

**A Confucian Ethical Framework in the Khitan Language:
*The Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues***

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Abstract

In China and its neighboring regions, cross-cultural and linguistic interactions have historically shaped distinctive cultural traditions. The Khitan people, who established the Liao dynasty (10th–12th centuries), provide a notable example of this dynamic process. During the 10th century, the Khitan people developed two unique writing systems: the Khitan Large Script (KLS) and the Khitan Small Script (KSS). Although both functioned as independent systems for recording the Khitan language, their forms were superficially modeled on Chinese characters. The creation of these scripts underscores the significant influence of Chinese civilization on the Khitan world.

Recent progress in the decipherment of Khitan texts has opened new possibilities for examining the processes through which Chinese intellectual concepts were transmitted and adapted in Khitan texts. This study focuses on the Confucian ethical framework consisting of *san'gang* (三綱, 'Three Cardinal Principles') and *wuchang* (五常, 'Five Constant Virtues'). By identifying and analyzing the Khitan lexical equivalents of these concepts, the paper demonstrates that they represent calques derived from their Chinese source expressions. This analysis sheds light on the mechanisms of loan translation, offering insight into the ways in which Confucian thought was linguistically integrated into the Khitan language.

Key words: Khitan, language contact, Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues, calque

1. The Khitan Language and Chinese Influence

The Khitan language is primarily attested through inscriptions written in the Khitan Large Script (KLS) and the Khitan Small Script (KSS). Most of these inscriptions are epitaphs engraved on stone monuments, while a limited number of fragmentary transcriptions employing Chinese characters have also been preserved. Although historical sources from the Liao dynasty and subsequent periods mention the existence of Khitan writing, the surviving scripts were not conclusively identified until the 20th century. As a result, the overall structure of the language remained largely obscure for many centuries.

Significant progress has been made in deciphering Khitan since the 1970s, driven by the discovery of new inscriptional materials. A landmark achievement was the work of Chinggeltei and his colleagues (Chinggeltei et al. 1985), who identified numerous Chinese loanwords in KSS inscriptions. By systematically comparing these loanwords with their counterparts in contemporary Chinese, the researchers were able to establish phonetic values for a substantial number of Khitan characters. This pioneering work provided compelling evidence that the Khitan language was profoundly influenced by sustained linguistic contact with Chinese.

Subsequent studies have shown that Chinese influence extended well beyond simple lexical borrowing. Khitan inscriptions reveal the presence of loan translations, direct quotations from Chinese classical texts, adaptations of well-known historical anecdotes, and even renderings of idiomatic expressions. These findings highlight the central role of Chinese linguistic and cultural traditions in shaping Khitan texts and provide the foundation for the present study.

Building on this body of scholarship, the present paper focuses on the Khitan equivalents of the Confucian concepts known as *san'gang wuchang* (三綱五常, 'Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues'). Through identifying and interpreting these terms, it demonstrates that they represent calques of Chinese expressions, offering new

linguistic and cultural insights into how Confucian thought was adapted and integrated into Khitan.

2. Calques in Khitan

Before turning to the main focus of this study—the Khitan expressions corresponding to the *Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues*—it is useful to examine how Chinese concepts were rendered in Khitan through calquing. This section introduces two examples that demonstrate how Chinese cultural terminology was structurally translated rather than phonetically borrowed. These examples provide a foundation for understanding the mechanisms of linguistic transfer that will be analyzed in the following sections.

2.1 The Emperor as “Nine and Five”

One striking case of calque appears in Khitan terminology for the Chinese title *huangdi* (皇帝, ‘emperor’). In Khitan texts, the emperor is most often referred to by the direct phonetic borrowing 主 圭, corresponding to the Chinese word *huangdi*, or by the native Khitan term 𐰺𐰆 *qaa*. However, the emperor’s position is instead represented by the sequence 𐰺𐰆, literally “nine five,” in certain inscriptions, as noted by Kane (2009: 109). In this usage, 𐰺 denotes “nine” and 𐰆 denotes “five,” together forming a phrase that symbolizes the highest position of rulership.

This construction ultimately derives from the well-known Chinese phrase *jiuwu zhi zun* (九五之尊, ‘Supreme Sovereign of Nine and Five’), which has its origin in the *Yijing* (易經, ‘Book of Changes’). In this classical text, “nine” signifies a strong *yang* (陽) line, while “five” refers to the fifth position within a hexagram. In particular, the ninth and fifth line in the *Qian* (乾) hexagram is associated with the ideal ruler, described metaphorically as a “flying dragon in the heavens” (飛龍在天). Over time, this metaphor came to be used directly in Chinese historical and literary sources as a title for the emperor, symbolizing supreme authority and

sovereignty.

