires a lot of digital “cleaning” of photographs.





The Aohan Banner Museum displays a remarkable array of murals removed from locally-excavated Liao tombs. Unfortunately, in 2009 while there, our visit was cut short by an electrical outage during a thunderstorm; so the examples here were photographed in a nearly-dark room using a flash. Reproductions of these and other paintings in the collection can be found in SG, pp. 228-61. My digital “cleaning” of the images to reveal detail in some cases desaturates what remains of the color on the originals. The pictures commonly show scenes of feasting either during the lifetime of the deceased or at the time of the funeral. We see attendants including a man carrying a bow, and musicians.







The remarkable image here *on the left* shows a funeral feast, with a draped coffin in the foreground, the curious head above it probably representing either the funeral mask of the deceased or, more likely, a wooden manikin. In the scene *below*, a man plays the panpipes while another individual performs a ritual in front of what probably represents one of the Chinese-style wooden sarcophagi. We can learn a lot from these paintings about food preparation, the scenes probably a reasonably accurate representation of real kitchens. Tableware shown in such tomb murals often is exactly like that which has been preserved in collections of Liao ceramics and metalwork (see GS, pp. 308-09).







In the painting *above*, a patron (the deceased?) looks on while a bowmaker works on a re-curve bow for which some of the bone strengthening pieces are laid out on the ground next to the pans whose steam presumably was being used to bend the wood.

A few of the paintings show somewhat paradisaical landscapes, this one inhabited by a tiger, which might, of course, have been a real sight in areas of East Asia known to the Liao.





The Princess of Chen's crown, *upper left*  
(see GS, pp. 102-03; ZJ, pp. 168-69).

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*Above:* see GS, pp. 300–01; ZJ, pp. 133, 135.  
*Below:* NM, p. 93.



*Above:* see NM, p. 103;  
*Below:* ZJ, pp. 98, 100–01; NM, p. 85.







The Princess of Chen's exotica included Baltic amber necklaces (*above and detail below*) and glass from the Islamic Middle East (*top and bottom right*). See GS, pp. 172-73, 330-33; NM, pp. 128-29. For the hairpin on right, GS, pp. 156-57.





These brilliantly-colored ceramics, some designed in imitation of leather flasks, are but a part of the ceramic production by the Liao craftsmen. Also a subject for much more study are the famous statues of *luohans* discovered at Yizhou, traditionally dated to the Liao period but maybe now needing to be given a later date.





## RECOMMENDED READING ON THE LIAO

These books are essential:

1) The pioneering study of Liao history and society by Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng-Chia-sheng, *History of Chinese Society. Liao, 907–1125* (Philadelphia, 1949), based on careful analysis of the written sources.

2) The magnificent catalog for the landmark exhibition, *Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China's Liao Empire (907–1125)*, ed. by Hsueh-man Shen (Asia Society, 2006), which included many of the objects depicted on the pages here. At the time of the exhibition, there was a very extensive website illustrating much of what was in it, but unfortunately that is no longer available.

3) The special issue of *The Journal Song-Yuan Studies* (Vol. 43 [2013]), edited by Valerie Hansen, François Louis and Daniel Kane, which contains important recent scholarship on the Liao. In particular, note the essays on trade and relations with the Muslim world by King and Biran, Hansen's chapter on gifting as an important mechanism of exchange, Louis' essay on burial customs, and Kim's monograph-length essay on Liao Buddhism, based in the first instance on her careful study of one of the major sites, the Chaoyang North Pagoda. Readers of *The Silk Road* may remember a photo essay on that remarkable structure and its relic deposit (Vol. 9 [2011]: 53–70). On burial practices, apart from Louis' article here, see the very interesting one on manikin burials by Hsueh-Man Shen in *Artibus Asiae* 65/1 (2003): 99–141. Louis has another insightful article, on the symbolic role of precious metals amongst the Liao elite, in *The Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 33 (2003): 71–109.

An important study based on biographies of those who served or interacted with the Liao, careers which demonstrated the fluidity of exchange across the borders with China, is Naomi Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China* (Honolulu, 2007). Standen and Gwen Bennett have written a very valuable article (in *Modern Asian Studies* 48/6 [2014]: 1519–65), explaining how, in displaying Liao material, Chinese regional museums (many being the ones visited in 2009) have had to grapple with the official views regarding the supremacy of Han Chinese culture throughout the country's history.

The standard work in English on Liao architecture, including city planning, the impressive pagodas and temples and the elaborate tombs, is Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture* (Honolulu, 1997). My choice here to focus on the pagoda at Qingzhou leaves untouched the large and very significant subject of timber architecture which she discusses *in extenso*. Russian and Mongolian archaeologists have been documenting the extent to which the Liao invested huge resources in fortifying their northern frontier in Mongolia. See the articles in *The Silk Road*, 9 [2011]: 104–21; 12 [2014]: 89–97; 13 [2015]: 95–103.

On Liao ceramics, there is a valuable analytical classification and discussion of production sites which at least formerly could be downloaded from the Internet: Jing Lu, *Liao Ceramics between 907 AD and 1125 AD in Northern China*, Ph.D. diss., Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Tübingen, 2009. She has now published a book in Chinese on the subject. For the Yizhou *luohans*, see the substantial article in Wikipedia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yixian\\_glazed\\_pottery\\_luohans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yixian_glazed_pottery_luohans)>, which has the key references regarding their history and dating. The examples in my pictures are the *luohans* in, respectively, The British Museum, The Musée Guimet, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Apart from *Gilded Splendor*, there are a good many other catalogs (the abbreviations listed below) that contain Liao material, including objects depicted on the previous pages:

AK — Adam T. Kessler et al., *Empires beyond the Great Wall: The Heritage of Genghis Khan* (Los Angeles, 1993), Ch. 4, pp. 89–120.

GS — *Gilded Splendor*

While the catalogs in Chinese unfortunately do not even have captioning in English, the quality and range of the illustrations is generally excellent; these books include a good many of the objects illustrated above:

NM — Nei Menggu bowuguan 内蒙古博物院 [Inner Mongolia Museum]. *Wenming zhi lu: Zhongguo beifang caoyuan gudai wenming lansheng* = *Cultural tour: spectacular sight of the northern grassland civilization in ancient China* 文明之旅：中国北方草原古代文明揽胜 [Huhehaote Shi]: Nei Menggu bowuguan, [2009]. The special exhibit in the



Inner Mongolia Museum , at which several of the photos above were taken. The museum has a number of other publications focusing on its Liao collections.

SG – Shao Guotian 邵國田. *Nei Menggu Aohan bowuguan* 內蒙古敖漢博物館 [The Aohan Inner Mongolia Museum]. Hulunbei'er: Nei Menggu wenhua chubanshe, 2004. The catalog of the important collection of the Museum of the Aohan Banner in Inner Mongolia, including the paintings from locally excavated tombs.

TC -- Tang Cailan 唐彩蘭. *Liao shangjing wenwu xie ying* 遼上京文物攝英 [Liao Shangjing Cultural Relics]. Huhehaote: Yuan fang chubanshe, 2005. The Balinzouqi collection in the Chifeng City Museum.

ZJ – Zhang Jingming 張景明. *Zhongguo bei fang cao yuan gudai jin yinqi* 中國北方草原古代金銀器 [Ancient Chinese Silverware in the Steppe Lands] (Beijing, 2005). On metalwork (even if not necessarily of Chinese manufacture...) of the northern borderlands

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