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Political legitimacy in Chinese history : the case of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-535)

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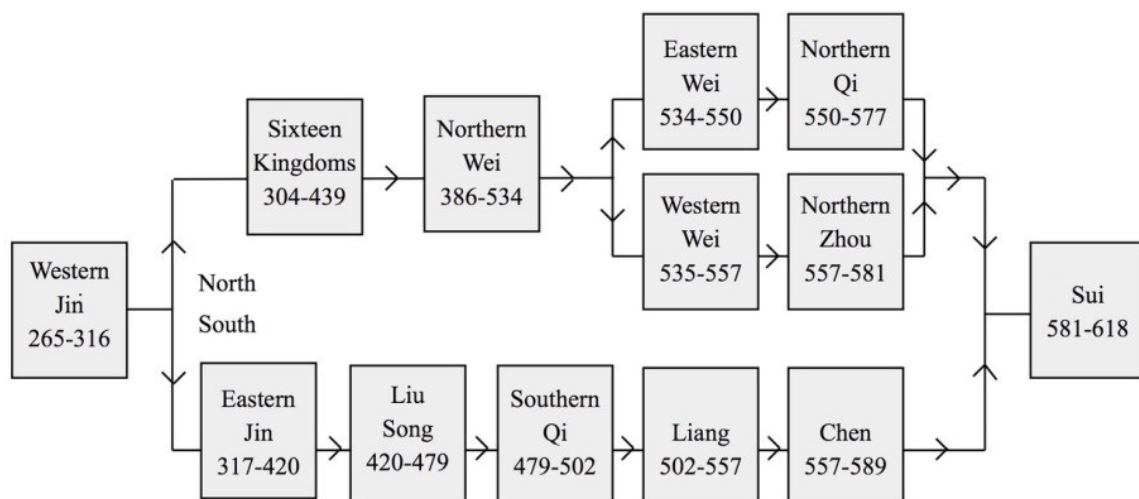
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Chapter 1. History of the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties

The period of the Northern Wei and Southern Dynasties was a dynamic time in Chinese history. As Lewis points out, it was characterized by five major historical themes: the extension of knowledge of China and the outside world, the emergence of a cultural and literary elite, the appearance of a military institution based on hereditary military households, the division between government and society, and the rise of Daoism and Buddhism.¹ The focus of this chapter, however, is on the political history of the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, which will serve as the historical background to the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. It begins with a description of how the Tuoba people, the ruling ethnic group of the Northern Wei, gradually established their state in northern China. Thereafter, their growth and fall are described. The political history of contemporaneous dynasties in southern China is subsequently investigated.

Chart 1. Dynasties in the Period of Disunion



¹ Mark Edward Lewis, *China Between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2-4.

1.1 History of the Tuoba Tribe and the Northern Wei

The founders of the Northern Wei Dynasty were the Tuoba, a northern clan of the larger Xianbei 鮮卑 ethnic group that originated from the Xianbei Hill 鮮卑山.² The first mention of the Tuoba people in Chinese dynastic records dates from the year 275, when the Western Jin Dynasty noted that a small frontier nomad group named “Tuoba” deferentially paid their tribute.³ In little over a century later, in 386, the Tuoba had managed to establish their own dynasty, the Northern Wei, and another half a century later, in 439, they completely controlled northern China.⁴ They firmly ruled the north for nearly a century, but failed to conquer southern China and finally split into two courts after a series of revolts in 534.⁵ The following section comprises a discussion of the history of the Tuoba people and their dynasty.

1.1.1 Origin and Early History of the Tuoba Tribe

The Tuoba people offer an account of their origin that can only be considered legendary. In the beginning of the *Weishu*, it is written that the Tuoba are the direct descendants of Chang Yi 昌意, the (currently considered mythical) governor of the northern part of what is now China. Chang Yi was also allegedly the youngest son of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, the legendary ancestor of the Chinese people.⁶ Although

² Originally, the Xianbei people was a branch of the so-called *Donghu* 東胡, who settled down in the Khingan mountain area in around the second century B.C. For the origin and early history of Xianbei people, see Holcombe, “The Xianbei in Chinese History,” 3-10.

³ Fang Xuanlin 房玄齡 and others comp., *Jinshu* 晉書 (History of the Jin Dynasty, hereafter *JS*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 3.65.

⁴ The Tuoba named their state “Wei” 魏, which was also the name of the (Cao) Wei Dynasty 曹魏 (220-266) in the Three Kingdom Period. Later historians, faced with the problem of more than one dynasty by the name of Wei, variously referred to the Tuoba dynasty as “Northern Wei” 北魏, “Tuoba Wei” 拓跋魏, “Later Wei” 後魏, or “Yuan Wei” 元魏. (The latter appellation comes from the fact that the Tuoba leader changed his surname to “Yuan” 元 in 493.) For the sake of consistency, I shall use the name Northern Wei in my discussion in order to distinguish this dynasty from other Weis in Chinese history.

⁵ The Northern Wei split into the Eastern Wei 東魏 (534-550) and the Western Wei 西魏 (535-557) in 534. The former Wei were replaced by the 北齊 (550-577), while the latter Wei handed over power to the Northern Zhou 北周 (557-581) in 557.

