



BRILL

Introduction: Founding Histories of China's Northern Kingdoms

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When a new dynasty is established, writing the story of its own founding becomes a task of utmost importance. It is the art of turning legend into history. This act of inscribing a new dynasty's legitimacy into the pages of history is a specialized object of study for many Chinese historians.

In China, the founding histories of the major Central Plains dynasties such as the Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), and Ming (1368–1644) are relatively straightforward. The founding of the northern kingdoms, however, is a much more complicated historiographical issue. These northern kingdoms often do not have their own indigenous writing system. Records of their history are after-the-fact recollections written for the first time in a foreign language (Chinese). These various Chinese accounts often represent differing historical perspectives which conflict with one another. Add to this the fact that such contemporaneous Chinese records were also few in number and indirect by nature, it becomes clear that the historian has a difficult task in separating truth from myth.

Furthermore, soon after these northern kingdoms were established, they went through a period of cultural transformation. (In the case of China, cultural assimilation might be a more accurate term.) Those who held power in the courts began to realize that they faced two tasks of great importance, which if handled properly could cement their legitimacy in the annals of Chinese history. They had to write – or rewrite – their own founding story to paint themselves in the most positive light possible. They also had to find a way to incorporate this story into the larger, unbroken narrative that comprises China's dynastic history. When framed in this light, the history of these dynasties often evolves into accounts that are hard to verify.

This special issue contains five articles researching the founding history of four northern dynasties: the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Yuan (1206–1368), and Qing (1616–1911).

In studying the founding histories of the northern dynasties, the two central problems that require the most attention are the specific date of a nation's founding, and name that the new nation gave itself. The themes of this special issue revolve around these topics.

In “The Question of the Founding Year of the Khitan Dynasty”, Liu Pujiang 劉浦江 (1961–2015) sifts through two strands of historical documentation, that of the Central Plains tradition and that of the Liao (Khitan) tradition, to piece together the time of the dynastic founding. Miao Runbo's 苗潤博 article, “A Political Time Rewritten: Revisiting the Founding Year of the Khitan Empire”, furthers Liu Pujiang's research into the founding of the Khitan dynasty. He argues that the controversy surrounding the specific date and circumstances of the founding is not due to contradictory camps of evidence, but rather to the fact that later Khitan historians deliberately changed their founding history.

In “On Revision and Reconstruction”, Qiu Jingjia 邱靖嘉 claims that the commonly held date for the founding of the Jin dynasty is incorrect and that this, too, is the result of later scholars rewriting history for ideological purposes. Chen Xiaowei's 陳曉偉 “On the Issue of Determining the Founding Year of the ‘Great Mongol Nation’” brings out rarely-used historical documents to argue that Genghis Khan proclaimed the founding of the great Mongol empire an entire five years after what the majority of history books claim to be the founding date. Finally, Lu Zhengheng 盧正恒 and Huang Yinong's 黃一農 research looks into the founding of China's last dynasty, the Qing. Relying on pre-Qing texts in both Chinese and Manchurian scripts, their article, “A New Study of the Title of the Reigning Dynasty during the Pre-Qing Period”, concludes that before the founding of the Qing dynasty, the forefather of the Qing emperors had called their kingdom simply “Jin”, and that, despite prevailing theory, the “Later Jin” name was never an officially adopted moniker.

Whether through the use of new material or new methodology, the articles presented herein have successfully brought new findings to the field of late medieval Chinese history. They demonstrate the complexity of issues concerning the history of China's northern kingdoms, and open up new questions for further research.