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

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Citation

Liu, P. (2018, April 25). *Political legitimacy in Chinese history : the case of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-535)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61623>

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Issue Date: 2018-04-25

Chapter 3. Early Views on the Legitimacy of the Northern Wei

By investigating the specific legitimation practices undertaken by the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, the previous chapter provided a preliminary study of the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. This chapter and the next two chapters comprise a study of influential and representative views of the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute held by scholars at various times in Chinese history. Specifically, the focus of this chapter is on five early scholars who were active either during the Period of Disunion or in the centuries that followed it. Two sets of historians in this period, Wei Shou and his southern peers Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian, debated about whether the Northern Wei or the Southern Dynasties were the legitimate rulers of the central realm. The question that will be addressed is: Why did they share similar views on legitimacy but yet come to different conclusions? The Tang scholars Li Yanshou and Huangfu Shi relied on factors such as the occupation of the central realm, the duration of reign, and the adoption of Confucianism to discuss the legitimacy dispute. Why does the former one support the legitimate status of both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, while the latter accepts only the Southern Dynasties' legitimacy? These questions are answered in this chapter by investigating pre-Song scholars' discussions about the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute.

3.1 Views in the Period of Disunion

The Northern Wei was one of the first non-Chinese dynasties in China's history that maintained a relatively successful and lengthy reign, and challenged its Chinese peers' legitimate status in a direct and fundamental way. In terms of the ethnic criterion of legitimacy, a legitimate ruler of the central realm is defined by his adherence to Chinese culture or virtues. Therefore, in discussing the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute, historians in the Period of Disunion, Wei Shou, Shen Yue, and Xiao Zixian, draw a connection between "being Chinese" and being the legitimate ruler of the central realm, although they come to drastically different conclusions. Wei Shou rejected the rightful status of the Southern Dynasties by denouncing them as the

“Insular Barbarians” (*daoyi* 島夷). Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian criticized the Northern Wei’s legitimacy by describing that dynasty as “Plaited Barbarians” (*suolu* 索虜). These historians also stressed that their own dynasties were Chinese. In the following section the relevant views on these two groups of historians are examined.

3.1.1 Wei Shou

Wei Shou was an eminent scholar who was active from the late Northern Wei period to the end of the Northern Qi Dynasty. Due to his precocity, the Northern Wei court bestowed on Wei Shou the title of “Erudite of the National University” (*taixue boshi* 太學博士) in his youth.¹ He also maintained a high official position in the Northern Qi Dynasty.² Wei Shou’s views on the legitimacy of the Northern Wei can be ascertained from the *Weishu*, a book compiled under his editorship. In 551, he was appointed by the Northern Qi court to compose this official history of the Northern Wei.³ In the autumn of 555, Wei Shou submitted the 130 volumes of the *Weishu* to the court.⁴ This history was accepted as a success and is now included in the Twenty-Four Histories, the corpus of official histories of imperial China.

One major purpose of compiling the *Weishu* was to highlight the Northern Wei’s legitimacy, a fact accounted for by the following two factors. On the one hand, as editor-in-chief of the *Weishu*, Wei Shou manifestly supported the Northern Wei’s legitimacy since he had long served that dynasty. On the other hand, the compilation of the *Weishu* had significant meaning for the Northern Qi. In the traditional Chinese context, the compilation of an official history by a successive dynasty had two major aims, namely to present a historical summary of the preceding dynasty, and, more

¹ Li Baiyao 李百藥 comp., *Beiqi Shu* 北齊書 (History of the Northern Qi Dynasty) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 37.483.

² *Ibid.*, 37.483-87. Wei Shou played a significant role in establishing the Northern Qi. In 550, the last emperor of the Eastern Wei abdicated his throne and transferred it to Gao Yang 高洋 (550-559), the first emperor of the Northern Qi. Wei Shou had strongly suggested to Gao Yang that he should usurp the throne, and he actually drafted all the abdication edicts.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.487. Wei Shou personally possessed an immense amount of historical material. The Northern Wei had left a considerable number of official annals. Some historians prior to Wei Shou also compiled various histories of the Northern Wei. See Holmgren, *Annals of Tai*, 14-18. Meanwhile, Wei Shou received significant support from the Northern Qi court. Emperor Wenxuan 文宣 (550-559) promised absolute support, as well as no intervention in Wei Shou’s work. He also assigned some assistants to aid Wei Shou. Concerning the historical resources of the *Weishu*, see James R. Ware, “Notes on the History of the Weishu,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 52.01(1932): 35-45.