⁶ Wei Shou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 (hereafter *WS*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1.1 explains that the name Tuoba means the “pure descendent” (*ba* 跋) of “the land” (*tuo* 拓). Some scholars agree with this explanation. See An-King Lim, “On the Etymology of T’o-Pa,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 44 (2000): 30-44. A greater number of scholars see this explanation as farfetched. The real meaning of Tuoba hence remains unclear. Luo Xin summarizes the most relevant discussions and advances the idea that “Tuoba” was merely the official title of Liwei 力微, the first influential chieftain of the Tuoba clan. See Luo Xin, “Lun Tuoba Xianbei zhi deming 論拓跋鮮卑之得名,” *Lishi yanjiu* 6 (2006): 32-48.

any genealogical link to the mythical heroes Chang Yi and the Yellow Emperor has to be legendary, their origin in Xianbei Hill, located in the northeast of China and the alleged birthplace of most Xianbei people, could be real.⁷ However, some historians describe the Tuoba tribe as a hybrid Xiongnu clan from the north-western steppes.⁸

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars found tangible evidence concerning the origin of the Tuoba tribe. Mi Wenping 米文平, a Tuoba specialist, led an archaeological expedition in 1980 and found nineteen lines of vague Chinese characters carved in the Gaxian cave 嘎仙洞, which is located in the Greater Khingan Range 大興安嶺.⁹ Subsequent studies of these characters indicated that they could have been left by a Northern Wei official named Li Chang 李敞 (mid-5th century), who is reported to have conducted the ceremony of Tuoba ancestral worship in that cave.¹⁰ This discovery, combined with other relevant archaeological finds, suggests that the area surrounding the Gaxian cave could be the earliest habitat of the Tuoba people that we know of, and it also suggests that the Tuoba probably originated from the far reaches of northeast China, and not the northwestern steppes.¹¹

⁷ See Mi Wenping 米文平, "Xianbei yuanliu jiqi zuming chutan 鮮卑源流及其族名初探," *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 社會科學戰線 3(1982): 210-13. Archaeological evidence also proves that most early Xianbei people lived in northeast China. See Dun Jinji 孫進己 and Sun Hai 孫海, "Xianbei kaoguxue wenhua 鮮卑考古學文化," *Caoyuan wenwu* 草原文物 2(2003): 59-70.

⁸ See Shen Yue 沈約, *Songshu* 宋書 (hereafter *SS*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 95.2321. *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (History of the Southern Qi Dynasty, hereafter *NQS*) offers a detailed description. It says Li Ling 李陵 (?-74BCE), a great general of the Western Han Dynasty, surrendered to the Xiongnu people after a tragic military failure. Thereafter, he settled down in the Xiongnu area and married a Xiongnu woman named "Tuoba." People referred to their offspring as "Tuoba people." See Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯, *NQS* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 57. 993. Scholars began to doubt this hypothesis from the Qing Dynasty onwards. Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814) suspected that it might have been a "contemporary rumor." See Zhao Yi, *Nianershi zhaji* 廿二史劄記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 9.191.

⁹ Mi Wenping, "Xianbei shishi de faxian yu chubu yanjiu 鮮卑石室的發現與初步研究," *Wenwu* 文物 2 (1981): 1-7. The geographical coordinates of the Gaxian cave are N50°38', E123°36'.

¹⁰ The *Weishu* records that the early Tuoba people built an ancestral temple in a stone cave near Xianbei Hill before they migrated to northern China. It also notes that the Wuluohou 烏洛侯 people, a small tribe living in the Greater Khingan Range, reported that they had found that temple when they paid tribute to the Northern Wei court in 443. The Northern Wei court sent Li Chang to visit that place. Li Chang found that cave and conducted a ceremony of ancestral worship there. His ceremonial address is recorded in the *Weishu*. Mi Wenping discovered that these characters in the Gaxian cave were identical to Li Chang's ceremonial speech from the *Weishu*. See Mi Wenping, "Xianbei Shishi," 1-7.

¹¹ See Tong Zhuchen 佟柱臣, "Gaxiandong Tuobatao zhuwen shike kao 嘎仙洞拓跋燾祝文石刻考," *Lishi yanjiu* 6 (1981): 36-42. Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 15-16. Luo Xin provides a new perspective on the study of Gaxiandong. His paper suggests that the Northern Wei formulated the idea that the Tuoba people originated from Gaxiandong in order to represent themselves as the authentic successors of the Xianbei people and the rightful rulers of the far reaches of northeast China.

If the far northeast of China is indeed the birthplace of the Tuoba people, a power vacuum on the steppes could explain why they migrated almost two thousand kilometers south and finally settled on the northern frontier of the Western Jin Dynasty's territory in the mid-third century.¹²

Map 1. Migration of the Tuoba People



According to the historical records, the Xianbei people originally settled down near the northern frontier of the Qin Dynasty. They were defeated by the Xiongnu people, the first dominant ethnic group in the steppe, and moved to the Greater Khingan Range area in the first century BCE.¹³ One century later, in 91 CE, increasing attacks by Eastern Han Dynasty forces, combined with years of natural disasters, forced the majority of the Xiongnu people to flee to what is now Inner Asia, leaving a power vacuum on the steppe. The Xianbei people seized this opportunity and occupied the former Xiongnu lands.¹⁴ According to the *Weishu*, Tuoba Tuiyin 拓跋推寅, the

See Luo Xin, "Minzu qiyuan de xiangxiang yu zaixiangxiang, yi gaxiandong de liangci faxian wei zhongxin 民族起源的想像與再想像,以嘎仙洞的兩次發現為中心," *Wenshi* 2 (2013): 5-26.