By rendering the title of the emperor as 天可汗, the Khitan adopted the conceptual structure of the Chinese metaphor while entirely replacing the original Chinese words with their Khitan equivalents. This represents a clear example of a calque, in which each component of the original expression is translated individually, rather than borrowed phonetically as a whole. It also reflects the prestige of Chinese culture and demonstrates the extent to which it became embedded in Khitan administrative and ceremonial vocabulary.

2.2 Expressions of “Coming of Age”

Another clear example of a calque in Khitan is found in expressions used to signify the attainment of adulthood. Takeuchi and Shen (2025) argue that whereas age in Khitan is typically indicated with simple numerals, certain passages employ formulaic expressions closely modeled on Chinese texts. One such phrase appears in the *Epitaph of Yelü Dilie* (耶律迪烈墓誌文) as 曲公 金全及弔, which occurs in a passage 化 甬北 曲公 金全及弔 土化 火火来¹, meaning “After this, having reached the age of ~.” Takeuchi and Shen identify 曲公 as a borrowing of Chinese *guan* (冠, ‘cap’ or ‘capping’) for two reasons. First, in traditional Chinese culture, young men formally entered adulthood at the age of twenty through *guanli* (冠禮, ‘capping rite’), giving rise to idioms such as *jiaguan* (加冠, ‘to put on the cap’) and *jiguan* (及冠, ‘to reach capping’). In the Khitan expression, the verb 金全及弔 means “to put on,” making the entire phrase a literal rendering of “to put on the cap,” understood figuratively as “to attain adulthood.” Second, Khitan epitaphs often narrate the life of the deceased chronologically, including key milestones such as the attainment of adulthood. Based on the surrounding context, this event is assumed to have happened around the age of twenty, indirectly supporting this interpretation.

¹ For a detailed explanation of each element of the sequence, see Takeuchi and Shen (2025).

As with the “nine-five” expression for the emperor, this case illustrates how Khitan writers translated Chinese cultural concepts structurally rather than merely phonetically. These examples highlight the deep integration of Chinese social categories into Khitan commemorative texts and prepare the ground for analyzing the Confucian ethical terms discussed in the following section.

3. Analysis of the Target Passage

This section examines the primary material for the present study: a passage from line 17 of the *Damaged Epitaph of Prince Xu* (遼國許王墓誌殘石). Although fragmentary, this inscription preserves a sequence of phrases describing the personal qualities and accomplishments of the deceased. The relevant portion reads as follows:

尙及女 公中化升弔 𠂔 令仕空北𠂔 伏空升及肉 止平关 而女 𠂔央平升弔 包 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔
𠂔𠂔𠂔 𠂔𠂔

Previous decipherments (e.g., Chinggeltei et al. 2017) and contextual analysis allow several of these expressions to be interpreted with reasonable confidence. The opening phrase 尙及女 公中化升弔 is best translated as “in order to bring harmony among the people,” while 而女 𠂔央平升弔 conveys the sense of “in order to carry out military affairs.” The verb 止平关, in its converb form, means “excelling in ~”; 𠂔𠂔𠂔 denotes “virtue”; and 𠂔𠂔𠂔 conveys the idea of being “accomplished” or “brought to completion.”

Taken together, these elements portray the deceased as a figure embodying specific virtues and abilities. While some components are relatively clear, others—such as 𠂔 令仕空北𠂔 伏空升及肉 and 包 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔—remain opaque and require further investigation. These expressions merit closer examination, and the main ones will be discussed in greater

detail below.

3.1 Identification of the *Five Constant Virtues*

Among the undeciphered items, the sequence 𠂔 令仕𠂔𠂔𠂔 provides a promising point of entry. The first character, 𠂔, is securely identified as the numeral “five.” The following element, 令仕𠂔𠂔, is interpreted by Aisin Gioro and Yoshimoto (2011:134) as meaning “constancy.” The final character, 𠂔, is a known case marker.

On this basis, the phrase 𠂔 令仕𠂔𠂔𠂔 can plausibly be read as a literal rendering of the Chinese term *wuchang* (五常, ‘Five Constant Virtues’). In classical Confucian thought, the *Five Constant Virtues* represent the five essential virtues that sustain moral order: *ren* (仁, ‘benevolence’), *yi* (義, ‘righteousness’), *li* (禮, ‘propriety’), *zhi* (智, ‘wisdom’), and *xin* (信, ‘trustworthiness’). These virtues collectively form the foundation of ethical behavior within both the family and the state.

