

Inventing Surnames

A case study of Tabgach identity construction*

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ABSTRACT

The Tabgach, as a non-Chinese tribe, ruled North China from the end of 4th century to the middle of 6th century. Through a series of social reforms, Emperor Xiaowen depicted himself as a typical Chinese emperor rather than as a kaghan over the steppe people. One of the reforms he undertook was a reform of Tabgach surnames. The Tabgach people used Chinese characters to transcribe their proper names. As Chinese characters are single-syllabic, sometimes they had to use several Chinese characters to transcribe a single Tabgach proper name. The multi-character Tabgach surnames sounded exotic to the Chinese people. In order to be accepted by Chinese society, they changed these sophisticated multi-character surnames into simple and traditional Chinese surnames. This paper is going to discuss the methods used by the reform committee in inventing Tabgach surnames.

KEYWORDS

Tabgach; reforms; Sinicization; surnames; Turkic; Mongolic

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INTRODUCTION

The Tabgach (Tuoba 拓跋) people, who were one of the core ethnic groups within the Xianbei 鮮卑 confederation in the early Middle Ages, emerged victorious out of the political disorders in North China in the fourth century and successfully established the Northern Wei dynasty 北魏 (386–534 AD). Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 471–499) intended to portray himself as a typical Chinese emperor rather than a kaghan over the steppe peoples.¹ In order to be recognized as legitimate by the Han Chinese people, he launched a social reform that had far-reaching consequences. He not only moved the capital city from Pingcheng 平城 (today's Datong 大同 in Shanxi Province) to Luoyang 洛陽 (today in Henan Province), which had been the political center for many Chinese dynasties, but also abandoned the traditional Tabgach costumes, language and lifestyle. Through the reform, he wanted to construct a totally new identity for his subjects. Not surprisingly, his reform met strong resistance from the conservative Tabgach tribes or clans, who would rather have maintained their traditional lifestyle.

As an inherent part of this social reform, Emperor Xiaowen issued a decree to officially introduce surnames for the Tabgach people in the territory of Northern Wei in the nineteenth year of Taihe 太和 (495 AD). By imitating the hierarchical mechanism of Chinese society, Emperor Xiaowen intended to institutionalize the way in which the Tabgach people within his regime negotiated their political interests. He appointed Mu Liang 穆亮, Yuan Yan 元儼, Yuan Jia 元嘉 and Lu Xiu 陸琇 to form a committee, and asked them to 'carefully determine the surnames for the northerners (i.e. the Tabgach people); and it must be fair'.² What Emperor Xiaowen meant by 'fair' (*pingjun* 平均) was not only that they should allocate political resources equally, but also that they should offer each Tabgach tribe or clan a new Chinese style surname, which was thought to be a crucial element in their identity construction.

Altaic languages, whether Mongolic or Turkic, are completely different from the Chinese language in word formation. Usually several Chinese characters were used to transcribe a single Altaic proper name. In the eyes of the Chinese literati, these multi-character Chinese transcriptions of Altaic proper names looked very non-native and exotic. Emperor Xiaowen wanted to use his administrative power to enforce this social reform, so that every Tabgach tribe or clan would have a new identity. In chapter 113 of the *Weishu* 魏書, which is the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty, there is a list of more than one hundred Tabgach proper names in Chinese transcription and their corresponding Chinese surnames. This paper is going to answer the question: how did the reform committee decide on the new surnames?

RESEARCH HISTORY

Research on the Tabgach people has been concentrated on the question of their linguistic affinity. Was their language Mongolic or Turkic? Scholars such as P. Pelliot and K. Shiratori were pioneers in this field. P. Pelliot suggested that the language of the Xianbei seems to have been a Turkic

¹ In the Gaxian Cave 嘎仙洞 inscription we can read *kehan* 可寒, which is a transcription of *kaghan*. However, the authenticity, or more exactly the dating of this inscription is still under discussion.

² *Weishu* 113: 3015: (令司空公穆亮、領軍將軍元儼、中護軍廣陽王嘉、尚書陸琇等)詳定北人姓，務令平均。



language.³ However, in another place, he admitted that the language of the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾, who were also a tribe of the Xianbei, was Mongolic.⁴ K. Shiratori introduced the term of ‘Donghu’ 東胡 to describe ethnic groups including the Xianbei in the northeast of China. However, a serious mistake made by him is that he used the modern pronunciations of the Chinese transcriptions to try and trace back the Altaic origins of these names.⁵

P. Boodberg collected thirty-two examples of Chinese transcriptions preserved in Chinese historical works and reconstructed their possible original Altaic forms. The conclusion he came to was that the language of the Tabgach people was basically Turkic, but with some Mongolic elements.⁶ L. Bazin made use of the transcriptions of Tabgach proper names and their corresponding Chinese surnames that had been collected by W. Eberhard in his *Das Toba-Reich Nordchinas*. He divided the material into three groups. He tried to trace back the possible Altaic origins of the Chinese transcriptions, basing his work on the medieval Chinese pronunciation system reconstructed by B. Karlgren. He concluded that the language of the Tabgach before the social reform was a Pre-Turkic one, with some Mongolic loanwords.⁷ L. Ligeti repudiated the conclusion of the earlier scholars and proposed that the language of the Tabgach people was Mongolic. However, he did not deny the fact that there were some non-Mongolic elements in the Tabgach language.⁸ Since L. Ligeti, the Mongolic theory has been widely accepted by academics. Recent studies tend to use the term ‘Para-Mongolic’ to describe the Tabgach language.⁹