¹² Holcombe shares this view, see Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 3-6.

¹³ *SGZ*, 30.836.

¹⁴ Fan Ye 范曄, *Houhan shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 90.2985-86.

chieftain of the Tuoba people, led the migration towards the south and they settled around Lake Hulun 呼倫湖.¹⁵

Two centuries later, another power vacuum on the steppes triggered the second migration of the Tuoba. From the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, China had experienced endless revolts and had consequently virtually exhausted its agrarian and military population. To increase its supply of farmers and soldiers, the Eastern Han and following dynasties then turned to “barbarian” frontier groups that had become compliant. During the second and third century CE, large numbers of nomadic people migrated into China to serve as serfs or mercenaries.¹⁶ A power vacuum emerged in the border area again, and the Tuoba, along with other steppe peoples, were attracted to move even further south to the northern border area of Chinese dynasties’ territory.¹⁷ In the late second century CE, the Tuoba people launched their second wave of migration. They travelled southeast and finally arrived at the southern slope of Yin Mountain 陰山, the former heartland of the Xiongnu people.¹⁸

The Tuoba people lived in this Yin Mountain area for the next three centuries.¹⁹ During this period, under several strong chieftains, they evolved from being a nomadic tribe into a sedentary state.

Tuoba Liwei 拓跋力微 (r. 220-277) was the first chieftain after the second migration. In 258 CE he successfully formed a tribal confederacy to rule the Yin Mountain area.²⁰ That is why the Western Jin Dynasty originally referred to the Tuoba

¹⁵ *WS*, 1.2.

¹⁶ Barfield writes: “When revolts arose inside China, the Han government saw the nomads as both a danger to the dynasty and as an important defense.” See Thomas J. Barfield, *The perilous frontier: nomadic empires and China* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 92. For similar discussions, see Tang Changru, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao*, 121-81. One Western Jin official anxiously noted that half the population in the Guanzhong area 關中, the heartland of the Western Jin dynasty, were non-Chinese then. See *JS*, 56.1533.

¹⁷ Tian Yuqing, *Tuoba Shitan*, 147. For more detailed descriptions about this migration route, see Wu Songyan 吳松岩, “Zaoqi Xianbei muzang yanjiu 早期鮮卑墓葬研究” (PhD diss., Jilin University, Changchun, 2010), 95-98.

¹⁸ *WS*, 1.2. This area had served as the heartland of many mighty nomadic powers, such as the Xiongnu, Tuoba, Turk, and Tangut.

¹⁹ Some Tuoba people kept on migrating southwest and ultimately settled down in the Hehuang 河湟 region (in the middle of present-day Gansu 甘肅 province). See *JS*, 126.3141-58. This group of Tuoba was called as Tufa 秃髮 people and they established the South Liang 南涼 state (397-414). Further studies indicate that some of them became the ancestors of the Tangut and Tibetan people. See Lü Yifei 呂一飛, “Tangdai Tubo yu Weijin nanbeichao de tufa Xianbei 唐代吐蕃與魏晉南北朝的秃髮鮮卑,” *Zhongguo zangxue* 中國藏學 4 (2004): 146-153.

²⁰ Holcombe, “The Xianbei in Chinese History,” 16.

tribe as “a Xianbei tribe led by Liwei” 鮮卑力微.²¹ In less than two decades, the confederacy collapsed and Liwei died soon afterwards.²²

Three decades after Tuoba Liwei’s death, in 307, another powerful Tuoba leader, Tuoba Yilu 拓跋猗盧 (r. 307-316), was enthroned. After serving the Western Jin Dynasty as a mercenary in their battles against non-Chinese usurpers, in 310 the Western Jin Dynasty granted Yilu the title of “Chanyu” 單於,²³ and enfeoffed him with the land of Dai 代, a rich agrarian area in northern China, effectively making him Duke of Dai 代公. In 315, Yilu even received the title of King of Dai 代王, which entitled him to establish the Kingdom of Dai (315-376).²⁴ However, only one year later, in the midst of disputes concerning his successor, Yilu was killed by his son.²⁵

In 338 another famous Tuoba ruler, Tuoba Shiyijian 拓跋什翼犍 (r. 338-376) became the king of Dai. Shiyijian seems to have been a formidable strategist. On the one hand, he strengthened Dai’s power by looting other steppe tribes. On the other, he gradually abandoned Tuoba’s former steppe politics and built a Chinese-style state with bureaucratic and legal institutions.²⁶ Shiyijian also built the capital of Dai in Shengle 盛樂 and provided his people with nearly half a century of relative peace. This came to an end in 376, when the Former Qin Dynasty 前秦 (351-394), which then ruled over the northern part of China, attacked and conquered Dai. Shiyijian was reportedly killed while attempting to escape.²⁷

²¹ JS, 3.65. Liwei seems to have become subject to the Cao Wei Dynasty and the subsequent Western Jin Dynasty, and sent his son to Luoyang (the capital of both dynasties) as a hostage, as was customary at the time. WS, 1.4-5. In ancient China, sending a hostage to the Chinese government was a conventional way for nomadic tribes to express their submission. Cf. Yang Lien-sheng, “Hostages in Chinese History,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15(1952): 507-521.