⁴ Li Baiyao, *Beiqi Shu*, 37.488. The *Weishu* encountered a great deal of criticism after it was released. Further studies see Zhou Yiliang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 236-272. Ware, “Notes on the History,” 35-45.

significantly, to indicate that the subsequent dynasty had inherited legitimacy from its predecessor. Richard Davis explains that “for an upstart regime anxious about its own legitimacy, the writing of history presented an ideal opportunity to illustrate the former dynasty’s loss of popular support, to justify its overthrow, and to demonstrate a genuine transfer of heaven’s mandate.”⁵ The Northern Qi was at that time competing with the Western Wei, which was a continuation of the Northern Wei in exile, to be seen as the rightful successors of the Northern Wei.⁶ The compilation of the *Weishu* formed an important part of this task, and it therefore not only highlights the legitimacy of the Northern Wei but also describes the Northern Wei as the predecessor of the Northern Qi.

Rather than focusing on how the *Weishu* supported the Northern Qi’s legitimacy, however, the emphasis in this section is on how this history supported the Northern Wei’s legitimacy. In general, the author of the *Weishu* accused the Southern Dynasties of being “barbarians” while highlighting that the Northern Wei was a Chinese dynasty.

(1) Upon initial consideration, it would seem strange to call the Southern Dynasties “barbarian,” because the ethnically Chinese elite of the Western Jin, which had been exiled from northern China, dominated these dynasties. So how did Wei Shou arrive at the idea that the Southern Dynasties were “barbarian”?

In the *Weishu*, Wei Shou uses the term “Insular Barbarians” to refer to the Southern Dynasties and their rulers.⁷ This name possibly derives from the *Book of Documents*, in which the term is used to denote ancient ethnically non-Chinese “barbarians” who resided on islands in the southeastern Chinese seas.⁸ Wei Shou provides three reasons for which this label would suit the Southern Dynasties and their rulers. Firstly, he points out that many people in his day viewed southern China as an area that was far from the central realm and too primeval for humankind to live in.⁹ Southern China in Wei Shou’s eyes belonged to the “barbarian” lands. Secondly,

⁵ Richard Davis, “Historiography as Politics,” 42.

⁶ The Northern Wei was finally divided into two courts, the Eastern Wei and the Western Wei. The former was succeeded by the Northern Qi while the latter was replaced by the Northern Zhou. It is remarkable that the *Weishu* records the emperors of both the Northern Wei and the Eastern Wei, but no Western Wei rulers, which suggests that the historiographical writers viewed the Eastern Wei and its successor, the Northern Qi, but not the Western Wei or the Northern Zhou, as the legitimate successors of the Northern Wei.

⁷ *WS*, 96.2092.

⁸ *Shangshu zhengyi*, 146.

⁹ *WS*, 96.2092.

Wei Shou mentions a popular view that was held in northern China, namely that the local people in southern China were uncivilized beasts and were consequently derided as “raccoon dogs” (*hezi* 貉子).¹⁰ Finally, Wei Shou records various cases in his *Weishu* to demonstrate that the southern rulers were brutal and licentious, even though many cases were based, in part, on demonstrably exaggerated or forged political rumors, as various pre-modern studies indicated.¹¹ An immoral ruler definitely fails to be a legitimate holder of the Mandate of Heaven, according to the moral criterion of legitimacy. Wei Shou further argues that point, stressing that the southern rulers were “barbarous” in a political sense due to their immoral behavior.¹² In short, the Southern Dynasties were located in “barbarian” regions, consisted of “barbarian” people, and were dominated by “barbaric” rulers. Since southern China was also where ancient “Insular Barbarians” were thought to have lived, Wei Shou thus reintroduces this age-old term to denote the Southern Dynasties.