Chen Sanping in one of his recent articles argued that the core Tabgach clans were more likely to have spoken a Turkic language.¹⁰ However, as we will show later, his argument is not convincing. A. Vovin added two more Tabgach words with Mongolic origins to Ligeti’s list, and therefore, provides additional evidence for the Mongolic affiliation of the Tabgach language.¹¹ The newest study that touches on the Tabgach linguistic affinity was done by A. Shimunek. He made a thorough revision of the available examples of Chinese transcriptions with possible Altaic origins.¹² In the field of onomastics, László Rásonyi and Imre Baski’s extensive *Onomasticon Turcicum* provides ample material for exploring the meanings of Tabgach tribal names.¹³ However, considering that this paper deals mainly with the connection between the old and new Tabgach ‘surnames’, we will not cite all of the hypothetical Altaic origins of the Chinese transcriptions proposed by earlier scholars.

Before we start our analysis, we need to make a note on the formation, structure, and circulation of the *Weishu*. Concerning the *Weishu*, James R. Ware extensively researched the materials that were available for the writing of this history, and how the work was received by the author’s contemporaries, as well as by later generations.¹⁴ As for the list of 119 Chinese transcriptions of Altaic proper names and their corresponding Chinese style surnames preserved in this work, we

³ Pelliot 1925.

⁴ Pelliot 1920–1921: 329.

⁵ Shiratori 1912; Shiratori 1934.

⁶ Boodberg 1936: 167 ff.

⁷ Bazin 1949–1950: 228–329.

⁸ Ligeti 1970: 308.

⁹ Janhunen 2003: 391–402.

¹⁰ Chen Sanping 2005: 161–174.

¹¹ Vovin 2007: 192.

¹² Shimunek 2017. On a sharp review of this work, see Róna-Tas 2019.

¹³ Rásonyi and Baski 2007.

¹⁴ Ware 1932: 35 ff.



have to note that they cannot give us the whole picture of surname reform in Tabgach society. On the one hand, Wei Shou 魏收 (507–572), the author of the *Weishu*, only included those Altaic transcriptions that he could collect, as at the time of compilation of his history, sixty years had already passed since the Tabgach social reform. On the other hand, some of the names had many parallel transcriptions in Chinese, and the transcriptions adopted by the author of *Weishu* may or may not have been the most popular ones. The other variant transcriptions were either preserved in other historical works and private genealogies or have been lost.

Nevertheless, the existing 119 examples are still a very valuable source for us to observe the nuances of surname reform in Tabgach society. We know that Wei Shou moved to the *shige* 史閣 (‘Imperial History Writing House’) to start the compilation of the *Weishu* in the fourth year of Tianbao 天保 (553 AD), and finished the *ji* 紀 (‘basic annales’) and *zhuan* 傳 (‘biographies’) parts in the 3rd month of the following year. Eight months later, he submitted the remaining ten chapters of the *zhi* 志 (‘treatises’) part to the court. The reason he was able to compile the *Weishu* in such a short time is that he had access not only to the rich imperial archives, but also to the abundant historical works on the Wei dynasty by earlier authors.¹⁵ Therefore, we have reason to believe that the list preserved in the *Weishu*, to some extent, reflects the will of the reform committee in 495 AD.

TYPE A

It is not difficult to see that the most common method used by the reform committee to select a new Chinese surname for a particular Tabgach tribe was to take one character from the Chinese transcription of their name, a character that represented a traditional Chinese surname, and designate it as their new surname. This method of changing surnames not only met the needs of the social reform, but also allowed the Tabgach cultural memories embedded in their proper names to continue. As there are a number of Chinese characters that are often used to transcribe foreign proper names, which means that some characters appear more frequently in the Chinese transcriptions than others, the reform committee had some trouble choosing a unique surname for each Tabgach tribe or clan. Meanwhile, it also often happened that within one transcription there was more than one Chinese character that represented a traditional Chinese surname. Then, there would be the question of selection (see below for examples).

After careful observation of the name list preserved in the *Weishu*, we can see that the reform committee must have put a lot of effort into achieving the goal of the social reform, because it turns out that nearly all of the new Tabgach surnames were unique. Obviously, they tried their best to avoid duplicates. For example, since Daxi 達奚 had been changed to Xi 奚, Boxi 薄奚 was changed to Bo 薄, because the second character *xi* 奚 had already been used. And since Helai 賀賴 had become He 賀, which meant that the character *he* had already been used, other transcriptions that include the character *he* such as Helou 賀樓, Hege 賀葛 and Heer 賀兒 no longer used the character *he*, but were changed instead to Lou 樓, Ge 葛 and Er 兒 respectively. This way of changing names looks simple, but it was not easy at all. The reform committee had to be very thoughtful and cautious. However, there were also exceptions. For example, both Adan 阿單

¹⁵ The authors whose works had been made use by Wei Shou include Deng Yuan 鄧淵, Cui Hao 崔浩, Li Biao 李彪, Xing Luan 刑巒, Cui Hong 崔鴻, Yuan Huiye 元暉業, etc. See *Bei Qishu* 北齊書 37: 487–488.



and Kedan 渴單 were changed to Dan 單, and both Helai 賀賴 and Helan 賀蘭 became He 賀. Nonetheless, these are the only two exceptions in the whole name list in the *Weishu*. We call this approach to producing new Tabgach surnames Type A1, and there are 72 such cases in the list of *Weishu* surnames.

