

# An Analysis of the Khoton Ethnic Group and Its Designation in Mongolia

Qinfu Ha<sup>1</sup> Wenjing Xue<sup>2</sup> Yidayati Yanitake<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Institute for Western Frontier of China, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710062, China

<sup>3</sup> Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, Sichuan 635000, China

<sup>3</sup>Corresponding author.

## ABSTRACT

This paper mainly discusses the origin of the Khoton people and the designation of this title with reference to multi-lingual literature. The study shows that Khotons are the result of the integration of different ethnic groups who settled in Mongolia. The title of Khoton was given to the group by others and became their self-proclaimed title as a result of evolution.

**Keywords:** *Mongolian Khoton, Integration, Ethnic designation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are about 12,000 Khoton people in Mongolia; most of them live in the Tarialan Soum in the southwest of Uvs Province; the rest of them live in Selenge, Orkhon Provinces, and Ulaanbaatar City. As one of the ethnic groups in Mongolia, they are an ethnic community that has gradually formed over a long period of historical evolution. Along the history, they gradually forgot their language, script, customs, and ethnic origins, showing localization in their culture. However, in terms of religious beliefs, they still retained traces of beliefs and some memories of customs that were different from those of the local Mongolian community.

Domestic and foreign scholars have conducted a comprehensive investigation and research on the origin, history, culture, change, and identity of the Mongolian Khoton people. In terms of this foreign ethnic name, scholar M.T.Fosse sorted out the various meanings of the Khoton.[1] scholar Li Ziran discussed the history of the formation of this word and provided some arguments.[2] Oyunbilig has conducted a detailed study of the word through multilingual literature and can be said to be the epitome of relevant issues. [3] However, there is no consensus in the academic community on the explanation of "Khoton".

Due to long-term historical evolution, the Khoton people have become a group that is not completely similar to the Mongols, with an ethnic identity and belonging to different nationalities, and their cultural change has evolved in a completely different direction. Therefore, based on the previous research, this paper discusses the Mongolian Khoton people and its title through multi-lingual literature.

## 2. THE DEFINITION OF MONGOLIAN KHOTON

The Mongols are a tribal-based social organization. Modernization has caused the tribal organization to gradually evolve into a symbol of the title and identity, which has lost the original administrative functions as a social organization and has been replaced by administrative structures such as Leagues, Banners, Soums, etc.

The term 'Narodnost' refers to the transitional community of people between the nation and the tribe in the four stages of Clan, Tribe, Narodnost, and Nation, and the term 'Narodnost' identifies a community of people during the time of slavery and feudalism.[4] Tribe and Narodnost relate to a specific community of people at a specific point in history.

In Mongolia, the terms 'үндэстн' (nation), 'угсаатан' (race, language family), and 'ястан' (Narodnost, ethnicity) are used to express one's ethnicity. It is believed that Mongolia has two "үндэстн", namely: Mongolian and Kazakh; three 'угсаатан', namely Mongolic, Altaic, and Tungstic; and twenty-four 'ястан', namely Khalkha, Buryat, Khoton, and so on. Mongolian scholars classify the Khotons as 'ястан'. It is a group of people who have the appearance, body shape, and language characteristics of the Altaic language group, believe in Islam, and are defined as one of many ethnic groups.[5]<sup>9</sup> In recent years, with the further unification of Mongolian ethnological terminology, the term "tribe" has been abandoned and gradually evolved into ethnic group.[6]

However, whether the Khotons are referred to a tribe, Narodnost, or ethnic group, we believe that they are not accurately expressed. Tribe and Narodnost are completely different concepts in the Chinese context, referring to a community of people at a particular stage of historical development, and they are conceptually negative.[7] However, the Khotons do not possess the natural units of humanity, language, religion, race, land, and other 'native ties'.[8] This group is more like an imagined community with common historical memories, beliefs, and customs. They are a constructed group whose cultural characteristics stimulate ethnic identity and are the result of their subjective choices. Therefore, it is much better to designate them as an ethnic group rather than clan or tribe. This title is in line with the concepts of modern society.

