

# Brief Analysis on Hunting Procedures and Culture of Liao Dynasty Through *Zhuoxie Figures*

Bo Wang, Renjiang Zhang

Department of Economic and Management, Nankai University Binhai College, Tianjin, China

## Email address:

86wangbo@sina.com (Bo Wang), rjzhang2010@163.com (Renjiang Zhang)

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**Abstract:** The object of this paper is *Zhuoxie Figures*, a painting scroll handed down by Hu Gui, a painter from the Khitan period. Hu Gui, the most representative man of "Northern Grassland Painting School". He had a lot of painting works, at present, *Zhuoxie Figures* must be the largest, the most representative and most abundant one in content. This picture can be roughly divided into three parts. It depicts the hunting life of the Khitan nobles. "Zhuoxie" means to set up a tent and take a rests. Based on historical documents, this paper explores the hunting procedure and culture of Qidan (also known as Khitan, an ancient nationality in China) in Liao Dynasty. In this paper, by means of analyzing the picture scroll content and historical data, the basic procedures of hunting in Liao Dynasty have been sorted out and summarized. In this way, further analysis of the role of hunting in Liao Dynasty has been carried out. Also, the influence of hunting culture in Liao Dynasty on the customs of northern ethnic groups in later ages has also been preliminarily investigated. The results have shown a duality of culture in Liao Dynasty: It has characteristics of incorporating ethnic cultures and other advanced cultures of diverse nature that were absorbed and accepted.

**Keywords:** *Zhuoxie Figures*, Liao Dynasty, Hunting Culture

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## 1. Introduction

The Khitan people were nomadic and hunting people on the northern steppe in ancient China. They were not seen in historical arena officially until the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420). Khitan people established Liao during the Five Dynasties. After the fall of Liao, Khitan people gradually merged with other ethnic groups. The Khitan ethnicity witnessed the most prosperous time in about 200 years when they established the Great Liao, when animal husbandry and agriculture were the most basic social economy of Liao as a great country. In the nearly one thousand years of the activities of the Khitan people, hunting has been throughout the ups and downs of the nation. It was also one of its important economic sources [1]. The Khitan people were mainly nomadic and supplemented by hunting on the steppe [2]. There are plenty of records of hunting in historical materials. Hunting scenes of Khitan nobles were also common in paintings of the Liao Dynasty. In this paper, Hu Gui, the most representative of the Qitan painters, and *Zhuoxie Figures*, the most famous painting scroll in his

paintings, has been selected to perform a comprehensive study on the hunting culture of Liao Dynasty based upon mutual verification and complemented of paintings and historical materials.

## 2. Hu Gui and *Zhuoxie Figures*

Hu Gui lived in the period of late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties. There are a plenty of records in ancient books about Khitan Hu Gui. Among them, the *Addendum to Famous Paintings of the Five Dynasties* was the earliest and particular one. Also, this work has the most detailed account of Hu Gui. He is recorded in the book as a "Khitan behind the Mountain", which is to the north of the Yinshan Mountains. But, in the *Knowledge Pictured with Paintings* and *Xuanhe Picture Copybook* claimed that Hu was from Fanyang (a place near to or in Beijing of today). Maybe Hu Gui used to live in Fanyang [3]. Hu Gui was a Khitan painter who specialized in depicting the life of ethnic groups in the northern grassland. He was the most representative man of "Northern Grassland Painting School". He was adept at

depicting the scenes of northern ethnic groups galloping horses, nomadic hunting and the magnificent scene of the North. *The Addendum to Famous Paintings of the Five Dynasties* lists his works as "superb work (of art or literature)" and regards him as "being able to make everything alive of the barren beyond the Great Wall" and "skill of the gods, unique among his contemporaries" [4]. Hu Gui had a lot of painting works, most of them are scenes of nomadic hunting, herding horses and shooting. But, sadly, most of his painting scrolls have been lost. At present, Hu Gui's works are *Hui Hunt Figure*, *Zhuoxie Figure*, etc. Among them, *Zhuoxie Figures* must be the largest, the most representative and most abundant one in content [5].