Chen Sanping made an analysis of the 72 cases we labeled Type A1 (for more information, see the Appendix). He divided the 72 cases into two groups, namely the ‘core clans’ and the ‘four-corner clans’.¹⁶ According to the original position (in the Chinese transcription) of the character that was selected as the new surname, he classified them as three types: ‘First’, ‘Medial’ and ‘Final’. Because the ‘the medial character is of no interest to this study’, he ‘restrict[ed] the analysis to a subset of cases for which the name transformation [was] based on either the first or final character’. He argued that the original position of the character (in the Chinese transcription) reflected the accentuation of the original Altaic proper names. He further assumed that the Turkic language in the time of the Tabgach people placed the accent on ultimate syllables, while the accent of Mongolic words was on the first syllable. According to his statistics, as far as the Tabgach core clans are concerned, 62.1% of their new surnames were of first-character derivation and 37.9% were of final-character derivation. On the other hand, 36.0% of ‘four-corner’ clans’ surnames were of final-character derivation and 64.0% were of first-character derivation. He concluded from this that the core Tabgach clans were more likely to have spoken a Turkic (or an oxytonic) language, while the ‘four-corner’ tribes might have included more proto-Mongolian constituents.¹⁷

However, the position of the character (that was chosen as the new surname) in the Chinese transcription did not reflect any accentuations of the original Altaic proper names at all. The reform committee had many rules they observed in their implementation, such as producing traditional Chinese style surnames and avoiding duplicates, but these did not include considering the accents of the original Altaic names. A. Vovin also pointed out that Chen Sanping’s argument can in no way be regarded as well-grounded, because: a) languages can undergo changes in their stress patterns, b) although most if not all modern Turkic languages indeed show the strong preference for the oxytonic pattern, the existence of the oxytonic pattern in Old Turkic, let alone Proto-Turkic, is more questionable.¹⁸

Where the transcriptions contained characters that represented traditional Chinese surnames, these were usually directly selected as the new Tabgach surnames, an approach which we have called Type A1. However, many Chinese transcriptions of Altaic proper names did not contain such characters or, even if they did, the characters had already been used for other names. In such a situation, the reform committee usually picked a common Chinese surname that was a homo-

¹⁶ In the *Weishu*, Wei Shou divided the Tabgach clans and tribes into three groups: a) *shixing* (凡與帝室為) 十姓, the ten royal clans (including the imperial family), b) *neiru zhuxing* 內入諸姓, tribes that had been included in the Tabgach regime since the time of the legendary Emperor Shenyuan 神元皇帝 (Tuoba Liwei 拓跋力微, 174–277), c) *sifang zhuxing* 四方諸姓, tribes that had become registered residents since Emperor Taizu 太祖 (Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪, r. 386–409). It is true that the difference between *neiru zhuxing* (together with the ten royal clans, Chen Sanping called them ‘core clans’ in his article) and *sifang zhuxing* (‘four-corner clans’ in Chen Sanping’s words) is a reflection of the early Tabgach historical process. However, as we have shown in this paper, in producing new surnames, the reform committee treated the name list as a whole.

¹⁷ Chen 2005: 161–174.

¹⁸ A. Vovin (2007: 192) has offered two more contra-arguments in his paper: c) reductions taken per se cannot prove or disprove a language relationship which has to be demonstrated by conventional means based on the comparative method, d) such a demonstration has to be based on the philologically attested materials. Neither (c) or (d) is done in Chen 2005.



phone of one of the characters in the Chinese transcription. We will take the transcription of Buliugu 步六孤 as an example. The committee changed it to the very common Chinese surname Lu 陸, because the pronunciation of Lu 陸 and Liu 六 at that time was the same, EMC /luwk/.¹⁹ There are many other such examples, thus 輾遲 Zhan (EMC /trianʔ/)chi was changed to 展 Zhan (EMC /trianʔ/), 烏丸 Wuwan (EMC /ɣwan/) was changed to 桓 Huan (EMC /ɣwan/), 紇豆陵 Hedou (EMC /dəwʰ/)ling was changed to 竇 Dou (EMC /dəwʰ/), and 紇奚 Hexi (EMC /ɣɛj/) was changed to 嵇 Ji (EMC /ɣɛj/). We have also found that sometimes the new surnames have the same initial consonant as one of the characters in the transcription of the Altaic proper name. For example, 賀拔 He (EMC /ɣaʰ/)ba was changed to 何 He (EMC /ɣa/), 破多羅 Po (EMC /pʰaʰ/) duoluo was changed to 潘 Pan (EMC /pʰan/), and so on. Moreover, in some cases, the initials of the new surnames and the corresponding characters in the original transcriptions were not the same, but similar in their phonetic value. For example, 達勃 Dabo (EMC /bət/) was changed to 鮑 Bao (EMC /paw/);²⁰ 吐奚 Tuxi (EMC /ɣɛj/) became 古 Gu (EMC /kɔʔ/);²¹ 叱干 Chi (EMC /tɕʰit/)gan became 薛 Xue (EMC /siat/).²² We call this approach to changing surnames Type A2.

TYPE B

The A1 and A2 approaches to changing surnames were both based on phonetic values. There are also a number of cases in which the connection between the surnames before and after the reform is semantic rather than phonetic. We call this category Type B. In the name list of the *Weishu* there are four such cases that have already been identified by earlier scholars.

