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Re-examination of the relationship between Toñuquq and Yuanzhen: Also on the time and place when Qutlugh proclaimed Qaghan

Toñuquq ve Yuanzhen Arasındaki İlişkiye Yeniden Bakış: Qutlugh'un Qaghan İlan Edildiği Zaman ve Yer Üzerine

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Toñuquq was not from the Ashide tribe, but from the Xueyantuo tribe. Yuanzhen was from the Ashide tribe and was the cousin of Funian. Toñuquq and Yuanzhen were not the same person, and they joined Qutlugh on different date. Toñuquq's joining marked the confluence of the Turks and the remnants of the Xueyantuo who rebelled against the Tang Dynasty. Yuanzhen joined later, but he had an older age and a higher status. Qutlugh became Qaghan in 681, not 682, and the location was Mount Zongcai in the northwest of Lanzhou, not Heisha City at the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains.

Key Words: Toñuquq, Yuanzhen, Qutlugh, Turk, Sir, Ashide.

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1. New Discovery of the Toñuquq Tamga

Recently, some scholars have suggested that the tamga on the top of the first stele of Toñuquq, engraved on some horn girth buckles in a tomb in the northern Altai region found in the 1990s (Fig. 1-1), may indicate that the Toñuquq family once ruled the right wing of the Second Türk Qaghanate. Based on the traditional view that Toñuquq came from the Ashide tribe, the tamga is regarded as the Ashide tamga. However, the author also realized that the location of the burial site is in the lower reaches of the Katun River, which is quite far away from the possible route of the Eastern Turkic army that crossed the Altai Mountains in 711 AD, so the connection between them may not be that close (Kubarev 2023). Also recently, Mongolia began to implement the plan to relocate the Toñuquq steles from its original location to a newly built memorial hall. During this period, the two steles were first moved to a temporary exhibition hall built nearby. During the construction and relocation, new discoveries were made. It turned out that there was an inverted triangle tamga engraved on the side of the bottom of the second stele (Fig. 1-2), which was exactly the same as the tamga on the top of the first stele, which has long been famous all over the world. This once again confirmed that the tamga was the tribal tamga of Toñuquq. At the same time, it also aroused the attention and discussion of scholars on the tribe from which Toñuquq came (Oğuz 2023). Some scholars began to re-examine the old theories. While questioning the traditional view that Toñuquq came from the Ashide tribe, they proposed new theories that he might have come from one of the Toquz Oghuz tribes, such as Pugu (僕骨) or Qibi (契苾) (Oğuz 2023: 257).¹ The above new discoveries and research have prompted us to examine the relevant materials, to verify and check the classic issues such as Toñuquq's ethnicity and identity and his relationship with Yuanzhen once again, and to try to put forward more reasonable hypotheses based on repeated deductions.²

¹ Since this article does not involve a discussion of the etymology of the relevant proper nouns, the reconstructed forms of the Middle Chinese are not listed, but are simply expressed in modern Chinese pinyin (Mandarin).

² For more recent research on the etymology of the name *Toñuquq* and the titles related to it, please see Aydın 2019. This article tends to treat *Toñuquq* as a name and assumes that *Toñuquq* and *Ashide Yuanzhen* have the same name.



Fig. 1-1



Fig. 1-2

2. Toñuquq's tribe

The new theory that Toñuquq came from the Toquz Oghuz tribes is very difficult to establish. According to the “Toñuquq Inscription”, Toñuquq had joined the Qutlugh group when the Turks in the south of the Great Desert rebelled against the Tang Dynasty. At that time, the Toquz Oghuz tribes were mainly distributed in the north of the Great Desert, so the possibility that Toñuquq went south from the north of the Great Desert to join the Qutlugh group to fight against the Tang Dynasty was almost non-existent. On the other hand, the traditional view that Toñuquq came from the Ashide tribe is also difficult to withstand scrutiny. The main evidence for this view comes from Toñuquq's daughter, Suofu Qatun, the queen of Turkic Bilgä Qaghan, who was once called “Shi shi (史氏)” in Chinese sources, which can be regarded as the abbreviation of “Ashide” (Chen 2017: 59-60). However, recent research based on historiography points out that the “Shi shi” cannot be definitely referred to as the daughter of Toñuquq and the mother of Dengli Qaghan, and the latter's name is difficult to determine as “Guduolu Suofu Kedun (骨咄禄娑匍可敦)”; the Qatun of Bilgä Qaghan had surrendered to the Tang Dynasty in the first year of Tianbao, and the one who surrendered to the Tang Dynasty in the 8th month of the 4th year of Tianbao was “Shi shi, the wife of Tujue Jia (突厥伽) Qaghan”, not the Qatun, and Guduolu Suofu Kedun was another person who was captured later, namely, “Gedulu Suofu Kedun (葛督禄娑匍可敦)” in the “Wang Zhongsi Inscription”, perhaps the Qatun of Bijia Guduolu Qaghan (i.e. Dengli Qaghan), so she had nothing to do with the above two women; the editors of *Xin Tangshu* confused Guduolu Suofu Kedun with Bilgä Qaghan's Qatun, and its credibility is questionable (Hu 2022: 185, 186-187, 191; Wu 2009: 991). Based on this, the Bilgä Qaghan's Qatun who surrendered to the Tang in the first year of Tianbao was not the same person as the Guduolu Suofu Qatun who was captured in the 4th year of Tianbao, and should be a different person from the “Shi shi, the wife of Tujue Jia Qaghan” who surrendered to the Tang in the 4th year of Tianbao. Therefore, the daughter of Toñuquq cannot be identified as the Turkic Qaghan's wife Shi shi who surrendered to the Tang in the 8th month of the 4th year of Tianbao, and therefore it is impossible to infer that she belonged to the Ashide clan. So far, there is no solid and reliable evidence in Chinese sources to prove that Toñuquq was from the Ashide clan. At the same time, since the above inference that

Toñuquq’s daughter was named Suofu is probably not true, the scholars’ early speculation that his family came from the Qarluq Suofu tribe (Zhu 1943: 6; Ma 1957: 66-67) has also lost its main basis.

Recently, some scholars have proposed that Toñuquq came from the Sir tribe, but because they were influenced by the traditional “Ashide theory”, they had to regard Sir as a branch tribe of the Ashide tribe, and did not agree with the view that the Sir tribe was identical with the Xueyantuo³ (Yavrucuk 2023). However, new evidence about Tamga suggests that Toñuquq’s origin may indeed be closely related to Xueyantuo. An obvious clue is that the Tamga on the Toñuquq stele also appeared at the Onget site on the Tula River (Samashev et al. 2010: 30, 154), although the owner of which has not yet been confirmed, recent research is getting closer to confirming V. E. Voitov’s early speculation that the site was built to commemorate Zhenzhu Pijia Qaghan Yinan of the Xueyantuo Qaghanate on the Mongolian Plateau during the AD 628~646 period. The new evidence comes from the auxiliary dating of the roof tiles at the site. The roof tiles at the Onget site are different from the roof tiles from the later Second Türk Qaghanate period unearthed from the tombs of Bilgä Qaghan and Kül Tegin, and are also quite different from the roof tiles from the much later Uighur Qaghanate period found in the sites of Karabalgasun and Por-Bazhyn. It is an early form of roof tile, and its age can be determined to be during the period of Xueyantuo Qaghanate and the subsequent Tang Dynasty’s vassal rule over the Mongolian Plateau (Voitov 1987: 92-109; Arden-Wong 2014: 16; Arden-Wong et al. 2015: 62; Xu 2024: 426). In his early research, Voitov traced the Onget complex to the last five years of the 640s and believed it belonged to Qaghan Yinan of the Xueyantuo Qaghanate. Archaeological excavations have shown that the site also had a later construction phase. It may be the only known monument to have survived two construction periods, which means that the site of the Xueyantuo Qaghanate was repaired and rebuilt during the Second Türk Qaghanate (Voitov 1987: 104-106). Both are located in the middle and upper reaches of the Tula River. A tamga

³ *Xueyantuo* 薛延陀 can be restored to *sir-yanda. *Sir* appeared in Old Turkic Runic inscriptions such as “Toñuquq Inscription”, “Küli Čor Inscription”, “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription”, etc. *yanda appeared in P. T. 1283-II, and the Tibetan transcription of it is yan-ti, which can be restored to *yan-da (ཡན་དཱ་ < *ཡན་ད), which is the phonetic transcription of the Chinese *yantuo* (EMC. *jian-da), the tenth of the twelve tribes of the vbug-chor Turks (Chen 2017: 140-143), from which Toñuquq may have come.

highly similar to the tamga on the Toñuquq stele was discovered at the site of the suspected tomb of the Xueyantuo Qaghan, indicating that there is a possibility that the tribe from which Toñuquq came was closely related to the Xueyantuo, which prompts us to rethink Toñuquq’s tribal origin.