The presence of this concept in a Khitan epitaph is highly significant, as it demonstrates the direct integration of core Confucian terminology into Khitan commemorative texts. Furthermore, its placement immediately after 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔 公𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔 (‘in order to bring harmony among the people’) suggests a meaningful association: the practice of the *Five Constant Virtues* naturally aligns with the ideal of harmony within the populace, and the two expressions likely function here as complementary elements describing the deceased’s role as a moral exemplar.

3.2 Identification of the *Three Cardinal Principles*

The next element to analyze is 𠂔 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔. The character 𠂔 is securely identified as the numeral “three.” The following cluster, 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔, has not yet been fully deciphered, although the final character 𠂔 is recognizable as a pluralizing suffix. Given the surrounding context—particularly the preceding appearance of 𠂔 令仕𠂔𠂔𠂔 as a calque of the *Five Constant Virtues*—it is natural to interpret 𠂔 𠂔𠂔𠂔𠂔 as referring to *san’gang* (三綱, ‘Three Cardinal

Principles’). This interpretation accords well with the passage’s structure, which pairs two closely related Confucian concepts in sequence.

This reading also gains support from the subsequent phrase 而安 乃决平升弔 (‘in order to carry out military affairs’). In the Confucian worldview, the *Three Cardinal Principles* emphasize hierarchical relationships, with particular weight given to the principle of *jun wei chen gang* (君為臣綱, ‘the ruler is the guiding principle for the subject’). Such hierarchy is crucial for the mobilization of armies and the proper conduct of warfare, where absolute obedience to the ruler’s command is paramount. The juxtaposition of 包 又 子 全 全 and 而安 乃决平升弔 therefore suggests that military action is here framed within the context of correct political and familial order.

In classical Chinese thought, the *Three Cardinal Principles* define the three fundamental relationships that maintain social harmony:

- 1) *jun wei chen gang* (君為臣綱) — the ruler is the guiding principle for the subject
- 2) *fu wei zi gang* (父為子綱) — the father is the guiding principle for the son
- 3) *fu wei qi gang* (夫為妻綱) — the husband is the guiding principle for the wife

The term *gang* (綱) literally means “main cord” or “guiding thread,” evoking the image of a net whose stability depends on its central strands. When combined with the *Five Constant Virtues*, the *Three Cardinal Principles* form a comprehensive ethical framework that integrates vertical authority with individual moral cultivation.

The structure of the Khitan passage—beginning with harmony among the people, followed by the *Five Constant Virtues*, then the *Three Cardinal Principles*, and concluding with the execution of military affairs—thus reflects a carefully ordered vision in which moral virtue and political hierarchy are deeply intertwined.

3.3 Broader Implications

Identifying these expressions as structural calques of Chinese ethical terminology carries implications beyond this single text. It illuminates the process by which Confucian concepts were not only borrowed but systematically adapted into the Khitan language. More broadly within Khitan studies, such calques provide a valuable methodological tool. Because many native Khitan words remain undeciphered, recognizing structurally translated expressions can yield crucial insights into otherwise obscure vocabulary and grammatical patterns. This, in turn, advances the overall decipherment of the language and deepens our understanding of Sino-Khitan cultural exchange.

4. Conclusion

This study has identified and analyzed Khitan expressions corresponding to the Confucian concepts of the *Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues*. Through close examination of the *Damaged Epitaph of Prince Xu* and comparative analysis with Chinese classical texts, it has demonstrated that these Khitan expressions are best understood as structural calques rather than simple phonetic borrowings. In doing so, the study has revealed how deeply Confucian ethical thought was integrated into Khitan commemorative language.

The presence of both the *Three Cardinal Principles* and the *Five Constant Virtues* within a single passage is especially significant. It suggests that Khitan elites were not only familiar with these core Confucian ideas but also actively employed them in their own linguistic and cultural framework. By pairing these two concepts in succession, the epitaph constructs a vision of social harmony and political hierarchy that closely mirrors Chinese models while simultaneously expressing them through uniquely Khitan forms.

More broadly, this research highlights the methodological value of identifying calques for the decipherment of Khitan. Because so many native Khitan words remain undeciphered, the recognition of structurally translated expressions offers a powerful tool for reconstructing

meanings and grammatical structures. This approach opens new avenues for understanding the mechanisms of cultural and linguistic transfer between the Khitan and the Chinese worlds, providing insights not only into the development of the Khitan language but also into the dynamics of cultural interaction in the broader East Asian context.

In summary, the discovery of calques representing the *Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues* marks an important step forward in both Khitan philology and the study of Sino-Khitan cultural and linguistic interaction. Future research expanding on these findings will further clarify how Confucian ideology was reinterpreted and re-expressed within the multilingual and multicultural setting of the Liao dynasty.

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