Firstly, Youlian (EMC /wuwʰ-lian/) 宥連 was changed to Yun 雲. K. Shiratori suggested that *youlian* was a transcription of the Mongolic word *ulen/uilän*, which means ‘cloud’. The character *yun* means ‘cloud’ in Chinese too, and that would be why it was selected as the new surname corresponding to the proper name *ulen*.²³ L. Bazin, however, reconstructed the pronunciation of *youlian* as **hääülän*. He proposed that the *h* at the beginning of the syllable later developed into *y*, so that it could be transcribed from the *yäʔ län*.²⁴ The reconstruction of L. Bazin was based on that of B. Karlgren, who thought that the initial of *you* was a semivowel *j/y*. In actual fact however, it

¹⁹ Reconstruction of the Early Middle Chinese pronunciations follows Pullyblank 1991.

²⁰ Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1997: 501) pointed out that in ancient Chinese, the voiceless bilabial initials sounded like voiced bilabial ones (古讀輕唇如重唇) (It is difficult to accurately translate the term 古 ‘ancient Chinese’ here. It is more likely that it refers to EMC). Qian Daxin was a famous scholar in the Qing dynasty. The edition we refer to here is, of course, a modern collection of his articles.

²¹ Li Fang-kuei 李方桂 (2003: 16) pointed out that in Middle Chinese, the initials of the Xiamu 匣母 (i.e. /ɣ/, voiced velar fricative) and Jianmu 見母 (i.e. /k/, voiceless velar stop) groups could generally be used as homonyms.

²² Zhou Zumo 周祖謨 (1993: 168) stressed that in Middle Chinese there are many examples where characters with *zhengchi yin* 正齒音 (voiceless alveolo-palatal affricate) initials and characters with *chitou yin* 齒頭音 (voiceless alveolar sibilant) initials were used as homonymic rhymes. As far as the case of Chi and Xue is concerned, we can also find historical evidence to demonstrate this theory. In the *Weishu* (2: 24), ‘The youngest son of Weichen 衛辰, Qujie 屈子 (in the original text, Gai 丐 is an error), fled to Xuegan tribe’. However, in the *Jinshu* (130: 3201), the same event is recorded as ‘[Helian] Bobo 勃勃 fled to the Chigan tribe’. We know that Helian Bobo 赫連勃勃 was the youngest son of Liu Weichen 劉衛辰. This demonstrates that Chi and Xue are two variant transcriptions of the same Altaic phoneme.

²³ Shiratori 1934: 132–133.

²⁴ Bazin 1949–1950: 276.



was probably a glottal stop.²⁵ The author agrees that the original form of this Altaic proper name was *egülen*, pronounced as *e'ülen* in some Mongolic dialects and written as *egülen*.²⁶

Secondly, Qujin (EMC /kʰiǰ-kin/) 去斤 was changed to Ai 艾. P. Boodberg suggested that the origin of the Chinese transcription *qujin* (EMC /kʰiǰ-kin/) was the Turkic *kök* or Mongolic *köke* 'blue, gray'. As to the reason why it was changed to Ai, P. Boodberg argued that the Mongolic *kökešin* (< *kök*) means 'old people', and the Chinese character *ai* also has the same meaning (because old people have gray hair).²⁷ But L. Bazin proposed that the pronunciation of *qujin* could be reconstructed as *kügän*, referring to a kind of plant in different Turkic languages, e.g. Ottoman Turkish *güvân* 'astragalus'. In the Chinese language, the character *ai* also refers to a kind of plant, i.e. 'wormwood'; and that could be the reason why Ai was chosen as the new surname.²⁸ P. Boodberg's interpretation is more acceptable.

Thirdly, Chinu (EMC /tʰit-nɔ/) 叱奴 was changed to Lang 狼. This is a very famous surname and has been researched a lot. The Mongolic form of this transcription is *čino* 'wolf', and the Chinese character *lang* means 'wolf' too. Some scholars have taken this example to argue that the language of the Tabgach people was Mongolic rather than Turkic, as the Turkic form of 'wolf' is *böri*. However, this argument does not hold true, because the Turkic form of 'wolf' was also found in Tabgach society; for example, the name of Emperor Taiwu, Fuli (EMC /but-li/) 佛狸 was nothing other than a transcription of *böri*.²⁹ It is noteworthy that the surname 'Lang' was quite uncommon in Chinese society, as the mainstream Confucian culture regarded the wolf as a greedy and ferocious animal. On the contrary, in the eyes of Altaic language speakers, the image of the wolf had much higher prestige.

Fourthly, Yidoujuan (EMC /ʒjit-təw'-kwian^h/) 壹斗眷 was changed to Ming 明. K. Shiratori suggested that it was transcribed from *yetuken*, a variant form of the Manchurian *getuken* 'to understand', as the Chinese character *ming* also has the meaning of 'to understand'.³⁰ P. Boodberg, however, proposed that the origin of this transcription was *ötüg*, the root of the famous Turkic 'mountain forest' *Ötüken*.³¹ Cen Zhongmian held this opinion too.³² L. Bazin interpreted the Chinese character *ming* as 'bright', and reconstructed the original form as *yilturqan*, from the Turkic *yiltur*.³³ A. Dien interpreted the character *ming* as 'sacred' and reconstructed the original form as *üduyan*, which means 'witch'.³⁴ The author is inclined to interpret *ming* as 'sacred', and connect it to the Old Turkic *ötügen*.