*Zhuoxie Figures* is now in the Palace Museum in Beijing, China. It is picture scroll filled in colors on a sketch with silk scroll, 33 cm long and 256 cm wide. *Zhuoxie Figures* depicts the hunting life of the Khitan nobles. "Zhuoxie" means to set up a tent and take a rest [6]. The picture scroll can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part is a break in the hunt, pandemonium with hunters and horses. This picture shows 16 Khitans and 27 horses. The horses are unsaddled, some are still carrying loads on their backs and their prey as well. In contrast, the characters are at different levels, some are adjusting the saddles, some are talking to each other, some are sitting down to rest, various postures. The characters and horses in the picture are interlaced and interrelated. Every detail gets tight. It's lively and natural. This part is the highlight of the whole scroll, occupying half of the whole painting.



Figure 1. The first part of *Zhuoxie Figures*.

The second part is a continuation of the first paragraph. There were only five horses and five Khitan knights. They seemed to have just dismounted and were chatting in a circle with their horses. In the midst of the noisy picture, it seemed very quiet here, and the grassland was very vast. This subparagraph is more like a transition. To be specific, it is an intermission between one tumultuous scene and another.



Figure 2. The second part of *Zhuoxie Figures*.

The third part is the banquet scene of Khitan noble dance music. There is a Khitan noblewoman, with two people sitting on the ground, the man drink wine, the woman is laughing and watching the song and dance performance; four fellow men with bows and leopard-skin quivers stood beside them. The high-fives in the band also wore quivers. The footmen kneel in front of the banquet. The maid is pouring the wine in a jug. There are men in front of the dance, two people playing the whole, three people clapping accompaniment. In the painting, there are five maids wearing cone-shaped scarves on their heads, tied with ribbons of brocade, and their tails oblique in the shape of dovetails. The left front robe is narrow at the waist, reaching to the feet, which is generally not wide. In contrast, the head scarf is slightly pointed, presenting a tip-top shape. Behind the crowd of horses, a few light strokes of distant mountains, quiet grassland, rolling hills, concise and vigorous imitation, bring people to the vast grassland [7].



Figure 3. The third part of *Zhuoxie Figures*.

*Zhuoxie Figures* is not only a description of the hunting life of the Khitan nobles, it reflects the political life and recreational activities of Liao Dynasty from the side. It is like an encyclopedia that describes a vivid and lifelike picture scroll of Khitan life.

### 3. Viewing Hunting Procedures of Liao Dynasty from *Zhuoxie Figures*

In terms of the Khitan's hunting in the Liao Dynasty, no matter the royal nobles or common people, there were certain procedures when hunting. To be specific, it includes preparation for the hunt, the hunting process, and the celebration after the hunt. This is the customs formed in the course of long history of hunting.

#### 3.1. Preparation Before Hunting

In the third part of *Zhuoxie Figure*, there is a picture showing a Khitan noble couple resting and drinking together on the way of hunting, which manifested the recording of *History of Liao*, saying the noble of Liao regarded the

pommel horse as his home, and concubines of the noble were good at riding and archery, and they would always go hunting with the emperor. It was also commonly seen for the lady of the family to go hunting with her. There was no different from the Royal Family and the common people in this setting. Also, there were some material preparations before hunting, such as hunting tools and servants such as falcons and hounds, and daily necessities such as tents, blankets and felt mats [8]. *Zhuoxie Figure* also illustrates hunting tools like falcons and hounds. This explains that the northern steppe peoples need to take their utensils with them as they migrated from place to place, living in search of water and grass. Besides, before hunting, they would engage in some prayer ceremonies, which are also reflected in some tomb murals about and of Liao Dynasty.

