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Courting Capitals: Imperial Itinerance and Urban Ambivalence in the Kitan Liao Dynasty (916-1125)

Lance Pursey
Waseda University

Abstract

The simultaneous existence of five urban centres labelled as 'capitals' in the Liao dynasty by the late eleventh century has perplexed scholars who presume that the Liao court must have resided in one of these capitals as the courts of most conventional 'Chinese' empires did. However, the Liao court never permanently resided in any one of these capitals; the court practised 'imperial itinerance', wherein they moved around according to an often loosely seasonal pattern but primarily from political expedience. This paper argues that the primary-auxiliary model of capitals does not apply to the Liao and therefore that neither Shangjing, the Upper Capital, nor Zhongjing, the Central Capital, can be considered to have been primary capitals. Rather, the Liao court exercised 'urban ambivalence', defined here as a selective attitude to the role of capitals in statecraft. This is done by first examining the frequency and purpose of imperial visits to the capitals, and then exploring the semantics of the capital names Upper and Central. This reassessment of Liao capitals invites us to eschew normative frameworks concerning capitals derived from Chinese empires, and highlights the explanatory potential of agency over adherence to ideological models to understand the Liao court attitude to capitals.

Keywords: Liao dynasty, Kitan, capitals, conquest dynasties, moving court

Introduction

By the late eleventh century the Liao dynasty (916-1125) had five cities simultaneously serving as 'capitals' (see table 1). The existence of multiple cities designated as 'capitals' (*jing* 京 or *du* 都) is not uncommon in Chinese history. However, conventionally only one of these is ever the 'primary capital' (*shoudu* 首都) where the court resided at any one time, with other capitals being referred to as 'auxiliary capitals' (*peidu* 陪都). If such a primary-auxiliary model can be applied to the Liao capitals, then there are two candidates for primary capital - the Upper Capital, Shangjing 上京, and the Central Capital, Zhongjing 中京 - however, our sources are unclear as to which of these capitals would have been the primary capital. Indeed, a growing consensus of scholarship argues that the Liao court was not permanently based in any of its capitals. Rather, the court practiced "imperial itinerance" (Atwood, 2015; Hershey, 2021), moving between different camps in a loose pattern not determined by pastoral imperatives but by political expedience and seasonal conditions. With no capital as centre of rule, the imperial itinerance of the Liao court renders the conventional primary-auxiliary capital model inapplicable. This leaves scholars the task of articulating the relationship between the court and

the capitals. I argue this relationship was one of 'urban ambivalence', in which the function of each capital was not the result of rigid design or model, but rather contingent on the political needs of the court.

The debate concerning the Liao capitals revolves around three separate arguments, that I will label as 1) the Shangjing argument, 2) the Zhongjing argument, and 3) the moving court argument. Proponents of the Shangjing argument insist that from its construction in 918-922 until its fall in 1120, the 'Upper Capital' Shangjing was always the primary capital (Toqto'a, 2016; Wittfogel & Feng, 1946: 436). On the other hand, proponents of the Zhongjing argument claim that while Shangjing was initially the primary capital, from its construction in 1005 the newly built Central Capital Zhongjing subsequently became the primary capital (Tan, 1980; Yu, 2012). Those in favour of the moving court argument posit that there was no primary capital that served as the political centre of the Liao; rather, affairs of the state were consistently carried out in the moving court (Twitchett and Tietze, 1994: 64; Yang Ruowei, 2022; Kang, 2007; Lin, 2010; Xiao, 2014). While the premise of the moving court argument has been widely accepted, the question of what role these capitals played in the Liao has not been resolved. Consequently, the Shangjing and Zhongjing arguments remain relevant in order to determine which city was nevertheless the most important capital for the court in the Liao.

Capital	Years as capital	Previous occupation	Modern Location
Shangjing 上京 (Upper)	938-1120	Previously Xilou 西樓 hunting ground. Populated 922	Lindong 林東, Chifeng 赤峰, Inner Mongolia
Nanjing 南京 (Southern)	938-1122	Urban centre of region since 11th century BCE	Fengtai district 丰台區, Beijing
Dongjing 東京 (Eastern)	938-1116	County in former Bohai state	Liaoyang 遼陽, Liaoning
Zhongjing 中京 (Central)	1006-1121	Land of the Qai Prince 奚王 in 10th century CE.	Ningcheng 寧城, Chifeng 赤峰, Inner Mongolia
Xijing 西京 (Western)	1044-1122	Urban centre of region since before Northern Wei capital in 398CE.	Datong 大同, Shanxi

Table 1: Five Capitals of Liao

The Shangjing argument was proffered by the compilers of the 1344 *History of Liao* (hereafter the 1344 *History*), and later taken up in Wittfogel and Feng's seminal text on Liao society (1946: 436). The compilers of the 1344 *History* organised the geographical treatises of the Liao into five chapters each centred on one of the capitals, with Shangjing given pride of place as the first chapter. Elsewhere in the 1344 *History* the compilers directly aver:

> 遼有五京。上京為皇都，凡朝官、京官皆有之；餘四京隨宜設官，為制不一。
>
> "The Liao had five capitals. Shangjing was the Imperial City, with both court officials and capital officials, the other four capitals, offices were established where appropriate, there was no one model of capital administration." (Toqto'a, 2016: 895)

However, this statement has been contested. Lin has argued that there is no evidence elsewhere that court officials were permanently stationed in Shangjing or indeed any other capital (2015: 261-2 n.1). In addition, historical information about Shangjing after the start of the eleventh century is conspicuously absent for a purported 'primary capital'. Zhongjing, on the other hand, is much more visible in multiple sources in the eleventh century. It has therefore attracted the attention of several scholars, leading to the formulation of the Zhongjing argument (Tan, 1980; Yu 2012: 33-42). This said, the most conspicuous problem with the Zhongjing argument is that the evidence is all indirect. Even allowing for the scarcity of sources on the Liao dynasty and their fragmentary nature, the formal move of a primary capital would have been a seismic dynastic event that would not have gone unmentioned in source record. It should appear not only in Liao sources, but also in those of their rivals, the Song, and their successors, the Jin and latterly the Yuan. The mixed messages left for us by the compilers of the 1344 *History* suggest they too were working on assumptions in the absence of emphatic evidence that either Shangjing or Zhongjing was the primary capital, or that the Liao adopted the primary-auxiliaries model of capitals at all. What proponents of the Shangjing argument and Zhongjing argument miss is that this very ambiguity in the sources is suggestive of an ambivalence on the part of the Liao rulers over the conventional primary-auxiliary model of capitals.