Furthermore, Wei Shou denigrates the Southern Dynasties by equating them with other non-Chinese states. To achieve that goal, he mixes the records of the Southern Dynasties with those of other non-Chinese states. For instance, he includes the Eastern Jin and another contemporaneous state, the Chenghan state 成漢國 (303-349, a non-Chinese state that occupied the Sichuan 四川 area in that era), in one volume. Similarly, the Northern Yan 北燕 (407-439) (i.e. the Later Yan in exile, a Xianbei state) and the Liu Song Dynasty are included in the same volume. As discussed in Chapter 2, an abdication ensured a continuous lineage in which the Western Jin transferred its rule to the Southern Dynasties. Wei Shou demolishes that lineage in the *Weishu* and does not mention the succession relation between the Western Jin and the Southern Dynasties. He points out that both the non-Chinese states and the Southern Dynasties are illegitimate since they had “barbarous” rulers and governed “barbarian” territories.¹³

(2) Given that the Northern Wei rulers were Tuoba people, and hence “barbarian” in the view of early Chinese people, their non-Chinese ethnicity posed a challenge to their image as Chinese rulers, and hence to their political authority. The

¹⁰ Ibid., 96.2093. This kind of idea could have prevailed in the Northern Dynasties period. Yang Xuanzhi, for instance, expresses a similar view. See Yang Xuanzhi, *Luoyang qielan ji*, 113.

¹¹ Zhao Yi, *Nianershi zhaji*, 240-241. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾, *Shitong* 史通 (Chongqing: *Chongqing renmin chubanshe*, 1990), 287.

¹² *WS*, 95.2042.

¹³ Ibid., 95.2042, 97.2153.

ethnic criterion of legitimacy could invalidate the Tuoba ruler's qualification to be the legitimate ruler of the central realm. To solve this problem, the writer of the *Weishu* introduces various methods to prove that the Northern Wei and its ruler are "Chinese," thereby supporting this dynasty's legitimacy.

In the *Weishu* the Northern Wei is depicted as a common Chinese style dynasty. According to its description, the Northern Wei adopted Chinese politics and culture; their rulers were virtuous and capable; their officials were diligent and talented; their people were prosperous and civilized; their dynasty ruled over most areas of All Under Heaven; and all other states humbly paid their tribute to this powerful central realm.¹⁴ As Holcombe points out, "The *Weishu* for the most part avoids representing the Northern Wei too openly as a 'non-Chinese' state, and it often provides Chinese-style names for Xianbei people, rather than using their older polysyllabic Xianbei language names. With this adroit sleight of hand, the non-Chinese Xianbei were made to appear essentially Chinese – on paper."¹⁵ This image is somewhat idealized and contradicts historical reality. As described in Section 2.1.4, the Northern Wei had preserved many Tuoba political and cultural practices before Emperor Xiaowen introduced Chinese cultural conventions, and the next section offers similar evidence from the Southern Dynasties' historians. Therefore, the impression of a common Chinese style Northern Wei could be a creation of the *Weishu*.

The *Weishu* depicts the Tuoba rulers as the direct offspring of the Yellow Emperor, the legendary ruler celebrated as the founder of Chinese civilization and Chinese people. This history begins with a genealogical lineage of the Tuoba rulers. The first recorded one is Chang Yi, the youngest son of the Yellow Emperor. Omitting a few generations, the next Tuoba ruler is Shijun 始均, who is described as an official under two legendary sage kings, Yao (trad. 2356-2255 BCE) and Shun (trad. ca. 2294-2184 BCE), and was appointed "Ancestor of Agriculture" (*tianzu* 田祖) for his great accomplishments.¹⁶ After the third recorded Tuoba ancestor, Mao 毛, the *Weishu* provides a continuous lineage of Tuoba rulers until the Northern Wei. Apparently, this lineage not only demonstrates that the Tuoba rulers are the direct

¹⁴ Compared with the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu*, the *Weishu* has more biographies of those who were famous for their Confucian academic achievements (volume 84), achievements in literature (volume 85), or various Confucian virtues (volume 86, 87 and 92). This fact could also indicate Wei Shou's efforts to describe the Northern Wei as a civilized dynasty.