²² JS, 36.1057, WS, 1.5 records that the Eastern Jin had concocted a plot to alienate the Tuoba confederacy.

²³ The title *Chanyu* was coined by the Xiongnu Empire to denote their rulers. After their empire collapsed, the Eastern Han and the later Chinese dynasties bestowed the title *Chanyu* on the steppe rulers. The Northern Wei later invented the new title of *Khan* 可汗 and made this title the legitimate one for subsequent steppe powers. See Luo Xin, “Xiongnu Chanyu minghao yanjiu 匈奴單於名號研究,” *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* 2 (2006): 23-36.

²⁴ WS, 1.7.

²⁵ Ibid 1.8-9. In Chinese historiography, the Dai state is never regarded as one of the Sixteen Kingdoms 十六國. The reason, as Klein says, is that “it was an ill-organized confederacy of nomads that maintained a precarious existence.” See Klein, “The Contributions of Xianbei States,” 118.

²⁶ WS, 1.9-10.

²⁷ Ibid., 1. 11-17.

1.1.2 Rise and Fall of the Northern Wei Dynasty

After defeating the Kingdom of Dai in 376, the Former Qin Dynasty divided Dai territory into two parts, which were granted to the Tiefu 鐵弗 tribe and the Dugu 獨孤 tribe.²⁸ Two men from the Tuoba tribe who could potentially create trouble were put under supervision. Tuoba Kuduo 拓拔窟咄 (?-386), the oldest surviving prince of Tuoba Shiyijian, was imprisoned in Chang'an 長安, the capital city of the Former Qin,²⁹ while the grandson (or son) of Tuoba Shiyijian,³⁰ Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪 (371-409), was guarded by the Dugu tribe.³¹ In 383, the Former Qin Dynasty collapsed almost overnight after suffering a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Eastern Jin Dynasty 東晉 (317-420).³² In the ensuing decades, northern China witnessed various states emerging and warring against each other, which was a positive development for the Tuoba people.

On February 20, 386, Tuoba Gui declared the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Dai and acceded to the throne.³³ This date is seen as the birth of the Northern Wei Dynasty, given that Tuoba Gui in the next decade renamed his state, changing it from Dai to Wei. As Klein states, “succession among the early Tuoba was ‘fraternal’, i.e. passed from elder to younger brother.”³⁴ Therefore, in the Tuoba people’s eyes, Tuoba Gui was not a legitimate king because the title should have gone to his uncle, Tuoba Kuduo.³⁵ Some Tuoba people even planned a coup to kill Tuoba Gui. A fledgling ruler, Tuoba Gui thus fled to his mother’s tribe, the Helan 賀蘭 tribe.³⁶ Fortunately for him, the Later Yan Dynasty 後燕 (384-407), the contemporaneous Xianbei rulers of the northern Yellow River basin (the area on the lower reaches of the Yellow River),

²⁸ *WS*, 24.610. The Tiefu tribe was a Xiongnu tribe that remained a major enemy of the Tuoba people. It is this tribe that appealed for military support from the Former Qin Dynasty, which led to the collapse of the Kingdom of Dai. The Dugu tribe, on the other hand, served as a loyal ally of the Tuoba people for a long time.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.385-386.

³⁰ It is a little difficult to determine the relationship between Shiyijian and Tuoba Gui. *WS* describes Tuoba Gui as the grandson of Shiyijian, while the *SS* and *NQS* name Tuoba Gui as the youngest son of Shiyijian.

³¹ *WS*, 24.610.

³² *JS*, 114.3917-3919. This battle, known as the “Battle of Fei River” 淝水之戰, is considered to be one of the most significant battles in Chinese history. See Michael C. Rogers, “The Myth of the Battle of the Fei River (AD 383),” *T’oung Pao* 54 (1968): 50-72.

³³ *WS*, 1.20. In the Chinese lunar calendar, the said date is the sixth day of the first month.

³⁴ Klein, “The Contributions of Xianbei States,” 97.

³⁵ In fact, the Former Qin treated the Tuoba Kuduo as a more legitimate Tuoba leader, and Dugu tribe also supported Tuoba Kuduo’s claim to be king. See *WS*, 1.20, 15.385-86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.385-386.

offered Tuoba Gui help.³⁷ In the winter of 386, the Later Yan defeated Tuoba Kuduo and secured Tuoba Gui's throne.³⁸

In the following years, Tuoba Gui solidified his rule through a series of military victories. He defeated most of the steppe powers and established his hegemony over the steppes.³⁹ In 391, Tuoba Gui challenged the Later Yan's power by supporting the enemies of that dynasty.⁴⁰ The Later Yan suffered a bitter defeat at the hands of Tuoba Gui in 395.⁴¹ In the following year, Murong Chui 慕容垂 (r. 386-396), the ruler of the Later Yan, led his remaining troops on a revenge mission, but after only a few successes he grew too sick to continue this campaign and died during the retreat.⁴² With its military power all but exhausted, the Later Yan could be conquered by Tuoba Gui. To display his ambition, Tuoba Gui chose "Glorious Beginning" (*Huangshi* 皇始) as the name of his reign in August of 396. In September of that year, Tuoba Gui led his troops to the south and occupied the northern central realm, the Later Yan's territory.⁴³