Such 'urban ambivalence' is exemplified in the practice of imperial itinerance, which is the core of the third argument regarding the Liao capitals. Since the 1990s many scholars agree that neither Shangjing nor Zhongjing were ever the 'primary capital', i.e. the political centre that housed the court. Rather, the Liao court was a moving one that followed a pattern of imperial itinerance between seasonal camps called *nadbu (*nabo* 捺鉢) (see Hershey 2022: 273). By adopting this argument however scholars are subsequently tasked with articulating what then was the purpose or function of the capitals? In particular, this means asking why in the first place did the Kitan rulers commission the construction of Shangjing and then Zhongjing, two large scale palatial cities on the grasslands with no prior urban sites. One suggestion by Kang (2007) is that the capitals were regional rather than imperial centres, and this is an angle certainly worth exploring, though beyond the scope of this paper. The term 'urban ambivalence' as a term allows us to recognise that the relationship between court and capital was open to negotiation and agency on the part of the court.

Zooming out, this question is important because the way we discuss and envision cities is often the way we talk about broader issues of culture, technology, and 'civilisations': after all, urban development is a function of narrative (Leyser *et al.*, 2018: 247). The story of the Liao capitals is no different. The Liao is frequently framed in the discipline of Chinese history as a 'conquest dynasty' or 'non-Han regime', whereby pastoral/nomadic non-Chinese rulers, in this case the Kitan, ruled over a Chinese population. This framing neglects the diversity and complexity of identities in the Liao in favour of a reductive binary of Kitan-Han cultures and practices. This framing can also be seen implicitly or explicitly in the three arguments discussed above: the argument that Shangjing was always the primary capital presumes that the Liao had a consistent primary capital as other dynasties did – eliding the importance of the moving court, while also suggesting that the Kitan preserved pride of place for their heartlands. The argument that none of the capitals housed the court suggests that the Kitan rulers maintained nomadic practices incompatible with ruling from capitals in a sedentary way. The second argument, that the primary capital moved from Shangjing to Zhongjing is the only one to offer an account of diachronic change as opposed to a static model. This shift however often serves a narrative that such a move of capital was a sign that the Kitan rulers were becoming more sinicised, i.e. adopting more Chinese practices and assimilating into the Chinese world (see Leyser *et al*., 2018: 250-254), and therefore the decline of Shangjing is also the decline of the Kitan way of life. At the heart of these narratives is the fundamental assumption that cities themselves are inherently a Chinese technology and that adoption, rejection, or ambivalence towards capital cities as political centres can act as a kind of gauge of how sinicised or nativist the Kitan rulers were at any given point in the Liao reign. This paper does not accept these assumptions.

This paper will begin by providing the empirical basis for the moving court argument by showing how infrequently the court actually visited Shangjing and Zhongjing. I proceed then to investigate what factors might influence the court's decision to enter or avoid Shangjing or Zhongjing, and address outstanding ritual and material arguments that favour Zhongjing as the primary capital. In the second part, I explore the assumption that either Shangjing or Zhongjing must have been the primary capital through questioning what the labels 'shang' (upper) and 'zhong' (middle) mean in the Liao context as compared to other dynasties that had multiple capitals.

Court and Capitals

In imperial itinerance the destination of the court are purposeful rather than prescriptive, meaning imperial presence any of the capitals suggests certain a particular capital had strategic advantages to domestic or foreign policy, symbolic importance, or even general comfortable conditions. However, while Shangjing and Zhongjing certainly had the space and facilities to accommodate the imperial family and moving court, through a combination of palaces and open spaces for tents (Zhao, 2017: 12, 20), the data available shows that the Liao emperors (listed in table 3 together with the years of their reigns) spent the majority of their time away from the capitals. This data in the form of the month by month, year by year movements of the court is incomplete, with patchy coverage for different emperors and periods. Scholars such as Fu (1984), Yang and Wang (2017), and Hershey (2021) have used records to discern seasonal

patterns of court movement and the nadbud system, whereas scholars such as Yang Ruowei (2022), Xiao (2014), and Wang Mingsun (2017) have focused on and tabulated the recorded visits of each emperor to the capitals. Wang has also provisionally calculated the time spent for these visits (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 313-324).

The figures for the numbers of visits also vary depending on interpretation of the sources. Xiao (2014: 50-56) counts only explicit mentions in the 1344 *History* of official visits made by the emperor to the capitals; Yang Ruowei (2022: 266-271) also includes mentions of visits to temples and shrines that are known to have been in the five capitals. Wang Mingsun is most generous in his estimation, however, as he also includes activities that could be inferred to be taking place in cities, such as an occasion on which the fourth emperor Jing drank and observed the lantern festival at the 'markets', likely in Shangjing (Wang Mingsun: 2017, 316). Before breaking down the figures, it is notable that these varying interpretations are stimulated by the fact that it is not the capitals, but the activities or specific shrines visited by the court that are foregrounded in some of these accounts. This again suggests the aforementioned urban ambivalence of those at the court, namely that the concern of the court was the shrine and not the capital.

The numbers also support this notion of urban ambivalence. Table 3 shows that even with the inclusion of inferred visits to the capitals and generous estimations of the duration of each capital sojourn, no emperor spent more than 30% of their reign at the capitals. For the last three emperors who collectively reigned over the period from 1031-1225, this was 10% or less. This refutes Wittfogel and Feng's suggestion that "the later emperors spent more time in the capitals than did the first rulers of the state" (1946: 436). When we break it down, Zongzhen spent more time at Zhongjing than Shangjing, and Yanxi appears to have never set foot in Shangjing in his reign. Hongji, on the other hand, shunned both more or less equally. The overall pattern shows that Zhongjing was more favoured than Shangjing as a destination for the moving court, but the number of months that even Zhongjing hosted the emperor over their entire reign decreases with each emperor post-1005. Taken alongside the clear indication in the data that no emperor spent more than a third of their overall reign in the capitals, sojourns in the capitals were exceptions and not the rule.