Although Toñuquq did not directly describe his tribal origin, he left some clues and hints in his self-written inscriptions. By combining them with other relevant materials, we may be able to get closer to the answer to this mysterious puzzle. There are five occurrences of “türk sir bodun” in the “Toñuquq Inscription”. The first and second occurrences are in the Qutlugh period, the third and fourth occurrences are in the Mochuo period, and the fifth occurrence is in the Bilgä Qaghan period. Among them, the first one is the most special, because “türk” and “sir” are separated by a separator “:”, which seems to indicate that there was still little close connection between the two at that time. There are no separators in the following four occurrences. The omission of the separator means that the two nouns originally placed in parallel have formed a stable combination and can be regarded as a phrase (Zheng 2012: 58-61). Therefore, this phenomenon may indicate that the two nouns have been merged into one. In addition, the first three occurrences of “türk sir bodun” are followed by the word *yär*, which means “land, place”, and the first two of them were still in the period south of the Great Desert before returning to the north of the Great Desert later. It is particularly noteworthy that the last “türk sir bodun” is followed by “oyuz bodun”, which shows that “sir” is more like a tribe between türk and oyuz, and its status is higher than oyuz; and the relationship between “sir” and türk is closer, but “sir” also has a certain connection with oyuz, which echoes the “(al)ti sir” before “toquz oyuz” in the first line on the east side of the “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription” (Rybatzki 1997: 81; Rui 1998: 263, 270; Geng 2005: 149; Chen 2021: 206), indicating that *sir* should be a tribal name, not an adjective.

Before the first appearance of “türk sir bodun” in the third line of “Toñuquq Inscription”, “türk bodun” (i.e. Türk people) had been mentioned three times, namely: the Türk people surrendered to the Tang Dynasty (first line), the Türk people rebelled against the Tang Dynasty (second line), and the Türk people were killed and exterminated (third line) (Tekin 1968: 283; Rui 1998: 277; Geng 2005: 94-95; Chen 2021: 155-156, 174). If the *sir* in “türk sir bodun” is an adjective meaning “good, kind”, then why was it “türk bodun” without “sir” in the first

three times? The reasonable explanation is that *sir* is the name of another tribe. The actions of the Türk people in the first three times had nothing to do with the Sir people, so “sir” was not mentioned. After that, the Sir people joined the Türk people, and the two united, so they were collectively called “türk sir bodun”, that is, “Türk-Sir people”. After the Türk people surrendered, rebelled, and were suppressed and massacred, no tribe remained on the land of the Türk-Sir people. It was after this that the remaining Türk people who refused to surrender fled into the wilderness and mountains and gathered into a group of 700 people, led by Qutlugh (šad), and Toñuquq joined right after this. It is worth noting that there are only four places mentioned above on the first side (west side) of the first stele of the “Toñuquq Inscription”, all of which are concentrated in the first three lines. The fourth “türk” is also described after the first “türk sir bodun”, which is the first appearance of Toñuquq himself in the fifth line. This can properly prove that the tribe led by Toñuquq was the Sir people. According to the existing research of scholars, *sir* as a tribe name most likely refers to Xueyantuo (Rybatzki 1997: 79-82, n. 222; Osawa 2023: 51-53, translator’s n. 14).

The first line on the south side of the “Kül Tegin Inscription” and the first line on the north side of the “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription” both mentioned “otuz t...” and “toquz oyuz”. Early interpreters restored “otuz t...” as “otuz tatar”, and later most scholars tended to restore it as “otuz türk (The Thirty Tribes of the Turks)” (Cen 1958: 878, 889; Czeglédy 1972: 280-281; Rui 1998: 232; Suzuki 2006: 10-15; Fan 2024: 210). These two simultaneous mentions of “otuz türk” and “toquz oyuz” are likely to correspond to the “türk sir bodun” and “oyuz bodun” mentioned simultaneously in the 62nd line (i.e. the last line) of the “Toñuquq Inscription”. This correspondence implies that “türk sir bodun” and “otuz türk” might refer to the same tribal group, and the relevant background context shows that “türk sir bodun” / “otuz türk” and “oyuz bodun” / “toquz oyuz” were both the two most important tribal groups under the rule of Bilgä Qaghan, while the former obviously occupied a more important ruling position. Toñuquq used “türk sir” to remind people that Sir (i.e. Xueyantuo) was an important ally tribe of Qutlugh Qaghan in the early period of the revival, and also because Toñuquq himself was from that tribe; and the reason why he avoided using “otuz türk” was probably because this name was more popular during the Mochuo period (“Xianli Pijia Gongzhu Epitaph”), and there was very little description of Mochuo

throughout the “Toñuquq Inscription” (Chen 2021: 93-97; Chen 2024: 130-134), so he deliberately avoided mentioning “otuz türk”, which was a special proper name closely related to the Mochuo era. Suzuki interpreted the unclear word before “türk bodun” in the 46th line of the “Toñuquq Inscription” as “otuz”, and therefore believed that “otuz türk” was also mentioned in it (Suzuki 2006: 8-10). However, according to the above research, this possibility is very small. Scholars generally interpret the word as “sögti (surrendered)”, which is more consistent with the context of the inscription (Chen 2021: 169, n. 95; Chen 2024: 132; Fan 2024: 210). In addition, newer research shows that the “otuz türk” in the above-mentioned “Kül Tegin Inscription” and “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription” did not come from the mouth of Bilgä Qaghan, but was added and inscribed by his son Dengli Qaghan (H. Chen 2017; Chen 2021: 133-138), which means that during the reign of Bilgä Qaghan, “otuz türk” was probably indeed a sensitive word that needed to be avoided, which further reduced the possibility of this word appearing in the “Toñuquq Inscription”. In addition, the above correspondence between “türk sir bodun” and “otuz türk” and its comparison with “toquz oyuz” / “oyuz bodun” also provides supporting evidence that “otuz türk” includes Xueyantuo but not toquz oyuz.