In the four cases above, the new surname was a Chinese translation of the original Altaic proper name. There are also a few cases in which the new surname was a 'translation', or more exactly a paraphrase, of one of the characters contained in the Chinese transcription of the Altaic proper name. Previous scholars have never discussed this phenomenon before.

²⁵ Zeng 1928: 2ff.

²⁶ See also Vovin 2007: 198.

²⁷ Boodberg 1936: 177.

²⁸ Bazin 1949–1950: 288–289.

²⁹ Luo 2009: 169.

³⁰ Shiratori 1934: 137. According to one of the peer reviewers of this paper, the Manchurian *getuken* means 'clear, understandable' and is certainly not a verb, which is *getukele*- 'to explain'.

³¹ Boodberg 1936: 178. We really do not know whether *Ötüken* was a forest or a steppe.

³² Cen 1958: 1078–1079.

³³ Bazin 1949–1950: 291.

³⁴ Dien 1956: 18



Wuyin 屋引 was changed to Fang 房. Previous scholars such as K. Shiratori and L. Bazin suggested that *wuyin* was a transcription of *ög/üg* ‘house’, because the Chinese character *fang* also means ‘house’. However, this conclusion needs to be revised. According to E. Pulleyblank, the pronunciation of *wuyin* can be reconstructed as /ʔəwk-jinʔ/, which could not have been a transcription of *ög* or *üg*. Actually, the reason why it was changed to ‘Fang’ is that the meaning of *fang* 房 and *wu* 屋 is the same; both characters mean ‘house’. However, the original Turkic or Mongolic form of *wuyin* remains unknown to us. A. Shimunek suggested the Mongolic cognate *ayil* ‘tent’ and **agyl*/**agyl* for *wuyin* /ʔəwk-jinʔ/.³⁵

Another example is Tunan 土難, which was changed to Shan 山. Although L. Bazin suggested that the original form could be reconstructed as **toran*, we would like to offer a new interpretation.³⁶ The Chinese characters *tu* ‘soil, earth’ and *shan* ‘hill (made of soil and rocks)’ were connected, and this could be the reason why it was changed to Shan by the reform committee.³⁷ Similarly, Shilou 是樓 was changed to Gao 高, mainly because *lou* 樓 ‘a structure with an upper deck’ and *gao* 高 ‘high’ were connected in meaning, regardless of the reconstructed form *suğerä* suggested by K. Shiratori.³⁸ Also in the case of Pu 普, which was changed to Zhou 周, the same explanation could apply, as both *pu* and *zhou* mean ‘everywhere’ in the Chinese language.³⁹

MISCELLANEOUS

In addition to the above two ways of changing surnames according to phonetic or semantic similarities, the reform committee also employed other methods in implementing the social reform. For example, Baba 拔拔 and Yizhan 乙旃, which were two tribes of the royal house, were changed to Zhangsun 長孫 and Shusun 叔孫, respectively. There seems to be no connection between the old and new names either in a phonetic or a semantic sense.⁴⁰ The Chinese surname Shusun originated from the famous historical figure Shuya 叔牙 (?–662 BC). In order to remember him, his descendants started to use Shusun as their surname, as *sun* means ‘grandchildren’ in the Chinese language.⁴¹ Shuya had a brother named Qingfu 慶父, whose posthumous name was Gongzhong 共仲. The grandchildren of Qingfu/Gongzhong were called Mengsun 孟孫.⁴² In the Chinese language, the character *meng* 孟 means ‘eldest brother’, while *zhang* 長 also means ‘the eldest’. Therefore, we assume that the Tabgach officials referred to the story of Shusun and his older brother Mengsun but replaced the character *meng* with *zhang*, in order to represent the respective political status of the two tribes within the imperial house.

³⁵ Shimunek 2017: 140.

³⁶ Bazin 1949–1950: 295.

³⁷ A. Shimunek (2017: 138, 137) did not offer any cognates in Mongolic for this name, nor for the following *shilou*.

³⁸ Shiratori 1934: 133.

³⁹ A. Shimunek (2017: 363) proposed that the character *pu* /*pʰɔr/ was a cognate of the common Middle Mongol root *horči-* ‘to surround, turn around’ and of the unattested Middle Mongol **horiya-* ‘to wrap’ < pre-Proto-Mongolic **hɔr-* ‘to surround, wrap’. This theory is not convincing, because he did not explain why the sounds /pʰ/ and /h/ can be regarded as equivalent.

⁴⁰ P. Boodberg (1936: 178) tried to identify the Turkic word **iči-in* < *iči* ‘elder brother, uncle’ with 乙旃 /*ičēt-tšiän*/ (reconstructed by B. Karlgren). However, this is only hypothetical, because in the medieval period *iči*/*éči* was displaced almost everywhere by the synonymous Mongolian *ağa*. See Clauson 1972: 20.

⁴¹ See *Yuanhe xingzuan* 10: 1451.

⁴² See *Shizulüe* 氏族略, p. 168.