In early 398, after years of war, Tuoba Gui returned to the new capital Pingcheng to build his dynasty, which he named Wei 魏.⁴⁴ On January 24, 399, Tuoba Gui declared himself "Son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), a title reserved for the highest rulers in the Chinese tradition.⁴⁵

³⁷ The reason for their support may be that Tuoba Gui had a blood tie with the Later Yan's royal family. Tuoba Gui's grandmother was a Murong princess and that the Later Yan Dynasty had been established by the Murong tribe 慕容. In addition, Tuoba Gui became subject to the Later Yan and sent his younger brother as a hostage. See Li Haiyan 李海葉, "Tuoba Xianbei yu murongshi de guanxi ji beiwei chunian de zhengzhi bianluan 拓跋鮮卑與慕容氏的關係及北魏初年的政治變亂," *Neimenggu shifan daxue xuebao* 內蒙古師範大學學報 37.5 (2008): 115-117.

³⁸ *WS*, 1.21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.21-23. During this period, Tuoba Gui defeated the Kumoxi tribe 庫莫奚 (in 387), the Tiele tribe 鐵勒 (in 388 and 389), the Rouran tribe 柔然 (in 391), and the Tiefu tribe (in 391). As Klein notes, "With each victory, the Tuoba seized quantities of horses, sheep, and cattle which could be used as payment for the emerging state's major supporters." See Klein, "The Contributions of Xianbei States," 67.

⁴⁰ *WS*, 1.24-25. Klein, "The Contributions of Xianbei States," 65-66.

⁴¹ Tuoba Gui recalled his troops and avoided any direct fights with the Later Yan armies. But when his enemies retreated, Tuoba Gui launched surprise attack. See *WS*, 1.24-25. Tuoba Gui even ordered the brutal burial of almost fifty thousand surrenders alive in order to weaken the Later Yan's power as much as possible. See Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (hereafter *ZZTJ*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 108. 3423-25.

⁴² *JS*, 123.3089-90.

⁴³ *WS*, 1.26-33.

⁴⁴ For the study of why Tuoba Gui adopted this dynasty name, see He Dezhang, "Beiwei Guohao," 113-25. I will also specifically discuss this issue in Section 2.1.1.

⁴⁵ *WS*, 1.32.

In the early fifth century, the Northern Wei focused on consolidating their control over the northern half of what is now China, with no discernible intention to unite the southern half as well. Chinese administrative methods were gradually adopted, with the result that this fledgling empire was gradually transformed from being a nomadic state to a Chinese style empire.⁴⁶

The first two Northern Wei's emperors did not live long lives. Tuoba Gui was murdered by one of his sons at the age of thirty-eight.⁴⁷ The next emperor, Tuoba Si 拓跋嗣 (r. 409-423), died of a disease at the age of thirty-one after years of battles against the steppe powers and the Liu Song Dynasty 劉宋 (420-479). The third emperor, Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾 (r. 423-452), lived much longer than his forbears. He set about conquering the rest of China in five steps. The first was to regain dominance of the steppes, which he achieved in 429 by defeating the Kingdom of Rouran 柔然 (330-555), which ruled the steppes at the time.⁴⁸ The second step was to unite northwest China by conquering the Kingdom of Xia 夏 (407-431), which he achieved in 430.⁴⁹ The third step was to conquer the northeast of China, which he achieved in 436 when the Northern Wei defeated the Northern Yan 北燕 (407-436).⁵⁰ The fourth move was to unite the far northwest of China, and the Northern Wei indeed annexed the Northern Liang 北涼 (401-439) in 439.⁵¹ The last step was to conquer southern China and defeat the ruling house of that area, the Liu Song Dynasty.⁵² Tuoba Tao launched an extensive military campaign against the Liu Song Dynasty in 450, but his armies were firmly blocked at the Yangzi River. Tuoba Tao reportedly grew increasingly mentally unstable, apparently due to his frustration, and was killed by an eunuch in 452.⁵³

⁴⁶ See Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 480-483.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 490. Tuoba Gui is said to have become increasingly tyrannical from about 400 CE.

⁴⁸ *WS*, 91.2293. In the fifth century, the Rouran people were the dominant power on the steppes. In 402, they built their state and invaded the northern frontier of the Northern Wei frequently. See Nikolay N. Kradin, "From Tribal Confederation to Empire: The evolution of the Rouran society," *Acta Orientalia* 58 (2005): 149-169.

⁴⁹ *WS*, 4.71-73.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.86-87.

⁵¹ This move, as Barfield says, brought "a final end to the 'period of the Sixteen Kingdoms' – the longest period of political and social fragmentation ever experienced in China's two thousand years of imperial history." See Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 86. Also see *WS*, 4.89-90.

⁵² The Liu Song Dynasty was a powerful competitor. This Chinese dynasty cherished the ambition to "rescue" northern China from "barbarian" hands.

⁵³ *WS*, 82.2012-13.