Emperor	**Duration of reign in years (months)**	**Time spent in five capitals in months**	**% of time spent in capitals**	**Of which months spent in Shangjing**	**Of which months spent in Zhongjing**
Deguang 德光 (Taizong 太宗 r. 927-947)	20 (168)	44	18%	19 (43%)	-
Ruan 阮 (Shizong 世宗 r. 947-951)	5 (60)	3	5%	1 (33%)	-

Jing 璟 (Muzong 穆宗 r. 951-969)	18 (216)	32	14%	30 (94%)	-
Xian 賢 (Jingzong 景宗 r. 969-983)	13 (156)	46	29%	26 (53%)	-
Longxu 隆緒 (Shengzong 聖宗 r. 983-1031)	23 (276)	27	10%	10 (37%)	-
Pre-treaty era 983-1005					
Post-treaty 1005-1031	26 (312)	68	21%	15 (22%)	37 (54%)
Zongzhen 宗真 (Xingzong 興宗 r. 1031-1055)	24 (288)	31	10%	3 (10%)	12 (39%)
Hongji 洪基 (Daozong 道宗 r. 1055-1101)	47 (564)	25	4%	7 (28%)	8 (32%)
Yanxi 延禧 (Tianzuo 天祚 r. 1101-1125)	20 (240)	26	10%	0	5 (19%)

Table 3: Approx. time spent in five capitals by each emperor (Wang, 2017: 325) + time spent in Shangjing and Zhongjing. Month = 30 days. Unlike Wang Mingsun, I have divided the reign of Longxu between the pre- and post- 1005 treaty periods.

This means that while Zhongjing did host the emperor more often than Shangjing, arguments that Zhongjing replaced Shangjing as a primary capital are misplaced. Evidently like Shangjing, Zhongjing housed multiple palaces and hence could be interpreted as a more permanent base for the imperial family (Yu, 2012: 38-39), but these could just as well have been facilities for visits and projections of imperial power in absentia. We cannot take too literally a flattering portrayal of Zhongjing in a 1072 stele which proclaims:

> 五都錯峙，帝宅尊乎中土，則大定之分甲天下焉。
>
> "Five capitals are distributed [over the empire], but since the central land is the most exalted residence of emperors, the status of Dading [i.e. Zhongjing] is the highest all over the world." (translation Lin, 2010: 118; original Xiang, 1995: 360)

This passage seems to suggest that the Liao emperors resided in Zhongjing and that this made it the primary capital. It was written by a court historian who was working in a private capacity, composing the stele as a commission for an aristocratic Kitan family to be installed in a newly completed large monastery complex in a valley 57km north of Zhongjing. The passage

therefore does not represent an official court-sanctioned privileging of Zhongjing, but rather the self-promotion of these aristocrats who argued that, like the emperor, they too held lands in this part of the empire whose value was no doubt augmented but their proximity to Zhongjing. It is unsurprising that the aristocratic members of the imperial family owned real estate in the capitals, and indeed the capitals may have functioned as the place to store various imperial assets. There are multiple records of financial institutions connected to the court in the capitals (Yu, 2012: 40), and scattered references in inscriptions to city-based 'private residences' (*sidi* 私第) of Kitan elites (Xiang *et al*., 2010: 47-49, 73-75; Yang Ruowei, 2022: 100-101). But what these fragments of information do not tell us is whether certain individuals had multiple residences in different urban settings, and how their time was divided between these urban residences and elsewhere. Needless to say, despite the palaces and properties they contained, Shangjing and Zhongjing were not the permanent residences of the imperial family.

So, why did the court visit the capitals when it did, or even at all? There are clear reasons why the fifth and sixth emperors, Xian and Longxu, spent significant time in Nanjing, the Southern Capital, prior to the 1005 Chanyuan Treaty (澶淵之盟) with the Song, as it was from that region that military campaigns had been launched against the Song to their south. After the 1005 treaty, Longxu spent more time in Zhongjing as compared to the other capitals; this could be explained by his desire to oversee its construction. These events aside however, there seems to be no indication of what would push the court into the cities. In times of extreme weather when hunts had to be cancelled, it is not recorded that the court travelled to the cities, but rather chose to sit it out in their encampments (Toqto'a, 2016: 336, 338, 349, 357, 362). When threatened by military invasion, the last emperor Yanxi and his court fled to hard-to-reach remote terrain (Twitchett and Tietze, 1994: 147), instead of hunkering down behind the fortified walls of any capitals. The capitals were not seen as a place of shelter or refuge for the court, let alone as a fixed base of operations.

Neither were Zhongjing or Shangjing the sole venues for ritual and official business. The laconic records of capital visits often note the promotion of ministers or the graduation of exam candidates (Wang, 2017: 322), and there were other specific rites that were also recorded taking place in capitals (Yu, 2012: 39). However, these activities were also carried out in an equal capacity in remote locations where the court was stationed (Toqto'a, 2016: 265-6). Zhongjing or Shangjing were rarely the destination of such missions. Granted, Zhongjing is significantly more visible in the surviving reports of embassies from the Song to the Liao, but this is because Zhongjing was a necessary stop en-route to wherever the moving court was. Shangjing was not, and thus is less visible as a stop for envoys. In fact, even if Shangjing could have been a stop en route to the moving court further north envoys did not have to pass through or by the capital. For example, in Shen Kuo's 沈括 1075 mission which took him 87km north-north-west of Shangjing, his route avoided Shangjing entirely, passing instead through the city of Qingzhou (Zhao, 2017: 101). Envoy routes and itineraries were not necessarily solely planned based on logistic expedience; they were curated by Liao hosts based on what they wanted or did not want their intelligence-gathering Song guests to see (Bennett, 2015). But it is significant that even when near Shangjing, envoy poems such as those written by two missions in 1055 only mention passing through the region. They provide few credible details

of the city to satisfy questions about whether they set foot anywhere near the city at all (Zhao, 2017: 51, 57). Diplomacy and ceremony could be conducted wherever the emperor was, and the emperor was not likely to return to cities specifically to conduct certain affairs.