The Tabgach were not the first nomadic people who felt obliged to transcribe their proper names into Chinese and sinicize them. From the Xiongnu onwards, many proper names of non-Chinese origin have been preserved in the Chinese historical accounts. Sometimes there was continuity concerning the Chinese transcription of proper names from the Xiongnu to the Tabgach. In such cases, the reform committee would preserve the Xiongnu cultural heritage in transcribing and sinicizing these names. For example, Dugu 獨孤 was changed to Liu 劉, which was the Han dynasty royal family's surname. According to Yao Weiyuan, the Dugu tribe were Xiongnu descendants.⁴³ In the Han dynasty, the Xiongnu had taken the surname 'Liu', because they wanted to stress their relationship with the Chinese imperial house.⁴⁴ There is another source directly indicating that the ancestor of the Dugu tribe was a Xiongnu son-in-law of the Han court.⁴⁵

The ultimate purpose of the surname reform by Emperor Xiaowen was to turn the multi-character transcriptions of Tabgach proper names into single-character Chinese surnames (except for the two imperial tribes, i.e. Zhangsun and Shusun). Of course, there were a few Tabgach multi-character surnames that were kept, because they had already been in use in Chinese society for a long time, such as Murong 慕容, Yuwen 宇文 and Tuyuhun 吐谷渾, which were three important tribes of the Xianbei 鮮卑 people. Except for these three cases, almost all of the multi-character transcriptions were shortened. However, there is another exception: Xidoulu 奚斗廬 was changed to Suolu 索廬. In south China, the Tabgach people were called Suolu 索虜, a shortened form of Suotoulu 索頭虜.⁴⁶ Therefore, we can assume that the transcriptions of Xidoulu (EMC /ɣɛj-təw'-lɔ/) and Suotoulu (EMC /sak-dəw'-lɔ/) may be two variant transcriptions of the same Altaic word, which, however, remains unknown. The reason why the reform committee chose Suolu as the new surname was that it had already been accepted by Chinese society, although it might have some derogatory connotations.⁴⁷

Last but not least, we have to admit that there are still a few cases in the *Weishu* where we are not certain what kind of method was used by the reform committee to determine the new surnames. For example, Chulian 出連 was changed to Bi 畢. K. Shiratori suggested that the original form of *chu* was *éčul*, and interpreted *bi* as 'to arrive'. However, his interpretation ignored the existence of the Chinese character *lian*. L. Bazin proposed that *chulian* should be reconstructed as **čulän*, from the Mongolic *čölä*- 'to interrupt', while interpreting the Chinese character *bi* as 'to end'.⁴⁸ A. Shimunek suggested a Mongolian cognate *toor* 'net' and Middle Mongol *tor*.⁴⁹ We would rather leave such cases for open discussion.

⁴³ Yao 1958: 38–51.

⁴⁴ According to the Biography of Liu Yuan 劉淵 in the *Jinshu* 晉書, Emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty married off one of the royal girls to Modu 冒頓, the Xiongnu's Chanyu, and from that time on the descendants of Modu started to use 'Liu' as their surname. See *Jinshu* 101: 2645.

⁴⁵ According to the *Yuanhe xingzuan* (p. 1456), the ancestor of the Dugu tribe had the surname of 'Liu'. In the Eastern Han dynasty, the [Xiongnu] Right Xianwang 右賢王, Liu Qubi 劉去卑, began to use the surname 'Liu'. His father had married a Chinese princess, and he kept his mother's family name. This story is very similar to the one preserved in the *Jinshu*, though it has a different protagonist.

⁴⁶ *Songshu* 宋書 95: 2321; *Nan Qishu* 57: 983.

⁴⁷ We have to admit that there is a minor problem in this theory, because the characters xi /ɣɛj/ and suo /sak/ are hardly possible variant transcriptions of the same Altaic phoneme. However, it is possible that the character 索 could be a writing error for 奚, as they look very similar.

⁴⁸ Bazin 1949–1950: 289.

⁴⁹ See Shimunek 2017: 334.



CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Tabgach surname reform committee employed different methods in changing the multi-character Chinese transcriptions of Altaic proper names into single-character Chinese style surnames. The procedure for changing names was very complicated. The position of the character that was chosen as the new surname was influenced by many different factors, not including the accentuations of the original Altaic words. The primary principle followed by the reform committee was to avoid producing duplicate surnames.

In addition, the different ways the Northern Wei 'reform committee' decided on the characters of the surnames reflect the complexity of their understanding of the culture of surnames at the time. They were not simply trying to become more 'Chinese'. Otherwise, they would not have chosen a surname such as 'wolf' that has clear negative connotations in Chinese. It could be that what they were doing was to comply with the Sinitic way of crafting surnames in form while still maintaining a certain distinction. For example, they kept the multi-character form of traditional Xianbei proper names such as Yuwen, Tuyuhun, and Murong.

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APPENDIX

Table of the Tabgach proper names before and after the reform

Notes:

- A1. One of the characters of the old proper names is chosen as the new surname: 72 items;
 A2. A character the pronunciation of which is similar to that of one of the characters in the old proper names is chosen, whether this is a homophone or has the same (or similar) initials: 26 items;
 B1. A character that has a similar meaning to one of the characters in the old Chinese proper names is chosen: 4 items;
 B2. The Tabgach proper name is translated: 4 items;
 C. The original characters are kept: 6 items;
 D. According to political status: 2 items;
 E. According to traditional practice: 2 items;
 F. Undecided: 3 items.