### 3.2. In the Hunting

In a general way, here are two methods of hunting, depending on the number of people involved. When there were few people hunting, they would go on a hunting trip (safari), shooting freely on the prairie. When there were a lot of people, they would choose hunt units. The hunt units were carried out in an organized manner. In the early stage of the development of northern grassland peoples, hunting activities were closely related to the survival of tribes. Hunting, at this time, would have been hunt units, with all hands on deck, pulling out all stops. Only in this way could they hunt more prey [9]. After the founding of the Liao by Khitan, hunting tended to be organized by the government. For instance, according to *History of Liao*, in the emperor's spring hunting, the division of labor was clear, their duties were clear. It was a typical form of hunting. Although no clear form of hunting is depicted in *Zhuoxie Figure*, given such a large number of people were travelling, the form of hunting must be hunt units.

### 3.3. Celebration After Hunt

In the Liao Dynasty tomb murals and handed down paintings, the celebration after the hunt was a frequently seen theme. In *Zhuoxie Figures*, we can see these celebrations directly. As depicted, the Khitan nobles take their retinue on a hunting trip. During the break, the nobles and their wives sit on a felt mat. Beside them are the attendants, the attendants have clearly defined responsibilities, some pouring wine, some playing music, and some dancing. In the painting, we can see that preys and white swans are hang beside. The falcons and the hounds are resting, the riders resting and chatting. The whole picture shows a scene of post-hunt singing and drinking. Feasting after the hunting strike must be the custom of the Khitan. In the *History of Liao Dynasty*, it is frequently recorded that the emperors and empresses of Liao Dynasty held big feasts to celebrate after each hunt. After an intense day of hunting, the men gathered together for drinking and revelry, which reflects the bold and unrestrained character of people from a horse-back nation.

## 4. The Social Culture Reflected on the Hunting Activities of Liao Dynasty

### 4.1. Political Institution Reflected by Hunting

In the first part of the *Zhuoxie Figure*, the Khitan take a break from hunting, some dismount and rest, but the saddle was not taken off, and there were prey on the horses, including white swans. This must be the scene of hunting in the spring of Liao Dynasty.

According to the *History of Liao · Yingwei Recording*: "The nation of Liao had vast deserts, and the Great Wall keeps them outside the great reach lands. So, they must adjust measures and rule according to local conditions. They expel coldness in fall and winter, avoid heat in spring and summer; they fish where there is water. They have made it a rule. They rule and regulate according to four seasons. This rule had a specified term at that time -- 'Na Bo'" [10]. In other words, the court of Liao Dynasty moved with the seasons and carried on animal husbandry and hunting in four seasons [11]. During which time, they would handle affairs and meet ministers according to different seasons. This is the "running a country according to four seasons" institution. "Running a country according to four seasons" must be the most representative and distinctive political institution of the Liao Dynasty. According to the recording of *History of Liao*, every spring, from January to April, every spring, from January to April, the emperor of Liao Dynasty held the place of Duck River. The main activities were fishing, catching swans and wild geese. The place was Duck River Shuo, everything took place in that beautiful land. The main activities were fishing, catching swans and wild geese. In summer, they tended to station in cool places, during which time he would summoned ministers from the south and north to discuss state affairs. In his leisure time, hunting was his main activity. Also, he had different places to camp and different people to hunt during fall and winter. This kind of special system has given birth to the most characteristic official system in Liao Dynasty, which is Northern and Southern officialdom, also known as that vassal state and Han were ruled and regulated respectively [12]. The emperors of Liao Dynasty took the court with them, ruled the country and handled government affairs anywhere they moved. Hunting played a key role in this system, because it can ensure the stability of the political situation and maintain the customs of the Khitan nation.

### 4.2. Literatures and Fine Arts Reflected in Hunting

Hunting presented a deep social foundation in the Liao Dynasty. It can be proven that it was widely reflected in the fine arts, songs and dances and literary works of the Liao Dynasty.