### 3. THE ORIGINS OF KHOTONS IN MONGOLIA

As a branch of the Mongolian nation, the history and culture of the Mongolian Khotons have attracted academic attention. In terms of the origin of Khotons, it can be seen from the existing historical material and official documents that they originated in the western regions of China. Their origins will be discussed separately below:

From a historical perspective, the Khotons of Mongolia were descendants of the people who migrated from their conquered territories during the Junggar Khanate and the Qing Dynasty to present-day areas such as Khovd, Uvs, and Bayan-Ulgii to be farmers. It mainly includes three parts. According to the language family, they mainly include the "Qotong" or "Khoton" people who speak Dungan language; the "Khoton" people who

speak Altaic+T languages; and the Khoton people who speak Mongolian language. [9]

The most original records about this ethnic group are mainly in the travelogue of Soviet Orientalist G.N. Potanin (Г.Н. Потанин), who conducted research on the Khoton ethnic group in western Mongolia during his travels from 1876 to 1877. At that time, by analyzing some surname components among the Khotons, he believed that among their tribes were the Kirgiz clan and the Brut (Бурт) clan.[10] B.Y. Vladimirtsov (Б.Я. Владимирцов) compared the linguistic and lexical materials collected by G.N. Potanin on the Khotons with his own linguistic and lexical material, which was collected in 1911 in the Ulaangom region, and proposed the hypothesis that the Khotons were composed of various Altaic+T languages speaking Sart clans (түрэг-сартуул) and Black Kyrgyz (хар киргиз) communities. [11]<sup>265-277</sup>

Based on the research of two scholars, G.N. Potanin and B.Y. Vladimirtsov, and professional analysis of the vocabulary and grammar of the Altaic languages, A.N. Samalovich (А.Н. Самалович) concluded that this ethnic group belongs to the ancient Altaic languages speaking people in southern Xinjiang, China. [11]<sup>278-290</sup> G.Y. Grumm Grzhimailo (Г.Е. Грумм-Грижмайло) gives a more specific definition, arguing that the term 'Khoton' does not refer to an ethnic group, but to the settled Mongolian people who have Islamic faith, they call themselves Khotons to distinguish themselves from nomads, which can be translated as people who live in the cities. In appearance, they are distinct from the Dorbods (дөрвөд) and the Uriankhais (урианхай) and have a purely Aryan appearance, being more similar to the Black Kyrgyz and Altaic languages speaking people of the northwest of China. [12]

The findings of the above scholars are mainly based on travel reports from field surveys in western Mongolia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the 1950s, some scholars continued to participate in the study of the Khotons. David Brophy argues that many of the Mongolians living in the vicinity of the Muslims converted to Islam and that the Khoid tribes of the Junggar group were considered to be particularly suited to the Altaic languages speaking society of the Tarim Basin, so they gradually became Muslim (Khotons).[13] B.Z. Nanzatov argues that the Khotons are descended from the intermarriage of the Oirat and Uzbeks.[14] According to S. Badamkhatan (С. Бадамхатан), they are descended from the Altaic languages

speaking people of the southern part of Xinjiang and Central Asia who were captured during the Junggar Khanate and the Qing dynasty.[15]<sup>19</sup> B. Sanhuu (Б. Санхүү) believes that Mongol Khotons are of Altaic language speaking people origin, their ancestors are related to Persians, and are known in Chinese literature under various names such as Semuren (色目人), Huihu, and Gaoche(高车). They are related to Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Khoton, Tatar, and other ethnic groups.[5]<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have mainly discussed the origins of the Khoton ethnic group through its historical-oral materials, language, tribe, and appearance characteristics. Regarding the issue of the ethnic origin of the Khotons in Mongolia, different scholars have different opinions, but there is no conclusion. We can conclude the opinions as follows:

First, the origin of the Khotons is related to the farming of the Khovd - Ulaangom region by the Junggar Khanate and the Qing Dynasty. It is the result of the migration of various ethnic groups from the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang, China, and various ethnic groups in Central Asia. Secondly, the ethnic groups are pluralistic in composition, consisting of various nationalities, ethnic groups, and tribes such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Uzbeks, Sarts, and even the Dungan (东干: *Donggan*). Thirdly, as an ethnic group with an evident Islamic faith, they were the ones who built a cultural identity in the Mongolian territory where Buddhism was the dominant faith. Due to living in a common region and cultural consistency, they gradually formed a new ethnic group called Khoton and became one of the ethnic groups in Mongolia.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC TITLE KHOTON**

The Mongolian word 'Khoton', which corresponds to the Chinese word 'Hui' (回), is a general term that refers primarily to the Muslim community in Mongolia. It includes various Altaic languages speaking peoples such as the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and even Mongolians who practice Islam. From the period of the Qing Dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic of China, the phenomenon of mixed titles for ethnic groups also existed in China. For example, the Salar people were called Salar Hui, the Dongxiang people were called Dongxiang Hui, and Islam was called "Hui religion". Numerous views have been put forward

by different scholars on the origin of the term Khoton, mainly focusing on clan affiliation, symbols of belief, class status, identity designations, forms of organization, names of cities, etc., with details as follows:

#### **4.1 Translation of Ethnic Titles Originating from Other Ethnic Groups**

B.Sanhuu notes that the term is a translation of the 'Taranch' who arranged for their migration during the Junggar Khanate.[5]<sup>6</sup> S.Badamkhatan writes, 'Khoton is the name given by the Kalmyks (Oirat) to the Khoton people, and the Oirat people refer to the people of Little Bukhara (Бара Бухарын), or the six cities in the southern region of Xinjiang, China, as 'Khoton', and it is widely used in Mongolian oral and written language. [15]<sup>11</sup> B.Z. Nanzatov believes that the Oirats called the Uzbeks 'Khoton', and that the descendants of the Oirats who intermarried with the Uzbeks were also called Khotons or Khoton Oirat. [14] Some scholars believe that the word 'Khoton' is of Mongolian origin, meaning slave, and was the name given to the Khwarizmi people by Genghis Khan during his conquest of the Khwarazm state in Central Asia. Khoton is a term used by the Western Mongols, the Oirat Mongols, for the designation of Altaic+T languages speaking peoples. [16]

#### **4.2 Ethnic Title Derived from Harmonics of Words**

Some scholars believe that the word 'Khoton' is derived from the word 'Haton' (woman) and say that the Khotons disguised themselves as women to protect their lives and escaped persecution in history.[5]<sup>27</sup> Paul Pelliot points out that the word may have been derived from the city of Khotan, argues that by the early 18th century, Khotan had become a generic term for the entire region among the Kalmyks, referring to the name of the city as a domain name, and 'Hotong' is a nasalized version of the word 'Khotan' in modern Mongolian and Kalmykian.[17] According to Yunusijiang Aili, after the Junggar people conquered southern Xinjiang, they did not change the original local tax system. Instead, they collected grain taxes based on "Hoton" organizations composed of people with blood relationships and close to each other, similar to villages and Ayinl, and used the term 'Hoton' to refer to these people according to their own characteristics of life. [18] Li Ziran believes that the word is similar to the city "Hot" in pronunciation. From the living form of Khoton people, they live

by agriculture and are different from nomadic Mongols, so they are distinguished by the title of production form.[2]

### **4.3 An Analysis on the Views of Title Khoton**

Regarding the above points of view, we believe that it is not accurate to say that the title of Khoton comes from other people's titles. First of all, Taranch is a cognition based on occupation; secondly, the origin of the Khoton ethnic group has multiple attributes; no other ethnic title can represent it; and finally, to be more precise, it is the inheritance of the word "Sart". This title originally referred to the people of the Khwarazm Kingdom and later gradually transformed into a general term for the Muslim groups. After the Yuan Dynasty, it specifically referred to the Hui group. The word "Haoteng"(Khoton) appeared as a formal ethnic title in the official code of the Hui people under Galdan's rule in 1678.

The claims that 'Haton' (woman), 'Hoton' (organizational form), and 'Khotan' (Khotan city) are the origins of the title of Khoton need to be further discussed. Firstly, the myths and legends are only circumstantial; there are no other new materials to support these claims, and the transliteration is not reliable. Secondly, designating the ethnic group by the name of a social organization such as 'Hoton' is also suspicious. Although they have a similar pronunciation, the two terms are not directly related to each other. Finally, there are many examples of designations of some group of people by the name of the city in which they live, but that's not true in this cases. The name 'Khoton' is a generic term for a culturally and geographically diverse group of people who have migrated from China and central Asia and are characterized by a large mixture of small settlements.

The biggest difference between Mongols and Khotons is that Mongols are nomadic and scattered, while Khotons are settled and city-based. In terms of production mode, Khotons mainly focus on agriculture, which is naturally different from that of nomadic Mongols. In terms of living, Khoton people have settled down and gradually formed settlements and cities with the increase of their population. From the perspective of belief, Muslim groups in Mongolia mostly like to settle in the city, and the existence of cities promotes the urbanization process of different Altaic languages speaking people.

In short, settlement, farming, and belief have formed a natural fit, which constitutes the cultural characteristics of the settled Altaic languages speaking people. The Mongols of Oirat designated them based on the most important feature that urban settlement is different from nomadic dispersion. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the name of Khoton might be derived from the word "Hot" (city, town) in Mongol language, and it has gradually evolved into "Khoton" through phonetic changes.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Although there are different viewpoints about the origin of Khoton ethnic group in Mongolia, it can be concluded from the above discussion that Khotons do not originate from a single tribe or ethnic group. The Khoton ethnic group has multiple attributes and integrated various nationalities and cultures, mainly from central Asia, China, and Mongolia. The historical term "Sart" is basically similar to the term Khoton. The designation of the title "Khoton" is the result of the cognition of "others" to the group's beliefs, ways of settlement, and other cultural symbols in the process of historical evolution.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

Qinfu Ha completed the writing of the main text. Wenjing Xue contributed to the collection of related literature. Yidayati Yanitake wrote the introduction, conclusion and contributed to the translation and edition of the text.

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