There is another clue about the speculation that Toñuquq came from the Xueyantuo tribe. The Xie (契) family of the Uighurs in the Yuan Dynasty claimed to be descendants of Toñuquq. The Middle Chinese pronunciation of their surname “Xie” was close to *sir, which was exactly the same as the Middle Chinese pronunciation of “Xue (薛)”; the surname “Xie” was also translated as “Xue” by people at that time, such as Xie Zhedu (契哲篤), who was also called “Xue Shinan (薛世南)”, with Shinan as his courtesy name, which proves that “Xue” can be used as a different translation of “Xie” (Xiao 2007: 736). As mentioned above, *sir* appeared many times in the Orkhon Turkic inscriptions, and it was very likely a tribal name, an important member of the core tribal alliance of the Second Türk Qaghanate (Erdal & Chen 2017: 114). The Selenge River in Mongolia was also written as “Xueliang River” (薛良河), “Xueliangge River” (薛涼哥河), “Xuelingge River” (薛靈格河), etc. in Chinese documents during the Yuan Dynasty. Combined with another different translation of the river name “Xienianjie River” (契輦傑河), it can be proved that the pronunciations of “Xue” and “Xie” were extremely close at that time; the

descendants of the Gaochang Xie's family living in Liyang (溧陽), Jiangsu still use the surname "Xie", and they still read "Xie" as "xue" instead of "xie", which shows that the pronunciations of "Xie" and "Xue" were the same in the Yuan Dynasty (Shang 2013: 524-525). From the above, we can know that the Turkic "sir" is most likely the Chinese "Xueyantuo". Therefore, the explanation of the Yuan Dynasty's Xie clan members that the origin of their surname was the Selenge River is indeed likely a misunderstanding, false claim or flattery. The real origin of the "Xie" surname is more likely to be related to the ancestral tribe Sir, namely Xueyantuo. This can also serve as circumstantial evidence for the speculation that Toñuquq came from the Xueyantuo tribe.

According to the research of Moriyasu and Bahti, the residence of Basmil in the Tang Dynasty was located in the north and south of the Altai Mountains, including the eastern part of the Junggar Basin and the Kobdo area, and northward to the Katun River, an upper tributary of the Ob River, and the Khemchik River, an upper tributary of the Yenisei River (Moriyasu 1977: 25-27; Ezhenkhan-uli 1992: 141-142). The site where the horn girth buckles with the tamga of the Toñuquq stele was unearthed is in the lower reaches of the Katun River, which is exactly within the range of Basmil's residence in the Tang Dynasty. If the tribe of Toñuquq was indeed Xueyantuo, then for Basmil, Xueyantuo could be regarded as the suzerain of Basmil, either it was the period of Qaghanate of Altai Mountain from 605 to 610s, or the period of Qaghanate of Mongolian Plateau from 628 to 646. From the Gaochang Uighur document fragments unearthed in Turfan, we can know that in addition to marrying his daughter to the Turkic Bilgä Qaghan, Toñuquq also married his daughter to the chiefs of the Uighur and Basmil tribes (Le Coq 1912: 147, 154; Moriyasu 2015: 317). As for the latter marriage, the background that historical materials can provide is that a branch of the Basmil tribe that responded to the call of the Tang Dynasty and sent troops to attack the Turks was defeated by the army led by Toñuquq himself in 720. They were chased to Beshbalik and all the people were captured. It is possible that intermarriage occurred during this period, which also gave rise to the possibility that Toñuquq's daughter and her fellow tribesmen left horn girth buckles marked with the tribal tamga in the Basmil settlement. Therefore, there are two possible explanations for the discovery of horn girth buckles engraved with the tamga of the Toñuquq stele in the tombs in the lower reaches

of the Katun River north of the Altai Mountains: first, they were left there by the supervisory officer sent by the Xueyantuo during the period of its rule over the Basmils, whose tribe happened to be the same as that of Toñuquq, and the time could be either the Altai Mountain Qaghanate period (early 7th century) or the Mongolian Plateau Qaghanate period (early mid-7th century) of the Xueyantuo; second, they were left there by the accompanying tribesmen sent by Toñuquq when he married his daughter to the Basmils, and the time was in the early to mid-8th century.

3. Ashide Yuanzhen's Identity

If Toñuquq was indeed from the Xueyantuo tribe, then the key evidence to identify him with Ashide Yuanzhen would no longer be valid, because Yuanzhen's tribe was from the Turkic Ashide, which was obviously different from the Xueyantuo originated from the Oghuz tribes. There are discrepancies in the Chinese materials about Yuanzhen's surname. In addition to the popular "Ashide", there are also cases where it was recorded as "Ashina", but the latter was definitely a mistake, because ancient books that specialized in recording surnames, such as *Yuanhe xingzhuan*, and the "Shizu lüe" of *Tongzhi*, had clear records of the Turkic surname "Ashide", and the representative figure listed under the entry was Ashide Yuanzhen (Lin 1994: 575; Zheng 1995: 184).

Although the hypothesis that Toñuquq and Ashide Yuanzhen were the same person faces increasing challenges, there is another identity comparison that is more likely to be confirmed, that is, "Čiqan Toñuquq" in the Turkic "Küli Čor Inscription" and "Funian di Yuanzhen (伏念弟元珍)" ("di" means "younger brother") in the Chinese "Pei Xingjian Inscription" (裴行儉碑) were the same person. According to newer research, when the Old Turkic word *čiqan* was used as a kinship title, it indicated that the recipient of the title was a maternal male cousin of a qaghan (Chen 2019: 171-174). So, the Chinese meaning of "Čiqan Toñuquq" is "cousin Toñuquq". Based on the fact that the Turkic form of the Chinese name "Yuanzhen" is most probably "Toñuquq", we can establish a direct semantic correspondence between "Čiqan Toñuquq" and "Funian's younger brother Yuanzhen". The "younger brother" here can be restored to "younger maternal male cousin". From this we know that Yuanzhen's mother and Funian's mother are sisters, and they must be from another tribe besides Ashina and

Ashide. Another piece of evidence for this identity comparison is the “Apa (Tarqan)” that appeared before “Čiqaŋ Toñuquq” in the “Küli Čor Inscription” (Clauson & Tryjarski 1971: 13, 21; Moriyasu & Ochir 1999: 151; Geng 2005: 178). Although the inscription after “Apa” is incomplete, if it is restored to “Apa Tarqan”, it exactly corresponds to the Turkic official title “Abo Dagan” of Ashide Yuanzhen recorded in Chinese sources. Based on this comparison, “Čiqaŋ Toñuquq” in the “Küli Čor Inscription” can be translated phonetically as **Shijian Tunyugu* (時健噉欲谷), who came from the Ashide tribe. His Chinese name was “Yuanzhen”, which is the semantic translation of “Toñuquq”. Therefore, he was definitely not the same person as Bilgä Toñuquq who might come from the Xueyantuo tribe, although their names were both “Toñuquq”. At the same time, according to the records of the “Küli Čor Inscription”, Čiqaŋ Toñuquq, i.e. Uluy Küli Čor, the father of the owner of the stele ĩšbara Bilgä Küli Čor, died at the age of eighty during the reign of a certain qaghan, whose identity is controversial. If we can confirm his year of death, on the one hand, it will help to identify the above-mentioned controversial qaghan, and on the other hand, it will also help to further compare and analyze the relationship between him and Bilgä Toñuquq.

One of the arguments raised by scholars in the early opposition to the identification of Bilgä Toñuquq with Ashide Yuanzhen was that both *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu* clearly recorded that Yuanzhen died in the campaign against the Turgesh (around 690). In response, S. G. Kljaštornyj found a record in Chinese sources that could prove that Yuanzhen was still alive in 697. The record came from the *Zizhi tongjian*, which mentioned that in the first year of Shengong (697), Abo Dagan Yuanzhen persuaded Mochuo Qaghan not to execute the envoys of Wu Zhou. Chen believed that this record in the *Zizhi tongjian* came from the *Chaoye qianzai*, a collection of folk stories with low reliability, and its author did not do any research and just wrote down various rumors and anecdotes he heard, which were full of imagination and fiction; therefore, without other supporting information, the record in the *Chaoye qianzai* that Yuanzhen was still alive in 697 should not be trusted (Chen 2021: 27). However, *Chaoye qianzai* only wrote “Yuanzhen” when recording the event, while *Zizhi tongjian* wrote the Turkic official title “Abo Dagan” before “Yuanzhen” when compiling it. This shows that the compilers of *Zizhi tongjian* may have referred to other sources to draw this inference, so they specially added the Turkic official title prefix “Abo Dagan”. On