In the history of Chinese art, tomb murals and paintings of Liao Dynasty show a very special status, often called the "Northern Grassland Painting School". Hunting images in frescoes tombs of the Liao Dynasty are frequently found in tombs of Khitan nobles. We are also lucky to see *Tiger Hunting Pictures*, *Riding and Hunting Pictures*, *Hunting*

*Units Pictures* and so on. Most of these murals were made by folk painters. They have different levels. However, it can be seen that the painter has a rich experience of hunting life. The painting works handed down from Liao Dynasty showed high artistic achievements. The brushwork was similar to that of Tang and Song dynasties, and with the bold and unrestrained style of the nation of Liao. The well-known paintings included in the record include: *Shooting Horse Picture* created by Yelv Bei, *Zhuoxie Figure*, *Herding Horse Picture*, *Seven Horse Pingyuan Shooting Picture* of Hu Gui, etc [3]. At that time, most of these paintings were collected and praised by the Song Dynasty and recorded in the annals of history.

Besides, the dance art of Liao Dynasty also has the characteristics of northern grassland ethnic groups. Dancing was appearing and existing everywhere in the hunting life of the Khitan nobility. The third part of *Zhuoxie Figures* depicts a fine banquet, with splendid dance and music scenes of the Khitan nobility. In this part, two noble couples are sitting on the ground, with a man dancing alone in front, two fellows playing the harp right beside him, and three clapping the accompaniment. This kind of performance is free, nimble, and flexible, regardless of venue [13]. The traditional Khitan folk dances include Mangh Style Dance, Arrow Dance and so on. The man in the painting is doing the Mangh Style Dance, a typical hunting style dance. In addition to *Zhuoxie Figures*, Khitan dances on the banquets on the way of hunting are also commonly seen in other paintings handed down from the Liao Dynasty and frescoes or mural of Liao people. Dance is intangible culture and art, which is difficult to intuitively preserve. Later generations will not know any dance forms in detail. However, we can obviously feel the artistic charm from the narrative of historical materials and paintings, in contrast.

In addition, there were plenty of literary works about hunting in the Liao Dynasty, most of which were articles and poems, but most of them were lost due to years of chaos caused by wars. Hence, at present, most of the articles about hunting can be referred to in the *History of Liao*. Although the *History of Liao* is merely a profile description, it can still be seen that a considerable number of literary works with hunting as the theme of Liao Dynasty [14]. This indeed made this work one of the literary themes at that time.

## 5. Conclusion

Hunting activities are of paramount importance to the Khitan people. Before establishing a state, Khitan people's livelihood sources mainly relied on nomadic and hunting. Hunting was one of the important sources of livelihood when the agriculture of Khitan was not developed and the animal husbandry was not mature. The meat was edible, and the fur could be made into clothing to defend against the cold. Even after the founding of the Liao, agriculture and animal husbandry matured and became the main source of livelihood, hunting was also one of the means to supplement military supplies and livelihood. Only in the late middle Liao Dynasty,

hunting became an important form of training soldiers and horses. In the wars between the Liao Dynasty and the Northern Song Dynasty, the Liao was always in the ascendant. They had been advantaged mostly because of excellent equestrian and archery skills. This is closely associated with the horse-riding and archery techniques they practiced in hunting and the combat tactics they understood. Only by this time, the Liao Dynasty had a stable political situation, and agriculture and animal husbandry were highly developed. In this case, hunting was no longer needed to supplement subsistence, so, hunting became the game of the royal aristocracy later. In fact, the four-season system of the Liao Dynasty is the portrayal of the four seasons of the Liao emperor hunting. Some of the emperors even spent their days hunting without attending to political affairs, hunting had less and less positive significance in the middle and late Liao Dynasty, but became a fuse to intensify social conflicts. As a result, it accelerated the subjugation of the Liao Dynasty.

The Liao paintings represented by Hu Gui's *Zhuoxie Figure* epitomized the life of the Khitan people in Liao Dynasty. In other words, they are the true portrayal of the hunting life of the Khitan nobility. We can see a lot of hunting themes in the tomb murals and handed down paintings of the Liao Dynasty. In addition, hunting culture has penetrated into all periods, classes and fields of the Liao Dynasty. Moreover, hunting culture has evolved as the whole country has developed. It can be seen that the Khitan people are a pioneering and enterprising people. They have been cooperating on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. Khitan people keep continuing to absorb foreign excellent culture. Also, they have preserved the cultural habits of the whole nation, thus bringing it all together. In this case, a hunting culture of the Khitan style has been created.

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