The agency of the emperor over venues for rituals and official business can be seen in a particular passage that is often misinterpreted as a rhetorical imagining of the Liao Zhongjing as the "pivot of the four quarters" (四方之極)，and therefore as the primary capital of the Liao in the eleventh century:

> 帝王之樂不奏于野。今中京四方之極，朝覲各得其所□
>
> "The music of the Emperor should not be played in remote areas. Now our Central Capital is the pivot of four quarters, those approaching the throne can reach it from their places." (Toqto'a, 2016: 1458)

By invoking a millennia-old motif in Chinese landscape-making that situates the ruler and the city-state/capital city at the centre of the four cardinal directions, this passage suggests a shift of capital to Zhongjing. However, it further suggests a shift in emphasis to privileging the 'centre' in symbolic discourse, and by extension, that the Liao are becoming more sinicised (Lin, 2010: 118). However, a closer look at the passage in question reveals the limits to which it is representative of court perceptions of Zhongjing. It comes from part of a debate recorded in the biography of the minister Liu Liufu 劉六符 (?-1058) in the 1344 *History*. In 1055, the newly enthroned emperor Hongji consulted two ministers over where to convene a large investiture ceremony (Toqto'a, 2016: 1458). The Northern Chancellor (*shumishi* 樞密使) Xiao Ge 蕭革 (?-1063) argued that large ceremonies require proper ceremonial trappings, and therefore wide open locations like that of the Huang River plain - possibly close to Shangjing hinterlands - would be ideal. Liu Liufu disagreed, advocating for the relative accessibility of Zhongjing due to its central location, rather than due to its absolute cosmological significance (pace Lin, 2010: 118). While the emperor purportedly agreed with this suggestion, beyond this passage there is no evidence that this particular ceremony actually went on to take place at Zhongjing (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 322). While there is evidence that some ceremonies were conducted at Zhongjing (Yu, 2012: 39), later official ceremonies also occurred in wide, open, out of the way spaces like those suggested by Xiao Ge (Chen Shu, 2018: 3233 n.8). Therefore, this depiction of Zhongjing as 'pivot of four quarters' in comparison to the 'remote areas' around Shangjing seems to be based on a proposition that was attractive and persuasive to the newly enthroned emperor at that time. Thus, it was not a permanent switch to conducting state rituals in Zhongjing. Most significantly, it has been overlooked in analysis of the context of the passage that the matter of location was up for discussion in the first place. Evidently, there was not an unequivocal mandate to convene imperial ritual in Zhongjing nor in remote places; rather, it was at the emperor's discretion.

Another passage similarly appears to privilege Zhongjing as the centre for official business, wherein:

> 每歲正月上旬，車駕啟行。宰相以下，還於中京居守，行遣漢人一切公事。除拜官僚，止行堂帖權差，俟會議行在所取旨，出給誥敕。

> "During the first ten days of the first month of every year, when the emperor started out, the officials from the Grand Councillors down returned to Zhongjing where they remained on duty dispatching all matters concerning the Han people and appointing officials simply by orders for temporary commissions. They awaited receipt of orders after discussions in the emperor's temporary residence and then issued the imperial certificates of appointment.
>
> (Toqto'a, 2016: 426; modified from Wittfogel and Feng, 1946: 483-484, official titles from Hucker, 1985)

Yang Ruowei presents counterevidence to argue that the description above is not representative of Liao practice. In particular, she points out that there is no account of how official business was conducted prior to Zhongjing's construction in 1005, and so where would this have taken place in the tenth century? Yang contends that neither Shangjing nor Nanjing (the Southern capital) would be viable venues. Therefore, in her view this passage cannot be generalised as representative of the whole of the Liao. Indeed, it should be considered unreliable and likely is the result of the hasty compilation by Yuan compilers of the 1344 *History* (Yang Ruowei, 2022: 102-105). However, precisely because of the *History*'s hasty compilation, many passages in the 1344 *History* were unmarked verbatim transcriptions of other sources. Miao Runbo has argued that this passage was lifted from the no longer extant "Miscellaneous Accounts of North of the Mountains" (*Yinshan zalu* 陰山雜錄) that was submitted to the Song throne c. 1073 by Zhao Zhizhong 趙志忠 (Miao, 2020a: 126-133) . Zhao Zhizhong had lived under the Liao since he was young, had taken the civil service examination and served in the government as Secretariat Drafter (*zhongshu sheren* 中書舍人; see Hucker, 1985: 193-194) but escaped to the Song in 1041. This means that this passage specifically reflects the workings of the Liao court in the first decade of seventh emperor Zongzhen's reign. Wang's data show that prior to 1041 the moving court was indeed at Zhongjing in the first month of the year for several years of the previous emperor Longxu's reign (namely, in 1009, 1010, 1013, 1015, 1019, 1020, 1021, 1022, 1029); however, this practice was less frequent in Zongzhen's reign, who visited only once in 1032 (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 319-322). In the decades following Zhao Zhizhong's defection prior to when he submitted this account in 1073, these claims were even less representative as the Liao emperors Zongzhen and Hongji were only in Zhongjing for the first month of the year in 1042, 1047, 1056, and 1064. Much like the anecdote concerning the Investiture Ritual above, while the capitals were demonstrably integrated into the nadbud system of the moving court (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 337), within that system they were not imperative stopping points, but rather were optional venues for affairs of the state and ritual.