the one hand, it made it clear that the person's identity was Ashide Yuanzhen, who was appointed as Abo Dagan by Qutlugh at the beginning of the Türk rebellion against the Tang Dynasty and the restoration of the Qaghanate. On the other hand, it also implied that there might be more than one important official named "Yuanzhen/Tunyugu" in the Second Türk Qaghanate at that time. In fact, the aforementioned sources such as *Yuanhe xingzhuan* and "Shizu lüe" of *Tongzhi* also recorded his Chinese official title "Tongtian Sibinqing Hanhaihou" (通天司賓卿瀚海侯) when mentioning Ashide Yuanzhen. This official title obviously contained time information, that is, it was obtained during the Tongtian period of Wu Zhou (696-697, the first year of Shengong is the second year of Wansui Tongtian, and the era name was changed in the 9th month of that year). Then, the prefix "Abo Dagan" specially added by the above-mentioned *Zizhi tongjian* can be explained - the compilers of *Zizhi tongjian* must have read the above information or other similar sources, so they confirmed that Yuanzhen who advised Mochuo in *Chaoye qianzai* was Ashide Yuanzhen who was appointed as Abo Dagan by Qutlugh, and that his acquisition of this Chinese official title was probably related to the marriage between Mochuo and Wu Zhou, which happened to take place around the Tongtian period. In this way, the record in *Tangshu* that Ashide Yuanzhen had died in the battle against the Turgesh before Qutlugh's death was indeed overturned, and Yuanzhen's death should have been after 697, belonging to the period of Mochuo or later.

A careful reading of the relevant texts in two *Tangshu* and *Tongdian* reveals that *Jiu Tangshu* and *Tongdian* did not explicitly state that Yuanzhen died earlier than Qutlugh. It was *Xin Tangshu* that put forward this inference, but it was not reliable. If the records in the above books that Yuanzhen died during the battle with Turgesh are credible, then based on the above clues, it can be inferred that the event had not occurred in the earlier Qutlugh period, but in the later Mochuo period instead, around 710 (Zhu 1943: 9; Rui 1998: 48-78; Rybatzki 2000: 227; Chen 2021: 44, 273-274). Based on this calculation, Yuanzhen (Čiqan Toñuquq, i.e. Uluý Küli Čor) was born around 631, about fifteen years older than Bilgä Toñuquq, who was born around 646. This further proves that the two were by no means the same person. On the other hand, it can also partially explain why various sources showed that Yuanzhen had a higher status. At the same time, the title of Qaghan, who was in power when Uluý Küli Čor died, recorded in the third line

on the west side of the “Küli Čor Inscription” should be restored and interpreted as “Qapyan”, that is, Mochuo. In other words, the record in Chinese sources that Yuanzhen died in the campaign against the Turgesh may not be wrong, but because the Turks launched more than one campaign against the Turgesh, the campaign in which Yuanzhen died was not the one in Qutlugh’s era in 690, but the one in Mochuo’s era in 710. Therefore, the Uluý Küli Čor recorded in the “Küli Čor Inscription”, namely Yuanzhen, should have died in the Qaghanate of Qapyan Qaghan, namely Mochuo (Clauson & Tryjarski 1971: 24; Geng 2005: 178; Aydın 2018: 8), and other interpretations, either Elterish Qaghan (Kotwicz & Samoïlovitch 1928: 101; Tekin 1968: 257; Rui 1998: 302) or Bilgä Qaghan (Osawa 2007: 209; Bai 2023: 273), may not be appropriate. In this light, the relevant arguments put forward by Bazin in the 1990s are still valid: Uluý Küli Čor’s aging and passing both occurred between 691 and 716, when Qapyan Qaghan, or Mochuo, reigned; According to the calculation that he died at the age of 80, he was born between 612 and 637, 10 to 35 years earlier than Toñuquq; Both the “Toñuquq Inscription” and the “Küli Čor Inscription” correctly referred to Elteriš Qaghan Qutlugh’s brother as “Qapyan Qaghan” (Mochuo), while Bilgä Qaghan and his supporters avoided mentioning him... It is reasonable to assume that Küli Čor’s tribe, like Toñuquq’s tribe, belonged to the conservative faction among the Turks, who to some degrees maintained a connection with the memory of Qapyan Qaghan and his rule, and were opposed to the phenomenon of sinicization (Bazin 1991: 164).

As discussed above, Uluý Küli Čor, or Čiqan Toñuquq, was most likely Ashide Yuanzhen, who was also Apa Tarqan, a high-ranking official during the Qutlugh and Mochuo periods. From a Turkic perspective, there were two important officials in the Second Qaghanate named “Toñuquq” at the same time. So how did people at that time distinguish between the two? One possible way was to use official titles. Yuanzhen served as Apa Tarqan and İšbara Čiqan Küli Čor of Qutlugh and Mochuo, while Toñuquq served as Boyla Baya Tarqan of Qutlugh and Mochuo. Another possible way was to add a modifier before the name. Yuanzhen was “Čiqan Toñuquq” and Toñuquq was “Bilgä Toñuquq”. One circumstantial evidence is that the 34th line of the “Toñuquq Inscription” recorded that Bögü Qaghan privately sent a message to Apa Tarqan saying: “Bilgä Toñukuk becomes bad and evil” (Chen 2021: 176). The “Bilgä” that appeared

before Toñuquq’s name in the direct quotation here is quite strange – this was Bögü Qaghan saying bad things about Toñuquq behind his back, so it was understandable not to use his official title and just call him by his name, but why was it necessary to add an honorific and decorative title “Bilgä” in front of it? A reasonable explanation may be that because Ashide Yuanzhen once served as Apa Tarqan, i.e. another Toñuquq with the same name, also known as “Čïqan Toñuquq”, that is, the cousin of Qutlugh and Mochuo’s former lord Qaghan Funian, Bögü Qaghan used the commonly used term “Bilgä Toñuquq” to refer to Toñuquq in the private message sent to Apa Tarqan (regardless of whether he was Ashide Yuanzhen or not) at that time, so as to clearly distinguish the two Toñuquqs coexisting in the Türk Qaghanate.

4. When Qutlugh became Qaghan

Although Chinese sources recorded two Türk rebellions before Qutlugh, they were vague about Nishufu (泥熟匐), the nominal Qaghan of the first Türk rebellion, and it is unclear about his lineage and relationship with Xieli (頡利) Qaghan. As for Funian, the Qaghan of the second Türk rebellion, Chinese sources clearly recorded that he was the son of Xieli’s cousin and came from Xiazhou (夏州); not only that, as discussed above, through the records of the Chinese “Pei Xingjian Inscription” and the Turkic “Küli Čor Inscription”, it can be inferred that Funian and Yuanzhen were maternal cousins. Therefore, the third Türk rebellion led by Qutlugh should also be more closely related to Funian’s remainder. In addition, after Funian was suppressed, the rebellion that broke out again was led by Qutlugh in fact, but the “Pei Xingjian Inscription” only mentioned Yuanzhen’s name when discussing it. Moreover, when Chinese sources mentioned the list of “Mount Zongcai bandits” (總材山賊) of the early Qutlugh group, Yuanzhen’s name was also ranked before Gudulu (骨篤祿 i.e. Qutlugh). This could be partly explained by the fact that the Tang people were more familiar with and paid more attention to Yuanzhen, who had ever served in the Tang government agencies (Luo 2009: 223-224). However, Yuanzhen’s nobility and status as the maternal cousin brother of the pioneer Qaghan Funian undoubtedly played an important role in it. The “Pei Xingjian zhuan” of two *Tangshu* both contained the word “next year” after “Ashina Funian again falsely called himself Qaghan” and before the Tang Court ordered Pei Xingjian to lead

the army to quell the rebellion once more. Pei Xingjian pacified Funian in the summer of the second year of Yonglong (681), so the time when Funian called himself Qaghan can be determined to be the first year of Yonglong, i.e. 680. This conclusion can also be confirmed by relevant records in the “Tujue” of *Tongdian*, the “Tujue zhuan” of *Jiu Tangshu*, the “Tujue zhuan” of *Xin Tangshu* and *Taiping huanyu ji*, but the specific month is unknown and can only be roughly determined to be some time in the second half of that year (Iwasa 1936: 103).