No.	Before	After	Connection	Notes
1	紇骨 He-gu	胡 Hu	A2	紇/γət/; 胡/γo/: same initial
2	普 Pu	周 Zhou	B1	普; 周: same meaning: 'everywhere'
3	拓(拔)拔 ⁵⁰ Tuo(-ba)-ba	長孫 Zhangsun	D	
4	達奚 Da-xi	奚 Xi	A1	
5	伊婁 Yi-lou	伊 Yi	A1	
6	丘敦 Qiu-dun	丘 Qiu	A1	
7	侯 Hou	亥 Hai	A2	侯/γət/; 亥/γəj': same initial
8	乙旃 Yi-zhan	叔孫 Shu-sun	D	
9	車焜 Che-kun	車 Che	A1	
10	丘穆陵 Qiu-mu-ling	穆 Mu	A1	
11	步六孤 Bu-liu-gu	陸 Lu	A2	六/luwk/; 陆/luwk/: homophone
12	賀賴 He-lai	賀 He	A1	

⁵⁰ In the present version of the Weishu, this is written as 拓拔. However, according to other sources such as the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 and especially the Diao Bigan Inscription 弔比干碑, the correct form should be 拔拔. See Yao 1958: 12–15.



13	獨孤 Du-gu	劉 Liu	E	
14	賀樓 He-lou	樓 Lou	A1	
15	勿扭于 Wu-niu-yu	于 Yu	A1	
16	是連 Shi-lian	連 Lian	A1	
17	僕闌 Pu-lan	僕 Pu	A1	
18	若干 Ruo-gan	苟 Gou	A2	干/kan/; 苟/kəw'/: same initial ⁵¹
19	拔列[蘭] ⁵² Ba-lie[-lan]	梁 Liang	A2	列/liat/; 梁/lian/ : same initial
20	撥略 Ba-lüe	略 Lüe	A1	
21	若口引 Ruo-kou-yin	寇 Kou	A2	口/khəw'/; 寇/khəwh/: same initial
22	叱羅 Chi-luo	羅 Luo	A1	
23	普陋茹 Pu-lou-ru	茹 Ru	A1	
24	賀葛 He-ge	葛 Ge	A1	
25	是賁 Shi-ben	封 Feng	A2	賁/bun/; 封/puawŋ/: initials homonymic
26	阿伏于 A-fu-yu	阿 A	A1	
27	可地延 Ke-di-yan	延 Yan	A1	
28	阿鹿桓 A-lu-huan	鹿 Lu	A1	
29	他駱拔 Ta-luo-ba	駱 Luo	A1	
30	薄奚 Bo-xi	薄 Bo	A1	
31	烏丸 Wu-wan	桓 Huan	A2	丸/ɣwan/; 桓/ɣwan/: homophone
32	素和 Su-he	和 He	A1	

⁵¹ However, there might be an alternative explanation for the connection between 若干 /ɣiak-kan/ and 苟. The character 苟 in the Middle Ages was used as a euphemism for 狗 'dog', suggesting that *ɣiak-kan* was an early variant of the Mongolian word *noqan*. This suggestion comes from one of the peer reviewers of this paper.

⁵² In the present version of the *Weishu*, this is written as 拔列. However, according to other sources it should be 拔列蘭 or 拔烈蘭, both of which contain the character 蘭, which is missing in the present *Weishu*. See Yao 1958: 64–66.



33	吐谷渾 Tu-yu-hun	吐谷渾 Tu-yu-hun	C	
34	胡古口引 Hu-gu-kou-yin	侯 Hou	A2	胡/ɣɔ/; 侯/ɣəw/ same initial
35	賀若 He-ruo	賀若 He-ruo	C	
36	谷渾 Gu-hun	渾 Hun	A1	
37	匹婁 Pi-lou	婁 Lou	A1	
38	俟力伐 Si-li-fa	鮑 Bao	A2	伐/buat/; 鮑/baiw ³ /: same initial ⁵³
39	吐伏盧 Tu-fu-lu	盧 Lu	A1	
40	牒云 Die-yun	云 Yun	A1	
41	是云 Shi-yun	是 Shi	A1	
42	叱利 Chi-li	利 Li	A1	
43	副呂 Fu-lü	副 Fu	A1	
44	那 Na	那 Na	C/E	
45	如羅 Ru-luo	如 Ru	A1	
46	乞扶 Qi-fu	扶 Fu	A1	
47	阿單 A-dan	單 Dan	A1	
48	俟幾 Si-ji	幾 Ji	A1	
49	賀兒 He-er	兒 Er	A1	
50	吐奚 Tu-xi	古 Gu	A2	奚/ɣɛj/; 古/kɔ ³ /: initials homonymic
51	出連 Chu-lian	畢 Bi	F	
52	庾 Yu	庾 Yu	C	
53	賀拔 He-ba	何 He	A2	賀/ɣah/; 何/ɣa/: same initial
54	叱呂 Chi-lü	呂 Lü	A1	

⁵³ According to the *Guangyun* 廣韻, the character 伐 shares the initial of 奉 while the character 鮑 shares initial of 並. However, in Pullyblank 1991, both are reconstructed as beginning with /b/.