¹⁵ Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 3.

¹⁶ *WS*, 1.1.

descendants of the Yellow Emperor, but also shows a close relation between the ancient Tuoba rulers and the three legendary “founding fathers” of Chinese civilization: the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun. It thus promotes the idea that the Tuoba rulers could be viewed as authentic Chinese. To underscore this lineage, the *Weishu* also mentions that the Tuoba emperors had sacrificed to the Yellow Emperor, as well as to Yao and Shun, several times.¹⁷ Although the aforementioned lineage, as many current scholars such as Holmgren and Yao Dali 姚大力 point out, was mostly invented by Chinese consultants in the early Northern Wei period, Wei Shou accepts it and uses this lineage to depict the Northern Wei’s Tuoba rulers as Chinese.¹⁸

In addition to the genealogical lineage, the *Weishu* also indicates that the Northern Wei rulers’ adoption of Chinese culture supports their political legitimacy.¹⁹ It is interesting to see that the *Weishu* labels the Tufa 秃髮 people, a branch of the Tuoba people who moved to the northwest of China during Tuoba Liwei’s period, as “barbarians.”²⁰ Although sharing the same (invented) genealogy as the Tuoba, the Tufa people also descended from the Yellow Emperor, but became “barbarians” since they lived in “barbarian” lands and failed to adopt Chinese culture.²¹ For similar reasons, Wei Shou also describes many other Tuoba relatives, such as the Murong and Tiefu peoples, as “barbarians.”²²

In short, Wei Shou insists on the Northern Wei’s legitimate status and provides a “restored” image in the *Weishu*. In that image, the Southern Dynasties are “barbarian” because they occupy “barbarous” territory and both their population and their rulers are “barbaric” people, whereas the Tuoba Wei are “Chinese” because their rulers fully adopted Chinese culture and are the direct descendant of Chinese ancient ancestors.

¹⁷ Ibid., 108. 2733-40. Kang Le, *Cong xijiao*, 179.

¹⁸ Current scholars have discovered that this lineage was mostly invented by Chinese consultants in the early Northern Wei period, not by Wei Shou. See Holmgren, *Annals of Tai*, 12-18, 102. Yao Dali 姚大力, “Lun Tuoba xianbeibu de zaoqi lishi 論拓跋鮮卑部的早期歷史,” *Fudan xuebao* 復旦學報 2 (2005): 19-27.

¹⁹ The *Weishu* makes a general evaluation of each Northern Wei emperor. Virtually all of these evaluations highlight the Tuoba rulers’ virtuous personalities and cultural achievements. See *WS*, 4.109, 5.123, 6.132, 7.187, 8.215. Scholars have also discovered that Wei Shou intentionally omitted examples of the vicious or brutal behavior of these Northern Wei rulers. See Zhao Yi, *Nianershi zhaji*, 13.263-64.

²⁰ *WS*, 99.2200.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 95.2041-43. For the familial connections between the Tuoba people, the Murong people and the Tiefu people, see Klein, “The Contributions of Xianbei States,” 68-70.

3.1.2 Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian

Shen Yue was born to an eminent family of the Liu Song Dynasty.²³ Because of his great talent, Shen Yue once served as “Chancellor [literally: Libationer] of the National University” (*guozi jijiu* 國子祭酒) in the Southern Qi Dynasty.²⁴ Xiao Zixian was the grandson of Xiao Daocheng, the founder of the Southern Qi Dynasty.²⁵ When he was 13, the Liang Dynasty replaced the Southern Qi. However, Xiao Zixian maintained his nobility and served in various high-ranking positions.²⁶

In 487 and 514 respectively, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian were appointed to compile the official histories of the Liu Song and the Southern Qi Dynasty.²⁷ Both historians discuss the legitimacy of the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties in their histories, the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu*, which were eventually included in the Twenty-Four Histories.²⁸

Similarly to the *Weishu*, one crucial purpose of the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* was to support the legitimacy of the dynasties under whose regimes these works were compiled. The Southern Qi and the Liang intended to prove themselves as rightful dynasties, since both had established their rules through usurpation, and were both fiercely competing with the Northern Wei for legitimacy. These dynasties therefore expected the compilation of their predecessors’ histories to highlight their inherited legitimacy. Moreover, both Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian had long served their dynasties and would thus willingly predispose their histories to directly support their dynasties’ legitimacy. In discussing the legitimacy of the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, both Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian highlight the “barbarian” nature of the Northern Wei on one hand and the Chinese ethnicity of the Southern Dynasties’ rulers on the other.