No scholarship has yet addressed the logistics of the court entering and leaving the capital. While it has been noted that Shangjing and Zhongjing housed palaces, shrines, and also open spaces for tents, information on the practicalities of hosting the court is largely absent from the record. We do know that with no permanent court officials based in the capitals (Lin, 2015: 261-2 n.1), in advance of its visit the court would dispatch one of the two Court Ceremonial Commissioners (*xuanhuishi* 宣徽使), who had the power to issue imperial edicts and dictate imperial rituals (Novey, 1983: 77). On arrival this Court Ceremonial Commissioner could spend months mobilising city officials and conscripting local labour to renovate palaces,

temples and shrines before the court arrived. This can be seen in the case of Han Chun 韓椿 , who was dispatched in 1036 to prepare Nanjing (Xiang, 1995: 203-210; Pursey, 2019: 97) for the first imperial visit to the city in nine years (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 321). While the situation of Nanjing, the Southern Capital, certainly differed from that of Shangjing and Zhongjing, this account reveals the mobilisation of resources required to host the court in an urban setting. An imperfect parallel can be seen centuries later in the experience of the Qing court when conducting imperial tours of the Jiangnan region between 1751 and 1784, for whom the arrival of the court in a city and region was a fraught process for both parties (Chang, 2007: 116-159). For the court, such visits entailed substantial security risks, while the receiving locales and residents bore significant pressure and financial burdens. A significant difference is that for the Qing court such tours involved a transition from the palace to the provinces, whereas the ever-mobile Liao court would have had to transition from the grasslands to an enclosed, densely populated urban setting.[1] Whatever risks and costs were involved in such a transition would have been factored into the decision of the court as to whether and when to enter the capitals.

One important royal amenity found within the walls of Zhongjing, but not in Shangjing, were the imperial shrines for veneration of the first emperor and the dynastic ancestors. This is one of many factors by which Tan argues that Zhongjing was the primary capital (1980: 49). However, such shrines were also found elsewhere. One of the reasons such shrines were absent within the walls of Shangjing is because a mere 23km west-south-west from Shangjing was the mausoleum of the first emperor, Abaoji, alongside a shrine to him and to the ancestors of the imperial house. These shrines were housed in the purpose-built mausoleum town of Zuzhou 祖州 (lit: Prefecture of the Ancestors), founded in 927 and populated by households moved in from the conquered Bohai territories (Toqto'a, 2016: 500-501) Indeed, Shangjing was situated in a wider landscape of imperial ancestral worship; the mausoleum town of Huaizhou 懷州 for the second and fourth emperors was built 42km west of Shangjing. The sixth emperor Longxu, the very emperor who had commissioned the construction of Zhongjing and its imperial shrines in 1005, also built a mausoleum town in the wider Shangjing region in the 1020s. This town, Qingzhou 慶州, 75km west-north-west of Shangjing, was built in a region that also served as the eleventh century court autumn hunting grounds. Therefore Qingzhou was by default integrated into the moving court's seasonal nadbud system. The mausoleum at Qingzhou went on to house the remains of seventh and eighth emperors. The presence of these venues of imperial ancestor worship in the vicinity of, but not in the city of, Shangjing enabled the court to evade entering Shangjing itself. This happened in numerous years when the court visited the Shanging region to hunt, and to pay respects to the deceased emperors, but are not recorded as entering the walls of Shangjing (Toqto'a, 2016: 290, 293, 304). The significance of the imperial shrines in Zhongjing is therefore less about Zhongjing's status as new primary capital, and more that the shrines allowed for ritual business to be conducted when the moving court was in the Zhongjing region. The presence of the shrines thus removed the need to travel all the way back to the Shangjing region. There is even evidence that there were portable shrines dedicated to the deceased emperors within the moving court (Yang Jun, 2015: 157). Therefore,

[1] I am indebted to my colleague Li Jingze, PhD student at Renmin University of China and visiting scholar at Waseda University, for this salient point.

the imperial shrines in Zhongjing were a symptom of imperial itinerance; they enabled the mobile court to sustain its mobility and flexibility, exercising agency regarding its destinations in any given year.

In fact, there are relatively straightforward reasons for the substantial material investment in shrines and palaces in eleventh century Zhongjing. The construction of Zhongjing came at the crest of two significant developments for the Liao. Internally, the construction of Zhongjing represented the completion of the century-long process of gaining central control over the Laoha 老哈 river basin from the Qay Princes 奚王 (Kang, 2007: 72-75; Han, 2006: 56-64). Externally, the Liao had agreed a peace treaty with the Song which stipulated the exchange of envoys several times a year. This exchange of envoys immediately initiated a period of cultural rivalry for symbolic legitimacy between the two empires (Lin, 2010: 113-119). Zhongjing was built at a hub point which embassies travelling to see the emperor in the moving court would have to pass through. Known itineraries show that it was the first and often only large city that envoys would approach beyond the Yan mountains (Fu, 1984: 26-28), which for Song envoys demarcated the limits of the civilised world (Tackett, 2017: 246-275). Zhongjing was therefore the key venue for the Liao to display and argue for the splendour of their northern-based empire.

This display of wealth and symbolic capital was carried out through several strategies. Many scholars have argued that the urban plan for Zhongjing creatively emulated elements of the former Tang capital Chang'an and the current Song capital Bianliang (Lin, 2010: 113-119; Wang Mingsun, 2017: 255-292). However, it should be noted that these arguments are predicated on the initial plan and not the subsequent modifications and renovations to its urban fabric over the ensuing century (Standen, 2019, 38-43). Discussions of either Zhongjing or Shangjing or both in comparison that are based on interpreting urban fabric suffer from this key limitation, beyond their founding and initial construction we do not have clear textual or archaeological-retrieved information that accounts for how the cities were lived in and used, and what buildings and structures came later.