The Chinese sources had a relatively clear timeline for Pei Xingjian’s second expedition to quell the rebellion of Funian and Wenfu, but the timeline between the execution of Funian and Wenfu and the rebellion of Qutlugh was relatively vague. In this period, the main Turkic rebel chieftain who appeared in the Chinese sources besides Qutlugh was Yuanzhen, and there was no mention of Toñuquq, which was one of the arguments that Hirth strongly believed that Toñuquq can be compared with Yuanzhen as the same person (Hirth 1899: 2). However, if we acknowledge that the recollections of Toñuquq, who was nearly 70 years old, are generally credible, then in addition to the Chinese sources, combined with the Turkic “Toñuquq Inscription”, supplemented by the Chinese “Pei Xingjian Inscription” and some other non-Chinese materials that have fortunately survived, a re-examination of the relatively vague period mentioned above will deepen our understanding of the historical events before the restoration of the Second Türk Qaghanate, and at the same time further confirm the aforementioned inference that Toñuquq and Yuanzhen were not the same person.

According to the records of the “Toñuquq Inscription”, when Toñuquq joined Qutlugh, the latter had only 700 people under his command, and he was immediately elected as Qaghan. According to the “Kül Tegin Inscription” and the “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription”, when Qutlugh was proclaimed Qaghan, he also set up the left wing and right wing leaders Yabghu and Shad, and established the basic state system in accordance with the traditions of the Turks. This shows that Toñuquq participated in the ceremony of Qutlugh’s proclaiming Qaghan and was a meritorious official among the early followers in the restoration of the Second Türk Qaghanate. Yuanzhen’s situation was different instead. According to the descriptions of the “Tujue zhuan” of two *Tangshu*, he escaped from Wang Benli, the chief secretary of the Chanyu Duhufu, and went to join the Türk rebels. This

happened after Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan and appointed his younger brothers Mochuo and Duoxifu as Shad and Yabghu (Cen 1958: 566, 624). Therefore, Yuanzhen joined Qutlugh's camp later than Toñuquq. Regarding the military strength of Qutlugh's early group, one view is that the 700 people recorded in the "Toñuquq Inscription" were not quite true, and the number of 700 seems to come from the legend of the Turks rather than historical facts (Chen 2021: 20). Another view is that the 700 recorded in the Turkic sources are closer to the real number, and the 5,000 troops recorded in the Chinese sources may be an exaggeration by the Tang people (Li 2018: 49). There is also a view that the number of 5,000 may include family members and people who fled to Heisha City (Klyashtorny 1964: 26). In fact, the difference between 700 and 5,000 can also be explained by the difference in time periods. The former was when Qutlugh first established the Qaghanate system, and the latter was when he became more powerful and began to harass the Tang people and moved to Heisha City, a base with better conditions (Zhu 1943: 8; Ma 1957: 65).

Previously, it was generally believed that the date of the 3rd day of the 6th month of the first year of Yongchun (682) recorded in the "Gaozong ji" of *Xin Tangshu*, was the time when Qutlugh first attacked the Tang Dynasty after his uprising, and that the invasion killed Wang Demao, the governor of Lanzhou (Li & Zhang 2024: 133; Zhang 2024: 644; Fan 2024: 137). Now it seems that this argument needs to be revised, because Qutlugh had already attacked the Tang Dynasty before that, that is, when Yuanzhen was still imprisoned by the chief secretary Wang Benli in the Chanyu Duhufu, "he met Qutlugh's invasion", and this invasion directly led to Yuanzhen's fleeing out and joining into Qutlugh. Although the specific time is unclear, it definitely happened before Wang Demao was killed in the 6th month of the first year of Yongchun. According to the "Pei Xingjian Inscription" in volume 228 of *Quan Tangwen*:

(...) He was granted the title of Duke of Wenxi County, and both Funian and Wenfu were executed in the streets of the capital. In that year, Funian's younger brother Yuanzhen led the remnants to rebel again (Dong et al. 1983: 2306).

The so-called Yuanzhen led the remnants of Funian and Wenfu to rebel again refers to the third Türk rebellion led by Qutlugh and Yuanzhen. The phrase "that year" is quite critical, which means that Qutlugh and Yuanzhen's rebellion occurred in the same year when Funian and Wenfu were executed, that is, the

second year of Yonglong (the era was changed to the first year of Kaiyao in the 9th month of that year), 681. Then, Toñuquq led his troops to join, Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan and established the Qaghanate system, and Yuanzhen rebelled against the Tang and went to join, all happened in that year, and Qutlugh's first attack on the Tang Empire also happened in that year.

In a Runic manuscript now stored in St. Petersburg and a Manichean Uighur manuscript, the collective memory of the Gaochang Uighurs in the 9th century is preserved (Erdal & Chen 2017). Among them, the St. Petersburg manuscript published by Radloff provided us with more information about Toñuquq's persuasion to make Qutlugh as Qaghan and the accession to the throne, and even recorded the specific date of the event: the nomination was held on 25th day of the 9th month of the year of snake, and the enthronement was held on the 18th day of the 12th month of the same year. According to the records of Chinese sources, the execution of Turkic rebel chiefs such as Funian and Wenfu took place on the first day of the 10th month in the first year of Kaiyao, which happened to be the year of snake. The year of snake recorded in the St. Petersburg manuscript is completely consistent with the Chinese sources, and this record also confirms the authenticity of the time recorded in the aforementioned "Pei Xingjian Inscription" about the rebellion of Yuanzhen and other remnants of Funian. In other words, it was all in 681 that not only did Toñuquq join and serve as Boyla Bagha Tarqan and Qutlugh be supported as Elterish Qaghan, but also Yuanzhen did join and serve as Apa Tarqan a little later in the same year; according to the St. Petersburg manuscript, regarding the discussion of the establishment of the Qaghan, Toñuquq proposed on the 25th day of the 9th month, and Qutlugh took the throne on the 18th day of the 12th month. From this, it can be inferred that Qutlugh had gathered at least 700 remnants before Funian was executed by the Tang Dynasty on the first day of the 10th month, and as a senior officer "šad" of the Turkic noble, he had already been ready to establish the system of Qaghanate; Toñuquq should have joined before the 25th day of the 9th month; Yuanzhen's joining should have been after that time, but it is not certain whether it was before or after the 18th day of the 12th month, but it was definitely in that year, and more likely before the 18th day of the 12th month. It was precisely because of the joining of Yuanzhen as a strong external aid that Qutlugh, who had already proclaimed himself Qaghan,

probably held a formal enthronement ceremony afterwards, thus starting a new round of the revival of the Türk Qaghanate.

According to *Zizhi tongjian*, Pei Xingjian captured Funian in the leap seventh month of the second year of Yonglong (681), sent him to the capital on the 27th day of the 9th month, and executed him on the first day of the 10th month, which means that before Funian was executed by the Tang Dynasty, Qutlugh had already proclaimed himself Qaghan (Toñuquq persuaded him to ascend the throne on the 25th day of the 9th month). On the same day that Funian was sent to the capital, Emperor Gaozong was very pleased and changed the era name to “Kaiyao”. He also pardoned the Dingxiang army and the officials and soldiers of the Turkic army. Zhu believed that Qutlugh escaped from the Turkic captives pardoned by the Tang Dynasty (Zhu 2012: 94). This conclusion is now difficult to establish. The Turkic captives offered by Pei Xingjian in the Tang Dynasty’s amnesty must have been after the 27th day of the 9th month, but Qutlugh was persuaded by Toñuquq to proclaim himself Qaghan on the 25th day of the 9th month, which shows that Qutlugh was not captured by Pei Xingjian and was not among the Turkic captives amnestied by the Tang Dynasty. Qutlugh must have fled with a few remnants of the Turkic tribes who were unwilling to surrender (the legendary 17 earliest meritorious followers) when Funian surrendered to the Tang Dynasty (in the leap seventh month) or much earlier, and escaped into the remote and secluded wilderness and forests.