The Northern Wei's rulers after Tuoba Tao focused on developing their dynasty's power by introducing various Chinese policies and customs. The famous pioneers of this strategy were Empress Dowager Wenming 文明太后 (442-490) and her grandson, Tuoba Hong 拓拔宏, who is better known as Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 471-499).⁵⁴ Through their efforts, various Chinese-style political institutions (such as the equal field system, Chinese-style bureaucracy, and legal and financial systems) were introduced and the civil administration was gradually filled by Chinese officials.⁵⁵ In 494, this movement reached a peak when Emperor Xiaowen transferred most of the aristocrats, officials, and residents in Pingcheng to the new capital, Luoyang, a city "filled with the resonance of Chinese dynastic power."⁵⁶ In the new capital, in the years 494 to 496, Emperor Xiaowen ordered the Tuoba aristocrats to adopt Chinese surnames, speak Chinese, wear Chinese clothes, intermarry with Chinese nobility, and follow Chinese customs and rites.⁵⁷

However, an escalating social schism eventually destroyed the Northern Wei Dynasty. To defend against steppe invasions, the Northern Wei deployed a large number of Tuoba troops in six garrisons along the frontiers in its early period.⁵⁸ In the late fifth century, the transfer of the capital to Luoyang and the diminishing importance of the border garrisons caused the Tuoba garrisons to lose their honored socioeconomic status and privileges, which led to them staging a military uprising in 524.⁵⁹ The Northern Wei then became embroiled in a full-scale civil war. In the end, Gao Huan 高歡 (496-547) and Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507-556), two border generals, wrestled for power and in 534 they separated the Northern Wei into two courts, the Eastern Wei 東魏 (534-550) and the Western Wei 西魏 (535-557).⁶⁰ Soon afterwards, the former one was succeeded by the Northern Qi 北齊 (550-577), while the latter

⁵⁴ In 466, the Empress Dowager of Wenming launched a coup and became the real ruler of the Northern Wei for the next two decades. See *WS*, 13.328-30.

⁵⁵ Wolfram A. Eberhard, *A History of China* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 144-47. Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 508-513.

⁵⁶ Denis C. Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 3, Sui and T'ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 51.

⁵⁷ Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 125. Xianbei in Chinese history 25

⁵⁸ For most of the fifth century, these six garrisons served as fundamental military bases in fighting with the Rouran state. From the end of the fifth century, the Rouran state was involved in ceaseless battles with the Tiele people. The northern border thus became peaceful and the importance of these garrison-towns decreased. See Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 528-531.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 531-533. In 523, the frontier troops suffered a severe food shortage when they defended the territory against the Rouran invasion. This was the last straw, and all six garrisons rebelled in 524.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 545-550. The Eastern Wei was succeeded by the Northern Qi while the Western Wei was replaced by the Northern Zhou.

dynasty was replaced by the Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581). The epoch of the Northern Wei had ended.

1.2 History of Southern China

In the three centuries following the collapse of the Western Jin Dynasty in 317, the south of China was governed by the Eastern Jin (318-420) and a series of ruling houses collectively referred to as the “Southern Dynasties” 南朝: Song (420-479), Qi 齊 (479-502), Liang 梁 (502-557), and Chen 陳 (557-588). On the one hand, these Chinese-ruled dynasties sheltered masses of Chinese refugees from the north and they ward off waves of attacks by northern “barbarian” powers. Most of them also competed with the Northern Wei for becoming the rightful ruler of the central realm. On the other hand, the Southern Dynasties experienced unceasing internal struggles between powerful cliques and imperial kinsmen, rendering any stable development within their territory impossible. After nearly three centuries, in 589, the south of China was conquered by a successor of the Northern Wei, the Sui Dynasty. The histories of the Eastern Jin and the Southern Dynasties are outlined in this section.

1.2.1 History of the Eastern Jin Dynasty

In 317, the Western Jin Dynasty collapsed after years of uprisings of the northern “barbarians.” In the next year, Sima Rui 司馬睿 (276-323), the King of Langye 琅琊王, ascended the throne of the Jin Dynasty in Jianye 建鄴 and initiated the Eastern Jin period.⁶¹

The history of Eastern Jin can be described as a continuous alternation of dominant noble families. This is because the Eastern Jin emperors had limited power, owing to their dependence on the support of a few noble families who possessed political and military power. These noble families, meanwhile, strove to increase their power and usurp the throne thereafter, making the politics of the region increasingly

⁶¹ JS, 6.143-149. Both dynasties named themselves “Jin.” Based on the location of their respective capitals and power bases, scholars use the term Western Jin to denote the Jin Dynasty, which had its capital in Luoyang and ruled the whole of China. By contrast, the Eastern Jin refers to the Jin Dynasty that ruled the south of China and had its capital in Jianye. As Jianye is located to the east of the Yangtze Plain, this dynasty is called the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Jianye 建鄴, modern-day Nanjing 南京, was called “Jianye” by the Eastern Jin and renamed “Jiankang” 建康 in the Southern Dynasties period. For a more detailed study, see Section 2.3.3.