Pagoda construction, on the other hand, is particularly demonstrative of explicit strategies of display. Unlike city plans which occupied a largely horizontal plane, pagodas towered vertically and could be seen from great distances in the landscape. In Dugdale's data-driven analysis of standing medieval pagodas across Eastern Eurasia, he notes that the Daming Pagoda 大明塔 in Liao Zhongjing is second in size only to the Song pagoda built at the Liao-Song border. Its vantage point allowed it be seen from far away by envoys as they approached Zhongjing, and its design embodied the archetypal features of distinctive Liao pagoda design (Dugdale, 2019: 275). Recent archaeology has revealed that Shangjing also had a significant large pagoda, though its base was smaller in diameter that that of Zhongjing's Daming Pagoda (Zhongguo Shekeyuan and Neimenggu Wenwu Kaogusuo, 2013); the pagoda was also the less common hexagonal shape (Dugdale, 2019: 196-197). It is unclear when this was built, and there are no records of new prestige constructions in Shangjing in the eleventh century, only the aforementioned construction of new imperial sites like Qingzhou in the wider Shangjing region. Possibly the strongest evidence for the importance of Zhongjing was the concentration of potent symbolic artefacts in the city, such as a legendary imperial seal putatively of the first

emperor of the Qin dynasty (221-207 BCE), which was enshrined by the sixth emperor Longxu in 1021 (Lin, 2010: 117). The city also held imperial key treasure and acted as a source of specialist labour (Yu, 2012: 39). This said, these were not necessarily a mark of Zhongjing's status as a primary capital, but were symptomatic rather of its role as the key location for showcasing the empire diplomatically.

Comparing Shangjing and Zhongjing, it is evident that the eleventh century court was more present in Zhongjing than Shangjing. However, the margin of difference between the time spent in the two cities was small, and the court nevertheless spent more time away from Zhongjing than in it. Zhongjing was not the "destination to which the court returned" (*pace* Yu 2012: 41). So while Zhongjing appears to have had a greater imperial presence, material investment, and visibility in the sources than Shangjing, it was not the 'primary capital' in the conventional sense of the primary-auxiliary capital model. The emperor and court did not rule the Liao from Zhongjing; they merely used it for an array of purposes, including ritual and display. The Liao court was ambivalent to the primacy of capitals as political centres. In the following section, I explore this ambivalence via another facet of Liao capitals that has frustrated scholars - the labelling of these capitals.

The Symbolism of Capitals in 'Conquest Dynasties'

Multiple capitals were not unique to the Liao, nor even to 'conquest dynasties'. However in other dynastic states or polities there has more or less only been one designated 'primary capital' at any one time, with other cities serving as 'auxiliary capitals'. There were purportedly five capitals in the Tang from 757 onwards (Liu Xu, 1975: 1402) and four in the Northern Song post 1072 (Li, 2007: 97). While these multiple capitals were typically officially designated via one of five cardinal directions (north, south, east, west, central), it is only in the conventionally labelled non-Chinese regimes of the Liao, Jin and Bohai that we see the use of the term Shangjing, i.e. an upper or supreme capital. The Yuan diverged from this tradition with the simultaneous installation of two capitals, the 'Upper Capital' Shangdu 上都, and the 'Great Capital' Dadu 大都 (a.k.a. Khan Baliq, City of the Khan). Nevertheless, the naming of these capitals still retains the use of 'upper' in the designation of 'Shangdu', and it was in this period that a significant proportion of the extant historical materials on the Liao and Jin were compiled. Prior to the Yuan, the divergence from use of a horizontal plane of the cardinal directions in favour of the vertical designation of 'upper' would seem to have indicated that the capital so labelled had an unparalleled status – that the 'Upper Capital was paramount among the five capitals of the Liao, or the six capitals of the Jin. But that was likely not the only meaning of the label 'upper'.

While there are parallels between the Liao and the Bohai, Jin and Yuan capitals these are superficial. The Bohai rulers were not mobile and scholars have argued that Bohai capitals appear to have followed a primary-auxiliary model (Song, 2009: 41-43). Unlike the Liao, the Jin did not practice imperial itinerance on a structural scale, only engaging in periodic seasonal imperial hunting expeditions as was not uncommon for other ostensibly more 'Chinese' regimes in the past (Chang, 2007: 34-71). In the hundred or so years of Jin rule the court was always based in a specific primary capital, - Shangjing in the far northeast from 1123 to1153 (named

Shangjing from 1138), Zhongdu under present day Beijing from 1153 to 1214, and Kaifeng from 1214 to 1233. The other concurrent capitals were auxiliary capitals. The Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty on the other hand did practice imperial itinerance and adopted a dual-capital system, with upper capital Shangdu as the spring-summer capital, and great capital Dadu, on the site of former Jin Zhongdu, as the autumn-winter capital (Chen and Shi, 2010). Given that the Liao did not adhere to the primary-auxiliary capital model, the five capitals of the Liao functioned in ways distinct from how the court and capitals worked in both of these other 'conquest dynasties'. This is particularly notable in the cases of Liao Shangjing and Zhongjing,

Significantly, even though the primary capital of the Jin dynasty moved from Shangjing to Zhongdu, Jin Shangjing retained its title of 'upper' or 'supreme' capital. Hence, this vertical orientation of 'upper' cannot be interpreted as an expression of superiority over the other capitals designated according to the horizontal plane. Part of the problem with identifying the symbolic status of Liao and Jin Shangjing is the overreliance on Chinese language materials, and therefore paradigms from Chinese history. But ‘shang’ means more than ‘upper’ or ‘supreme’, as it is sometimes translated (Wittfogel and Feng, 1946; Steinhardt, 1990: 123). In Classical Chinese it is the second and third person pronoun for the emperor. Hence, the title of 'Shangjing' retained the imperial trappings of the city’s former name, Huangdu, meaning 'imperial capital' (*huangdu* 皇都), which was in use from 918-937. However, Chinese was not the only or even primary official language of the Liao or Jin courts, and so we must also scrutinise the designation of the places in Kitan and Jurchen.

In the Kitan language, 'Shangjing' takes on a different meaning. By means of deduction based on their discovery of the Kitan words for the other capitals, Lu and Zhou (2000: 44-45) identified the word for 'Shangjing' as 叐化 九冃 in the small script, and 壬凸京 in the large script.[2] These have been phonetically reconstructed by Andrew Shimunek (personal communication, 2022) as *U(w)r*Giŋ. 'Giŋ' (九冃 or 京) is a direct loanword for the Chinese 'jing' or 'capital'. *U(w)r (叐化 or 壬凸) is a polysemous term seen in epitaphs in reference to ordinal generations of agnatic ancestors, and for the unit for divisions of distant branches the Fifth and Sixth 'Division' (*yuan* 院 or *U(w)r*ai 叐化丰; see Kim and Kim, 2019: 149-150). The Fifth and Sixth Divisions were distant branches of the imperial house of Yelü, descended from the founding emperor Abaoji's great grandfather and great great grandfather. *U(w)r as 'upper' then also had ancestral connotations.