Mainly based on the records of Chinese sources, scholars previously generally determined that the time when Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan was the first year of Yongchun (682), and the location was also mostly believed to be the Heisha City (Zhu 2012: 94-97, 114). However, the narrative convention of “Retrospective at the end of the event” in Chinese sources only gave the latest time of the event (Zhang 2024: 643). It is possible that the Tang Dynasty was not very clear about the specific time when Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan. Now, based on the comprehensive study of the above-mentioned old and new materials, we can be sure that the time when Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan and founded the Qaghanate was not in the first year of Yongchun (682), but in the first year of Kaiyao (681), the previous year, and the specific date can be determined to be between the 9th month and the 12th month. It is worth noting that if the above-mentioned research on the birth and death years of

Yuanzhen is correct, then in 681, the year when Qutlugh became Elterish Qaghan, Yuanzhen was about 51 years old, Toñuquq was about 36 years old, Mochuo was 17 years old, and Qutlugh himself was probably less than 30 years old. As for the side of Tang Dynasty, Emperor Gaozong Li Zhi was 54 years old and Empress Wu was 58 years old, both were close in age to cousins Yuanzhen and Funian. Emperor Zhongzong Li Xian, who succeeded to the throne briefly three years later, was 26 years old and his brother Emperor Ruizong Li Dan was 20 years old, both were exactly close in age to brothers Qutlugh and Mochuo. It can be further pointed out that the next generation of successors of both sides were also of similar age, and later experienced similar reigns as political rivals between the countries and the revivalists of their respective dynasties: two years after Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan, in 683, his son Mojilian was born, who ascended the throne as Bilgä Qaghan in 716; and two years after Mojilian's birth, in 685, Li Dan's son Li Longji was born, who ascended the throne as Xuanzong in 713.

5. Where Qutlugh became Qaghan

After the updated understanding of the time when Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan, the traditional view that he proclaimed himself Qaghan in Heisha City also needs to be revised. Between the 9th month and the 12th month of the year 681, Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan, but the location was not Heisha City, because the Qutlugh group at that time was obviously still active in Mount Zongcai. According to recent research, Mount Zongcai is not Yinshan Mountains, and the two places were not in the same geographical unit at all, so Mount Zongcai is extremely far away from the Heisha City area at the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains (Li 2018: 35-59; Zhong 2021: 59-60; Zhang 2024: 635-652; Fan 2024: 109-151). It is likely that Qutlugh first grew strong in Mount Zongcai and proclaimed himself Qaghan, and then expanded to Heisha City about a year later. Direct evidence of the proclaim of Qaghan in Mount Zongcai comes from the "Tujue" of *Tongdian* and the "Tujue zhuan" of *Jiu Tangshu*, which only recorded that "he gathered together as a group of bandits, with more than 5,000 people, and plundered the nine surnames, obtained a lot of sheep and horses, and gradually became powerful" between the description of Qutlugh "entering Mount Zongcai" and "proclaiming himself Qaghan", but did not mention Heisha

City; while the “Tujue zhuan” of *Xin Tangshu* inserted “also governing Heisha City” between Qutlugh “protecting himself in Mount Zongcai” and “proclaiming himself Qaghan”. Bao pointed out that the sentence inserted in *Xin Tangshu* was a new addition and was not the original intention of the sources. The early Qutlugh was just “entering Mount Zongcai” as recorded in *Tongdian* and *Jiu Tangshu*, and had not yet occupied Heisha City (Bao 2021: 105-107). Fan also believed that Qutlugh was in Mount Zongcai in the early days, and later moved to Heisha City; the narrative order of “governing Heisha City” recorded in the “Tujue zhuan” of *Xin Tangshu* is wrong (Fan 2024: 134-137). From this, it can be seen that the insertion of “also governing Heisha City” between Qutlugh’s protecting himself in Mount Zongcai and proclaiming himself Qaghan in the “Tujue zhuan” of *Xin Tangshu* is actually an inappropriate integration of historical materials, and the relevant records in the “Tujue” of the *Tongdian* and the “Tujue zhuan” of *Jiu Tangshu* may be closer to the original appearance of the historical materials.

The fact that the place where Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan was Mount Zongcai instead of Heisha City can also be verified by Turkic sources. As mentioned above, during the third Türk rebellion, Qutlugh’s early base was Mount Zongcai. Scholars had once thought that Čuyay in the Turkic Runic inscription was Mount Zongcai, but recent research shows that Čuyay was not Mount Zongcai, but Yinshan Mountains (Zhong 2021: 59; Zhang 2024; Fan 2024: 145-151). Therefore, the distance between Mount Zongcai and Čuyay was also extremely far, while Heisha City was located in the area north of Yinshan Mountains (Fig. 2). After the 5th and 6th lines of the “Toñuquq Inscription” recorded that Qutlugh proclaimed himself Qaghan, the 7th and 8th lines recorded that the Turks settled down in “čuyay quzın qara qumuy” and filled their stomachs with wild beasts and rabbits. The “čuyay” mentioned in the 7th line refers to the Yinshan Mountains where the Heisha City was located. The relevant strong argument comes from Bao, who pointed out from the perspective of grammatical analysis that “čuyay quzın” should be accurately understood as “the northern foot of the Yinshan Mountains”, where “quz” means “the northern foot of the mountain”, *-n* is a possessive particle, and *-y* in the subsequent “qumuy” is an accusative particle. The two case particles are different, so “čuyay quzın” and “qara qumuy” are not in a parallel relationship.

Since Čuyay was Yinshan Mountains, the exact literal meaning of the phrase “čuyay quzin qara qumuy” is “qara qum at the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains (as accusative)”, so “qara qum” (i.e. Heisha “black sand”) was located at the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains (Bao 2020: 160-161). In that way, the exact meaning of “čuyay quzin qara qumuy” is not “the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains **AND** the Heisha”, but “the Heisha **AT** the northern foot of Yinshan Mountains”.



Fig. 2

On the other hand, although Čuyay was not Mount Zongcai but Yinshan Mountains, the Turkic inscription might have mentioned Mount Zongcai, but did not directly write its name. The fourth line of the “Toñuquq Inscription” recorded:

Those who had remained among the bushes and stones (*ida tašda*) came together and became seven hundred [people] (Li 2018: 47; Chen 2021: 174).

The place where the 700 people gathered mentioned should be Mount Zongcai, and it was also in that place where Qutlugh summoned the remaining Turkic tribes to proclaim himself the Qaghan and establish the Qaghanate.