unstable.⁶² The Wang family of Langye 琅琊王氏 was the first influential noble family. They provided decisive support in establishing the Eastern Jin and dominated its politics thereafter.⁶³ In 322, Wang Dun 王敦 (266-324), the military leader of the Wang family, as well as the governor of the Jingzhou area 荊州, rebelled and controlled the court for the following two years. However, he died of illness in 324, on the eve of his long-prepared usurpation.⁶⁴ Thereafter, the Yu family of Yingchuan 潁川庾氏 dominated the court for a short period until the Huan family of Qiaoguo 譙國桓氏 came to the fore.⁶⁵ Huan Wen 桓溫 (312-373), the leader of the Huan family undertook three successful military expeditions against western and northern “barbarian” states. These successes allowed the Eastern Jin to temporarily reoccupy most of the land south of the Yellow River from 356 to 365, and Huan Wen’s power allow him to dominate the court.⁶⁶ Huan Wen died on the eve of his long-prepared usurpation in 373.⁶⁷

The mounting threats from noble families compelled the Xie family of Chenjun 陳郡謝氏, the subsequent dominant noble family of the Eastern Jin, to form a new national army in 377,⁶⁸ namely the famous Northern Garrison Army 北府軍, which was stationed near the capital and which distinguished itself in the battle against the Former Qin in 383.⁶⁹ However, this army soon slid into disarray because various noble families fought each other for control. Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369-404), the new leader of the Huan family and the governor of the Jingzhou area, rebelled in 402. He soon controlled the court, since the Northern Garrison Army surrendered to him in order to preserve its power. Huan Xuan forced the emperor to yield the throne and founded the Chu 楚 Dynasty (403-405) in 403. However, no less than two years later,

⁶² As Eberhard describes it, “The period of the Southern Dynasties is perhaps the period of Chinese history in which cliques were best developed and most powerful.” See Eberhard, *A History of China*, 158. For influential studies on this topic, see Tian Yuqing, *Dongjin Menfa zhengzhi* 東晉門閥政治 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1989), 17-23 and Dennis Grafflin, “The Great Family in medieval south China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41(1981): 65-74.

⁶³ *JS*, 65.1745-54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.2553-65.

⁶⁵ Tian Yuqing, *Dongjin Menfa*, 106-39.

⁶⁶ *JS*, 98.2568-82.

⁶⁷ Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 310-19.

⁶⁸ Chennault provides a detailed study of one noble family, the Xie family. See Cynthia L. Chennault, “Lofty Gates or Solitary Impoverishment? Xie Family Members of the Southern Dynasties,” *T’oung Pao* 85 (1999): 249-327.

⁶⁹ Rogers, “The Myth of the Battle,” 50-72. That battle is known as Battle of Fei River, in which nearly 800,000 Former Qin troops were defeated by 80,000 Northern Garrison troops.

Liu Yu 劉裕 (363-422), a general of Northern Garrison Army, defeated Huan Xuan and restored the throne to the Eastern Jin in 405.⁷⁰

After putting the Eastern Jin emperor back on the throne, it seems that Liu Yu was intent on founding his own dynasty with himself on the throne. According to historiographical sources, he apparently believed military achievement would increase his authority, enabling him to seize the throne for himself.⁷¹ From 405, Liu Yu launched several military campaigns against various northern states and conquered the Southern Yan 南燕 (398-410) and the Later Qin 後秦 (384-417) in 410 and 417 respectively. These victories enabled the Eastern Jin to reoccupy most of China south of the Yellow River, or “four sevenths of All Under Heaven” 七分天下而有其四, as the Liu Song scholar Pei Ziye 裴子野 (469-530) put it.⁷² Thereafter, Liu Yu left the front line and returned to Jianye to carry out his usurpation. His troops soon collapsed in ensuing infighting, leaving most of the newly acquired territories to be re-occupied by the northern states, such as Xia and Northern Wei. In 420, Liu Yu finally forced his emperor

Map 2. Map of the early Liu Song Dynasty and the Northern Wei in 440.



⁷⁰ JS, 99.2585-604. Eberhard, *A History of China*, 161-63.

⁷¹ Ibid., 162.

⁷² Pei Ziye 裴子野, “Songlue 宋略,” in *Wenyuan yinhua 文苑英華*, ed. Li Fang 李昉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 754.3947.

to abdicate and crowned himself the emperor of Song state 宋, ushering in the beginning of the Southern Dynasties.⁷³

1.2.2 History of the Southern Dynasties

History of the Southern Dynasties was marked by fierce infighting within the royal family. This is because the princes, rather than the noble families of the Eastern Jin, firmly dominated political power throughout the period of the Southern Dynasties.⁷⁴ Therefore, the Southern Dynasties slid into disorder due to internal succession crises and were finally replaced by other dynasties.⁷⁵

Emperors Wu 宋武帝 (r. 420-422) and Wen 宋文帝 (r. 424-453) of the Liu Song Dynasty are famous for their diligent politics.⁷⁶ Their reigns can be seen as the most powerful and prosperous periods in the Southern Dynasties' era. Emperor Wen undertook several military campaigns against the Northern Wei, but all of them failed.⁷⁷ In 450, the Northern Wei raided the Liu Song but achieved only a Pyrrhic victory. The great losses suffered by both sides in this battle heralded in a long strategic stalemate.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Liu Song Dynasty soon slid into instability. Emperors Xiaowu 宋孝武帝 (r. 453-464) and Ming 宋明帝 (r. 465-472) both ascended to the throne by usurpation and began their reigns by killing all the

⁷³ Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 357-59. Liu Yu used Song 宋, the name of his birthplace, to name his dynasty. Later people called this dynasty the Liu Song Dynasty 劉宋 or "the Song Dynasty ruled by the Liu family," in order to distinguish it from the later and more famous Song Dynasty 宋 (960-1279).