[2] Kitan fonts used here were developed by Andrew West, available at https://www.babelstone.co.uk/Khitan/index.html.

Regime	Name	Period	Location	Significance of site
Bohai	Shangjing; Longquan fu 龍泉府	755-929	Bohai zhen 渤海鎮, Ning'an shi 寧安市, Heilongjiang	Unclear
Kitan Liao	Shangjing; Linhuang fu 臨潢府	938-1120	Lindong zhen 林東鎮, Barin left banner 巴林左旗, Chifeng shi 赤峰市, Inner Mongolia	"Western tower" Xilou - autumn hunting ground of imperial family, near ancestral mausoleum of first emperor (Toqto'a, 2016: 496-501)
Jurchen Jin	Shangjing; Huining fu 會寧府	1138-1157, 1173-1217	Acheng district 阿城區, Harbin shi 哈爾濱市, Heilongjiang	Base of first emperor Aguda at the start of the Jin in 1115 (Liu Pujiang, 2013)
Mongol Yuan	Shangdu; Kaiping 開平; Xanadu	1263-1368	Zhenglan Banner 正藍旗, Xilin Gol League 錫林郭勒盟, Inner Mongolia	Where Kublai khan was crowned, then became the summer capital (Chen and Shi, 2010: 154-155)

Table 2: Other 'Upper' Capitals in the Northeast

Kang (2007: 67) suggests that this name was used because as the first of the five capitals to be built Shangjing was the 'ancestor' of the other capitals. While we do not know whether Liao Shangjing went by an earlier name in Kitan, as all of the Kitan language materials employed date from the period of 1090-1120, it is likely the 'ancestor' here is more a reference to the ancestral landscape in which Shangjing was situated. In fact, the 'ancestors' that the nearby Zuzhou mausoleum town commemorated were the very ancestors of Abaoji designated as the fifth and sixth 'Divisions'.[3] The family of Abaoji traced its connection to that region and its membership of the Kitan coalition to that generation (Miao, 2020b). Therefore, the city was built not at the original centre of the first emperor's personal power, but in a landscape with a deeper history of Kitan occupancy, as both pastoral lands and as the traditional hunting ground (Chen Xiaowei, 2016), and tied to the arrival of Abaoji's family. Shangjing as ancestral capital

[3] The Kitan name for Zuzhou remains unidentified.

tied Abaoji's family into the Kitan heartlands and consolidated and legitimated the Liao imperial project among the Kitan. This vertical and ancestral designation of Shangjing/*U(w)r*Giŋ across two languages expresses not only the ties of the city to the emperorship as an institution, but writes the family history of the emperor's ancestors onto the landscape.

As far as we can tell this ancestral reading of Liao Shangjing does not apply to the other Shangjings of Bohai, the Jin and the Yuan. While the site of Bohai Shangjing has been identified (Song, 2009), the significance of the location is still unclear. As established earlier, the site of Jin Shangjing was where Aguda of the Anchuhu Wanyan Jurchens rose to power. The historical memory of the Jurchen imperial clan is clear that their ancestors arrived in the region from the Korean Peninsula (Miao, 2020b: 65). In the Jurchen script materials, Jin Shangjing appears either as a phonetic transcription of the Chinese word 'Shangjing' *ʃaŋ*Giŋ 吉劈 or as *Wəgi*Giŋ 喊几劈 with the Jurchen word for 'upper', 'high', 'royal' (Jin 1984: 209, 286).[4] Evidently in Jurchen, Jin Shangjing did not have ancestral connotations. Likewise, Yuan Shangdu was not founded on the ancestral homelands of Chingis Khan; in fact, nor was the first built capital of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum, which was situated in what had once been the centre of the Türkic world in the Orkhon Valley. And so by the time of the compilation of 1344 *History*, the ancestral meaning of the term 'shang' had been elided, due to the combined factors of the Jurchen and Mongol framings of their own respective 'upper' capitals, and the less direct connection between the Chinese 'shang' and the ancestral meaning of 'u(w)r'.

The meaning of Zhongjing is also contentious - not in terms of its semantics, but in terms of its implications. The misinterpretation of Shangjing as 'supreme' or 'upper' capital has meant that for those who support the argument that Zhongjing was the primary capital, there is something significant about the designation of Zhongjing as the 'central' capital. After all, in Chinese history and cosmology it is the 'centre' that occupies ideological primacy in the 'middle kingdom'/'central state' (*zhongguo* 中國). Although none of the capitals of previous 'Chinese' dynasties from the Zhou through to the Tang or the contemporaneous Song dynasty had the 'central' capital as their primary capital, some have read a narrative of Sinicization (*hanhua* 漢化) on the part of the Kitan rulers of the Liao into the proposed rise of Liao Zhongjing as the aforementioned so-called “pivot of four quarters” and “most exalted residence of emperors” (Kang, 2007: 78-80). Likewise, the official move of primary capital in the Jin from Shangjing to Zhongdu in 1153 has also been widely interpreted as a sinicising move, despite the existence of several other convincing reasons for the relocation (Schneider, 2011: 381-382). The argument is that the Liao Zhongjing's primacy represented a discursive privileging of the 'centre', symptomatic of an adoption of Chinese ideological frameworks of legitimacy. Granted, in the eleventh century, the Liao do refer to themselves in Chinese sources as 'Zhongguo' (Zhao, 2010), and further in Kitan materials as the "Great Central Liao Kitan State" (Kane, 2013). But, as Xue has demonstrated in great detail, actors in the Liao court expediently drew upon several overlapping symbolic and cosmological frameworks to legitimise their rule, and never exclusively privileged the ‘centre’ (Xue, 2020: 203-278). While 'centre' was used in the Liao,

[4] The freeware Jurchen font used here was developed by Jason Glavy. Thank you to Andrew Shimunek for bringing it to my attention.

the ideological pluralism of the Liao meant it did not carry the same discursive power as it did in the regimes of the 'Central Plains'.