The 5th and 6th lines of the “Toñuquq Inscription” recorded that after Qutlugh became Elterish Qaghan, the 7th line also recorded that the Turks killed many Tang people in the south, Khitan people in the east, and Oghuz people in the north, and then settled down in the Heisha area at the northern foot of the

Yinshan Mountains. The description of the battles with the three enemies here can be seen as a reflection of the process of the Qutlugh group moving from its early base in Mount Zongcai to the new base Heisha City. In addition, the 11th to 14th lines on the east side of the “Kül Tegin Inscription” and the 10th to 12th lines on the east side of the “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription” recorded the process of Qutlugh’s getting stronger, claiming to be Qaghan, and establishing the Qaghanate. The place where all these events took place should also be Mount Zongcai:

My father, the Qaghan, left [China] with seventeen men. Having heard that they were marching out, those who were living in the towns left [the towns] and those who were living in the mountains came down [from the mountains]. When they assembled, there were seventy men. (Tekin 1968: 265; Chen 2021: 182, 200)

Qutlugh was gathering at Mount Zongcai at this time, which was the place where the seventy people gathered mentioned in the inscription; and when the number of people gathered reached seven hundred, they began to establish the traditional Qaghanate system of the Turks, which is basically consistent with the records in the above-mentioned “Toñuquq Inscription”, except that the epic process description of seventeen and seventy people was added before the seven hundred people. Fan also believes that Mount Zongcai is mentioned in the Turkic Runic inscription: the place of *ida tašda* mentioned in the fourth line of the “Toñuquq Inscription”, and the gathering place of the remaining Turks from seventeen to seventy and then to seven hundred people mentioned in the “Kül Tegin Inscription” and the “Bilgä Qaghan Inscription”, all referred to Mount Zongcai, which was the place where Qutlugh first started the uprising and proclaimed himself Qaghan (Fan 2024: 118, 143, 145-147).

During the Mount Zongcai period, the Qutlugh group grew rapidly from 700 to 5,000 people, a key node of which was the joining of Toñuquq. As mentioned earlier, Toñuquq should have joined before the 25th day of the 9th month of the year 681. At that time, Qutlugh’s Turkic official title was “šad”, and he led the remaining Turkic troops of 700 people to fight guerrilla warfare in the Mount Zongcai base. Toñuquq’s troops were representatives of the Xueyantuo people who had accepted the Tang Dynasty’s control and rule before, that is, Sir Bodun in the “Toñuquq Inscription”. Toñuquq’s joining Qutlugh marked the merger of the two anti-Tang forces, Türk Bodun (Turk people) and Sir Bodun (Xueyantuo

people), into Türk Sir Bodun (Turk-Xueyantuo people). The Xueyantuo who had previously planned to surrender to Funian encountered the Tang general Cao Huaishun on the way, and most of them surrendered to the Tang Empire. This shows that the Xueyantuo who had joined the Tang Empire had indeed planned to join forces with the Türk rebels led by Funian to fight against the Tang Empire together. Around the time when Funian surrendered to the Tang Empire, the remaining Xueyantuo who had not surrendered to the Tang Empire went to the Mount Zongcai base of the remaining Türk rebels under the leadership of Toñuquq to join Qutlugh. Another key node in the growth from 700 to 5,000 people was the strong joining of a large number of Turkic surrendered tribes from the Chanyu Duhufu who were previously loyal to the Tang Dynasty, which Yuanzhen brought with him (Liu 2024: 259), and the time may be between the 9th month and the 12th month of the year 681. Yuanzhen's previous imprisonment by Wang Benli, the chief secretary of the Chanyu Duhufu, was probably related to Funian's rebellion - the "Pei Xingjian Inscription" showed that the Tang Dynasty grasped the intelligence that Yuanzhen and Funian had a close family relationship, so Funian's rebellion inevitably implicated his cousin Yuanzhen, who worked in the Chanyu Duhufu.

6. Epilogue

The discussion in this article further shows that the core of political power of the Second Türk Qaghanate was not only the union of the Ashina and Ashide tribes, but also the joining of the Xueyantuo tribe. Especially in the early days of the rebellion against the Tang Dynasty and the restoration of the Qaghanate, both tribes Ashide and Xueyantuo were deeply involved in and led various actions. Their representatives were Yuanzhen and Toñuquq, and moreover, the latter joined Qutlugh's team a little earlier. Coincidentally, the two men had the same Turkic name, "Toñuquq". The Tang Dynasty apparently knew that the two were not the same person, and Chinese sources made a clear distinction between them. The former, who had served in the Chanyu Duhufu, had a higher status, a greater fame, and an older age, was recorded as "Yuanzhen", a Chinese name semantically translated from his Turkic name; the latter, who had a younger age and a later fame, was recorded as "Tunyugu", a Chinese name phonetically transliterated from his Turkic name. As an official during the reign of Mochuo

Qaghan, Toñuquq once had been “deposed and returned to his tribe” in the early days of Kül Tegin’s coup that supported Bilgä Qaghan to come to power. During this period, he wrote and engraved the “Toñuquq Inscription” to express his loyalty and value to Bilgä Qaghan, and emphasized the status of the Sir people, namely the Xueyantuo tribe, as the meritorious founding heroes in the process of the Turkic revival and consolidation of the Qaghanate.

If the above inference that Toñuquq came from the Xueyantuo tribe is correct, then on the one hand, one of the tribal tamgas of the Xueyantuo can be determined to be the tamga on the Toñuquq stele, and on the other hand, the residence of the Xueyantuo tribe during the Second Türk Qaghanate period can also be determined to be in the southern part of the middle and upper reaches of the Tula River where the Toñuquq steles were located. The latter point can also be confirmed by relevant historical materials. Among the northern barbarian tribes that surrendered to the Tang Dynasty in the 10th month of the third year of Kaiyuan during the civil strife at the end of the Mochuo Qaghanate, the Xueyantuo tribe, led by Dahun dudu (達渾都督), traveled together with the four Oghuz tribes of Sijie, Huxue, Qi, and Fuliyu, the residence of which were also in the southern part of the reaches of the Tula River, while the other five Oghuz tribes of Bayegu, Tongluo, Pugu, Huihe, and Xi, which surrendered to the Tang Dynasty later, in the following year, lived in the northern part of the reaches of the Tula River.

If the above research on Uluy Küli Čor being Ashide Yuanzhen is valid, then we will also get an important inference. For a long time, due to the lack of relevant textual materials, the tamga of Ashide tribe has not been confirmed. Although the Küli Čor stele is seriously damaged and its preservation condition has deteriorated with time, scholars who had close contact with it in the early days mentioned that there was a central tamga at the top of the west side of the stele, such that the few lines of the inscriptions in the middle had to lower their start positions to avoid the tamga. This slightly complicated layout effect is exactly the same as the west side of the first stone of the Toñuquq steles (Clason & Tryjarski 1971: 10). Combining relevant rubbings and photos, we can roughly restore the basic shape of the tamga, and its main part is close to the Chinese character “乙” or Latin letter “Z”. In the lower part, which is in a better state of preservation, there is an elliptical arc that opens to the right, which looks like a

slightly flat letter “C”. There is a vague arc extending to the upper left in the upper part, but it is not certain whether there is a circle at its end (Fig. 3). The tamga similar in basic shape to this surviving tamga above can also be seen on the left side of the tortoise-shaped socle at the Mukhar site (Fig. 4), which is suspected to be the tomb of Mochuo Qaghan, and on the Choir Stele (Fig. 5), which is not far from the Toñuquq Steles (Moriyasu & Ochir 1999: 146, Plate 7a, 7b, 7c; Samashev et al. 2010: 26, 27; Rogozhinskiy & Tishin 2021: 592-593). These two appearances are accompanied by the Ashina tamga, indicating that the tribe to which this tamga belongs was very likely to have intermarried with the Turkic Qaghan’s family. Strong evidence for this assertion comes from the inscription on the Choir Stele. Although various scholars have not yet reached a consensus on the interpretation, the presence of “yägän irkin” in it is basically undisputed, and the meaning of “yägän/yegän/yigän” as a kinship title is exactly “maternal nephew or maternal grandchild”, proving that the mother of the stele owner is a close relative (sister or daughter) of Elterish Qaghan (Rogozhinskiy & Tishin 2021: 592-593; Chen 2019: 163-168). If the above speculation about the identity of the owner of the Küli Čor stele is correct, then we can basically confirm that the basic shape of a certain type of Ashide tamga is the above-mentioned “乙/Z” shape, which may have a circle on the upper left, and its derivative may also have a horn-shaped decoration on the upper part. Comparing the three types of Ashide horse seals recorded in the “Zhufan mayin” of the *Tang Huiyao* (Fig. 6) (Luo 2010: 137-138), the tamga of the Küli Čor stele is closer to the Bayan Ashide horse seal, so the Yuanzhen family may be from the Bayan clan within the Ashide tribe.