55	莫那婁 Mo-na-lou	莫 Mo	A1	
56	奚斗盧 Xi-dou-lu	索盧 Suo-lu	E	索頭虜(?) Suotoulu
57	莫蘆 Mo-lu	蘆 Lu	A1	
58	出大汗 Chu-da-han	韓 Han	A2	汗/γanh/; 韓/γan/: same initial
59	沒路眞 Mo-lu-zhen	路 Lu	A1	
60	扈地于 Hu-di-yu	扈 Hu	A1	
61	莫輿 Mo-yu	輿 Yu	A1	
62	紇干 He-gan	干 Gan	A1	
63	俟伏斤 Si-fu-jin	伏 Fu	A1	
64	是樓 Shi-lou	高 Gao	B1	樓; 高 same meaning 'high'
65	尸 (=屈) 突 ⁵⁴ Qu-tu	屈 Qu	A1	
66	沓盧 Ta-lu	沓 Ta	A1	
67	噍石蘭 Wen-shi-lan	石 Shi	A1	
68	解枇 Xie-pi	解 Xie	A1	
69	奇斤 Qi-jin	奇 Qi	A1	
70	須卜 Xu-bu	卜 Bu	A1	
71	丘林 Qiu-lin	林 Lin	A1	
72	大莫干 Da-mo-gan	郃 He	A2	郃/γap/; 干/kan/: initials homonymic
73	尔緜 Er-mian	緜 Mian	A1	
74	蓋樓 Gai-lou	蓋 Gai	A1	
75	素黎 Su-li	黎 Li	A1	
76	渴單 Ke-dan	單 Dan	A1	

⁵⁴ The character 尸 in the present version of the *Weishu* is an error for 屈, according to other sources. See Yao 1958: 137–138.



77	壹斗眷 Yi-dou-juan	明 Ming	B2	ütkān 'sacred'; 明 'sacred'
78	叱門 Chi-men	門 Men	A1	
79	宿六斤 Su-liu-jin	宿 Su	A1	
80	馮邦 Bi-han	邦 Han	A1	
81	土難 Tu-nan	山 Shan	B1	土 'earth, soil'; 山 'hill': same meaning
82	屋引 Wu-yin	房 Fang	B1	屋 'house'; 房 'house': same meaning
83	樹洛于 Shu-lo-yu	樹 Shu	A1	
84	乙弗 Yi-fu	乙 Yi	A1	
85	宇文 Yu-wen	宇文 Yu-wen	C	
86	慕容 Mu-rong	慕容 Mu-rong	C	
87	茂 (= 莪) 眷 ⁵⁵ Mao-juan	茂 (= 莪) Mao	A1	
88	宥連 You-lian	雲 Yun	B2	egülen; 雲 'clouds'
89	紇豆陵 He-dou-ling	竇 Dou	A2	豆/dəwh/; 竇/dəwh/: homophone
90	侯莫陳 Hou-mo-chen	陳 Chen	A1	
91	庫狄 Ku-di	狄 Di	A1	
92	太落稽 Tai-lo-jj	稽 Ji	A1	
93	柯拔 Ke-ba	柯 Ke	A1	
94	尉遲 Yu-chi	尉 Yu	A1	
95	步鹿根 Bu-lu-gen	步 Bu	A1	
96	破多羅 Po-duo-luo	潘 Pan	A2	破/phah/; 潘/phan/: same initial
97	叱干 Chi-gan	薛 Xue	A2	叱/tchit/; 薛/siat/: initials homonymic
98	俟奴 Si-nu	俟 Si	A1	

⁵⁵ The character 茂 in the present version of the *Weishu* might be an error of 莪 or 戎. See Yao 1958: 172–173.



99	輾遲 Zhan-chi	展 Zhan	A2	輾/trian' /; 展/trian' /: homophone
100	費連 Fei-lian	費 Fei	A1	
101	其連 Qi-lian	綦 Ji	A2	其/gi /; 綦/gi /: homophone
102	去斤 Qu-jin	艾 Ai	B2	kök/köke 'grey, blue'; 艾 'grey'
103	渴侯 Ke-hou	緜 Gou	A2	侯/ɣəw /; 緜/kəw /: initials homonymic
104	叱盧 Chi-lu	祝 Zhu	F	
105	和稽 He-ji	緩 Huan	A2	和/ɣwa /; 緩/ɣwan /: same initial
106	冤賴 Yuan-lai	就 Jiu	F	
107	嗚盆 Wa-pen	溫 Wen	A2	嗚/ɹwət /; 溫/ɹwən /: same initial
108	達勃 Da-bo	褒 Bao	A2	勃/bət /; 褒/paw /: initials homonymic
109	獨孤渾 Du-gu-hun	杜 Du	A2	獨/dəwk /; 杜/də' /: same initial
110	賀蘭 He-lan	賀 He	A1	
111	郁都甄 Yu-du-zhen	甄 Zhen	A1	
112	紇奚 He-xi	嵇 Ji	A2	奚/ɣej /; 嵇/ɣej /: homophone
113	越勒 (=勤) ⁵⁶ Yue-qin	越 Yue	A1	
114	叱奴 Chi-nu	狼 Lang	B2	čino 'wolf'; 狼 'wolf'
115	渴燭渾 Ke-zhuo-hun	味 (=朱) ⁵⁷ Zhu	A2	燭/teuwk /; 朱/teuâ /: same initial
116	庫褥官 Ku-ru-guan	庫 Ku	A1	
117	烏洛蘭 Wu-luo-lan	蘭 Lan	A1/E	
118	一那萋 Yi-na-lou	萋 Lou	A1	
119	羽弗 Yu-fu	羽 Yu	A1	

⁵⁶ The character 勒 in the present version of the *Weishu* is an error for 勤. See Yao 1958: 224.

⁵⁷ The character 味 in the present version of the *Weishu* is an error for 朱. See Yao 1958: 226.