The Liao not only referred to themselves in Chinese sources as the 'central state', but also in some contexts as the 'upper state' (*shangguo* 上國), the nuances of which have been debated. In some contexts, the term seems to refer to the Liao as a whole, while in others to the Kitan heartlands that encompassed the Liaoxi and Laoha river basins (Xiang *et al*., 2011: 13; for a discussion, see Xue, 2020: 261-275). The rhetoric of the 'upper state' appears to have been invoked primarily in diplomatic contexts, between the members of different states and predominantly in the tenth century (see Xiang et al., 2011: 166-168). This is significant because the usage of the term 'upper state' has been employed as indirect evidence that the primary capital of the Liao shifted from Zhongjing to Shangjing. Tan (1980: 45) argues that Song envoy Lu Zhen 路振 refers in 1008 to Shangjing as Shangguo and Zhongjing as Qidanguo 契丹國, i.e. 'Kitan state' (for original text, see Zhao, 2017: 18, 21). I do not find this convincing however because the two terms are not used in direct comparison with each other, and therefore may well carry difference valences. The envoy arrives from the Song to the south; the first place beyond the Yan mountain range he arrived at was Liao Zhongjing, which he believed was the start of the land of the Kitan. Although while Lu Zhen would have travelled through Liao territory for several weeks through the Southern Capital region and Yan mountains to reach Zhongjing, Song envoys frequently harboured irridentist feelings towards that territory, viewing them as what Tackett calls “Sinitic space” (Tackett, 2017: 246-275). Therefore, it was only at Zhongjing that he felt he had arrived in a foreign place, and at what he recognised as the 'Kitan state'. Evidently there are limits to the degree in which rhetorical uses of both 'upper' and 'centre' here can determine whether Zhongjing replaced Shangjing as the primary capital from 1005, or indeed if there was ever a primary-auxiliary capital framework in the first place.

In fact, outside official titles it is more common to find writers of Liao inscriptions referring to Shangjing and Zhongjing by the relevant historical regional toponyms. The name the region had held prior to 1005, Baixi 白霫, was frequently used to refer to Zhongjing, in reference to the 'White Qay' people that previous occupied the region (Li and Hu, 2004). Meanwhile, Shangjing was often called Xilou 西樓, ‘the Western Tower’ (Chen Xiaowei, 2016). For example, a 1091 inscription eulogising a Buddhist master lists the key regions in the Liao where mourning took place, among them Baixi and Xilou (Xiang, 1995: 437-440). In one inscription Zhongjing is even referred to as Xidu 霫都, i.e. capital of the Qay people, revealing that the prestigious 'centre' designation could be dispensed with in favour of invoking its deeper heritage (Xiang et al., 2010: 250). So too could the 'upper' or 'ancestral' trappings of Shangjing be dropped in favour of referring to the rivers of the region, as in Xiao Ge's description of Huangshui 潢水, 'Waters of the Huang', also seen in a self-description of author of the tomb stele of another monk based in Shangjing (Xiang, 1995: 667-669). Operating under multiple concurrent rhetorical frameworks of legitimacy, places in the Liao went by several names: some were official administrative divisions or addresses, others were more culturally loaded and or even poetic. Evidently, the use of the names of these capitals alone to judge their relative status and, by extension, what kind of places they were, suffers from a lack of sensitivity towards the context in which the capitals are invoked. Indeed, if anything, such local

names for the cities and their surrounding regions bolsters Kang's characterisation of the capitals as centres of regional governance (Kang, 2007). Our confusion regarding the designation of these places as 'upper' and 'central', and indeed 'capitals' reveals the limits of our current frameworks and models.

Conclusion

Unlike other dynasties, and in particular the problematic grouping of 'conquest dynasties' among which the Liao is often counted, the Liao did not have a primary-auxiliary model for their capitals. Shangjing was never the primary capital in the first place (*pace* Wittfogel and Feng, 1946), and consequently, it is not possible that Zhongjing could have replaced it as primary capital in the eleventh century (*pace* Tan, 1980; Yu 2012). In the absence of a primary-auxiliary model, the perceived differences in the court's relationship to Shangjing and Zhongjing and the court's apparent favouring of Zhongjing demonstrate that each capital served a different function for the state and for the court. This can be seen by the fate of the two capitals after the fall of the Liao. Damaged in the Jin conquest of the Liao, both cities were marginalised throughout the subsequent century of Jin rule, after which they were further destroyed and abandoned after the 1214 Mongol invasions (Wang Shulan, 2010). Evidently, without the political will to sustain these capitals - built as they were to fit the needs of the Liao moving court - a combination of shifting geopolitical priorities, the retrospective delegitimization of the Liao imperial legacy, and ecological decline rendered these cities and their regions more peripheral to the geopolitics of later periods.

Undoubtedly, Shangjing and Zhongjing were part of the nadbud system (Wang Mingsun, 2017: 337), but they were certainly not the centre or locus of that system (*pace* Yu 2012: 41). The Liao emperors 'courted' their capitals, in multiple senses of the word. Rather than the court being fixed in one capital, they brought their court to certain capitals at certain times. They also 'courted' these capitals in the sense that the court had several options of capitals to visit and carry out official business in, and indeed whether to use a capital as a venue for ritual, residence, and affairs of the state at all. The idea of the capitals was not a model they imported and adapted wholesale from the Tang empire, it was something they experimented with and adopted for their own purposes of statecraft. Their attitude to urban spaces was ambivalent and they exercised agency as part of the practice of politically informed 'imperial itinerance'. Rather than approaching what we see in the Liao dynasty with a presumed normative framework primarily based on Chinese history, we can consider the ways in which the idiosyncrasies of the Liao political system challenge our assumptions about capital cities and empires in premodern East Eurasia.

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