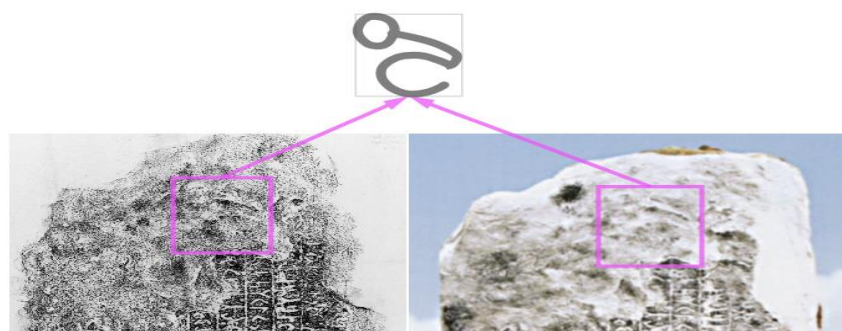


Fig. 3

(The left rubbing is from: <https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/mmd/iiif/1/4000/20866/20063.tiff/full/max/0/default.jpg>;

The right photo is from: Mert 2015: 45)

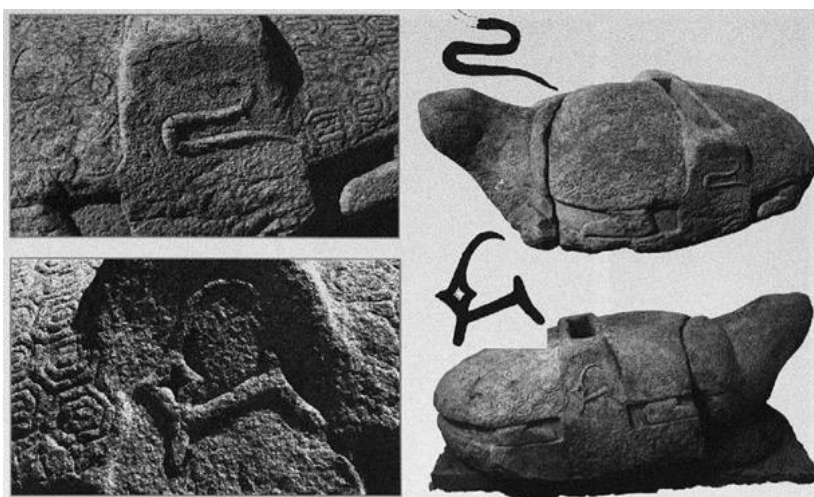


Fig. 4

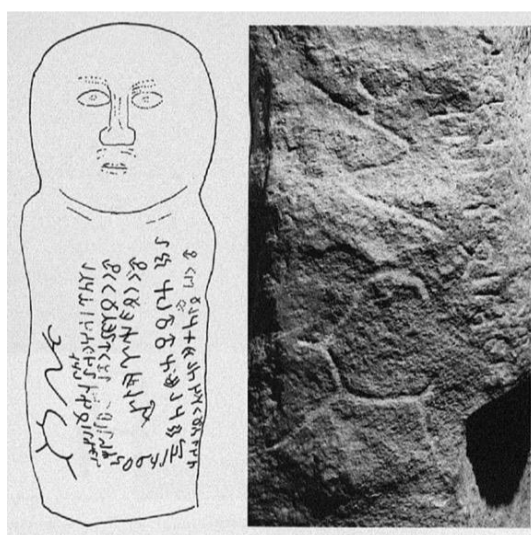


Fig. 5

《唐會要》抄本、刻本、印本中的諸蕃馬印

版本 馬印 部落	清代抄本、刻本					
	明抄本 ⁷⁷⁾	錢氏抄本			汪敏淑藏本	
		清初乾隆抄本	彭元瑞校藏本	王宗炎校本	武英殿本	江蘇書局 ⁷⁸⁾
阿史德馬	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏
闐阿史德馬	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏
拔延阿史德馬	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏	𐰇𐰏

Fig. 6

Recently, a Runic inscription was discovered in Tavan Tolgoi, Mongolia, with more than a dozen tribal tamgas next to it (Rinchinkhorol 2022: 37-42). Among the three large tamgas at the title position, the middle one is the Ashina tamga; the left one is obviously more prominent, and its shape is very similar to

the tamga on the Küli Čor stele, and there is a definite circle on the upper left of the “乙/Z”; the tamga on the right is a triangle, which can be regarded as a variant of the tamga on the Toñuquq steles (Kubarev 2023: 128). It is still difficult to determine the tribe of the owner of this inscription, but combined with the “yegän irkin” in the inscription and the three major tamgas at the title position, we can basically infer that the owner was likely to be from the Bayan clan of the Ashide tribe and was the maternal nephew or maternal grandson of a Turkic Qaghan; and if the triangular tamga on the right side of the title is indeed related to the Xueyantuo tribe that Toñuquq was belonged to, then the arrangement of these three tamgas just provides a footnote to the previous conclusion of this article that the Ashide tribe and the Xueyantuo tribe were deeply involved in the operation of the Second Türk Qaghanate.

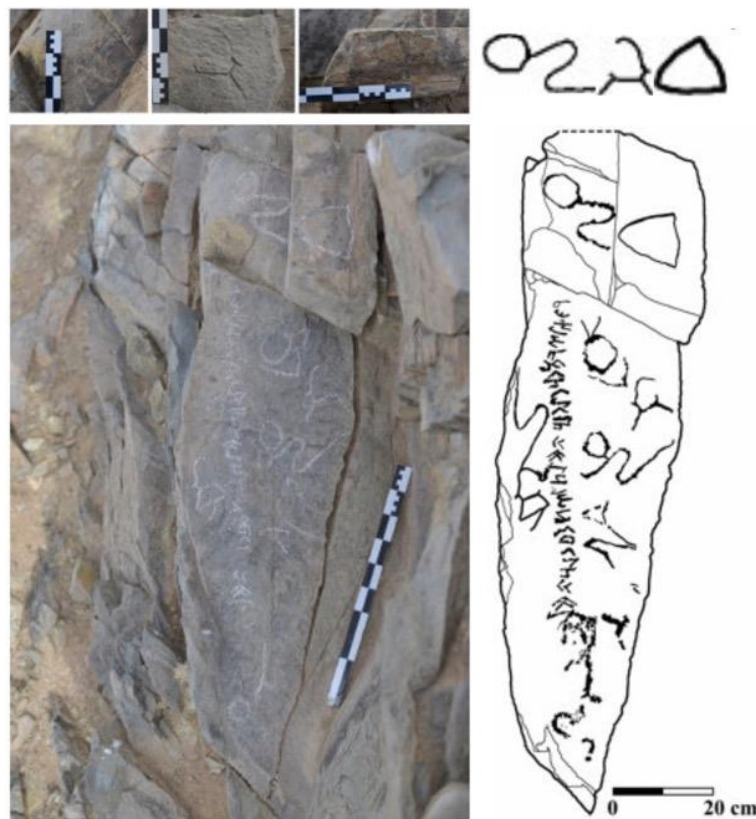


Fig. 7

However, the relevant records in the “Zhufan mayin” of the Tang Huiyao are indeed valuable, but it must be realized that the image data in the handed-down documents are very easy to be distorted. If we want to implement the correspondence with archaeological field discoveries, there is still a long way to

go before the final recognition. This article's speculation that Toñuquq came from the Xueyantuo tribe and the re-examination of his relationship with Ashide Yuanzhen may help to gradually clarify related questions and continue to advance related research.

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