⁷⁴ The Southern Dynasties drew lessons from the collapse of the Eastern Jin and thus preserved political and military power inside the imperial clans. For detailed discussions, see Chen Yinque, *Wei Jin nanbeichao*, 140-56, 191, and Tian Yuqing, *Dongjin Menfa*, 326-29. Lewis also says, "The southern dynasties maintained their authority by distributing troops throughout the key regions of the empire and placing each regional command under a member of the imperial family." See Lewis, *China Between Empires*, 70.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *China Between Empires*, 71. Chennault also writes that the "Southern Dynasties' emperors held their thrones much more briefly, for a span reaching only six years on average. The dynasties themselves were ephemeral, and internal crises of succession, often violent in nature, punctuated the annals of each regime." See Chennault, "Lofty Gates or Solitary Impoverishment," 257.

⁷⁶ Emperor Wu is the posthumous title of Liu Yu.

⁷⁷ *SS*, 5.78, 99, 101. Emperor Wen's excessive micromanagement of generals and insufficient preparations for campaigns could largely account for these failures.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.2344-53. Chen Yinque provides a detailed explanation of this stage of strategic stalemate. See Chen Yinque, *Wei Jin nanbeichao*, 226-39.

descendants of the former emperors.⁷⁹ The political situation became increasingly volatile, until Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成 (427-482), a relative of the imperial clan, gradually gained power, crowned himself emperor in 479, and founded the Southern Qi Dynasty in 479.⁸⁰

Similarly to the Liu Song Dynasty, although the first two monarchs of the Southern Qi Dynasty, Emperors Gao 齊高帝 (r. 479-482) and Wu 齊武帝 (r. 482-493), allegedly ruled their states diligently, most of their successors were reported to be cruel and prone to usurpation.⁸¹ This was until Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464-549), a distant cousin of the imperial clan, came to the fore.⁸² He rebelled and usurped the throne in 502. His dynasty is known as the Liang Dynasty.⁸³

Xiao Yan, or Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty 梁武帝 (r.502-549), was famous for his support of the arts, literature, and Buddhism.⁸⁴ His reign lasted nearly half a century, from 502 to 549, and is considered one of the most peaceful and prosperous periods of the Southern Dynasties era. Emperor Wu was said to have become fatuous in his old age. From 527 to 547, the Liang government was forced no less than four times to provide extravagant donations to a Buddhist temple in order to “redeem” their emperor from the temple since he had declared himself a monk and abdicated the throne.⁸⁵ The final stroke came in 548 when Hou Jin 侯景 (503-552), a brutal fugitive general of the Eastern Wei, rebelled. Hou Jin besieged the capital city of Jiankang for nearly a year, which caused Emperor Wu to starve to death, after which Hou finally captured the city and destroyed it.⁸⁶ In 549, Hou Jin finally dominated the Liang court and soon established his short-lived dynasty of Han 漢, which lasted only from 551 to 552.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 365-67. Eberhard thus notes that “nothing happened at court but drinking, licentiousness, and continual murders,” Eberhard, *A History of China*, 163.

⁸⁰ It was rumored at the time that the imperial family of Liu Song Dynasty would be replaced by King of Qi 齊. Xiao Daocheng thus asked for the title of King of Qi first and named his state Qi later. See *NQS*, 28.517.

⁸¹ Emperor Gao is the posthumous title of Xiao Daocheng.

⁸² Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 370. Xiao Yan was the governor of Yong province 雍州, the northern part of the Jingzhou area, at that time.

⁸³ Yao Silian 姚思廉, *Liangshu* 梁書 (History of the Liang Dynasty, hereafter *LS*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 1.4-30, 2.33-35. Also see Eccles, “The Seizure of the Mandate,” 169-180. Xiao Yan was enfeoffed with the Liang 梁 area and he named his state Liang. See *LS* 1.17.

⁸⁴ Eberhard, *A History of China*, 164. Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 417.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 788-91.

⁸⁶ *WS*, 98.2181-88.

⁸⁷ *ZZTJ*, 162.5071.

Next, Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508-555), the prince of Liang, as well as the governor of the Jingzhou area, came to the fore. He defeated Hou Jin in 552 and ascended the throne in Jiangling 江陵 (the capital of the Jingzhou area).⁸⁸ In 554, the Western Wei raided Jiangling and killed Xiao Yi. The Liang general, Chen Baxian 陳霸先 (503-559), restored the Liang Dynasty in Jiankang, usurped the throne and founded the last southern dynasty, Chen.⁸⁹

The Chen Dynasty dominated only the Lower Yangtze Plain, a much smaller area than the other southern dynasties.⁹⁰ This dynasty was even feebler in military power than the preceding dynasties and was finally conquered by the Sui Dynasty in 589. The Period of Disunion thus ended.⁹¹

⁸⁸ *LS*, 5.113-120. Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 422-26.

⁸⁹ Yao Silian, *Chen Shu* 陳書 (History of the Chen Dynasty) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 1.7-25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.51-55.

⁹¹ Wang Zhongluo, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi*, 435-37.