²³ *LS*, 13.232-33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.233. Like Wei Shou, Shen Yue provided considerable support in the establishment of the Liang Dynasty. The *Liangshu* records that Shen Yue had strenuously attempted to persuade Xiao Yan, the founder of the Liang Dynasty, to usurp the throne. Shen Yue also drafted most of the edicts related to the abdication that established the Liang Dynasty. That is why he maintained his prominent position until he died in 513.

²⁵ *LS*, 35.511.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.511-12. Xiao Zixian served as the “Chancellor of National University” in 506 and as the “Minister of Personnel” (*libu shangshu* 吏部尚書) in 507.

²⁷ *SS*, 100.2466. *LS*, 35.511.

²⁸ Similarly to the compilation of the *Weishu*, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian greatly benefited from surviving historical material in their period, such as the official historical annals of the previous dynasties and histories written by previous historians. See *SS*, 100.2467-68, *LS*, 13.234, 35.512, Zhao Yi, *Nianershi zhaji*, 9.188.

(1) To undermine the Northern Wei's legitimacy, the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* both depict that dynasty as "barbaric," with the aim of exposing the Tuoba monarchs as primitives and the Northern Wei as a non-Chinese state.²⁹

It is notable that the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* both attribute a rare origin to the Tuoba, because both argue that the Tuoba are a hybrid mixture of Xiongnu and Chinese. They argue that Li Ling 李陵 (?-74 BCE), a Western Han general, surrendered to the Xiongnu state and became the first ancestor of the Tuoba people.³⁰ As described in the *Nan Qi shu*, the name "Tuoba" was derived from Li Ling's Xiongnu wife – the Xiongnu people received their names from their mothers, not their fathers, as in Chinese culture.³¹

This hybrid origin, whether true or not, seemingly improves the Tuoba people's ethnic status since it demonstrates their semi-Chinese origin.³² However, the truth is that the aim of asserting this hybrid origin was rather to define them as "barbarian." By introducing this Tuoba origin, Shen Yue suggests that the Tuoba were the direct successors of the Xiongnu, the most powerful and famous "barbarians" prior to the Period of Disunion.³³ In its final judgment of the Northern Wei, the *Songshu* equates the Northern Wei with the Xiongnu and argues that the Xiongnu remain the most serious adversaries of all Chinese dynasties to date.³⁴ Xiao Zixian presents similar ideas in his *Nan Qi shu*.³⁵ The *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* clearly emphasize the perpetual confrontation between "barbarian" clans, such as the Xiongnu and the

²⁹ The practice of identifying opposing rulers as "barbarian" so as to undermine their legitimacy is older than the Northern Wei case. During the Warring States period, for instance, the Kingdom of Qin 秦國 (770-221 BCE) was located on the western edge of the central realm, but was still firmly part of China's culture. Once the Qin's influence began to grow, other kingdoms started referring to it as a kingdom that "has customs in common with the Rong 戎 and Di 狄 [alien tribesmen]; a state with the heart of a tiger or wolf." See Pines, "Reassessing Textual Sources for Pre-Qin Imperial History," in *Sinologi Mira k iubilieu Stanislava Kuczery: Sobranie Trudov*, eds. Sergej Dmitriev and Maxim Korolkov (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniia RAN, 2013), 257.

³⁰ *SS*, 95.2321. *NQS*, 57.983.

³¹ *NQS*, 57.993.

³² Present-day scholars do not support this hybrid origin. It does not fit with the historical records, which indicate that most of Li Ling's children were executed soon after he died. In the ensuing period, there is no record of Li Ling's steppe descendants. In addition, no other similar descriptions of this hybrid origin have been found among extant early medieval Chinese writings beyond the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu*. The Tuoba people themselves also did not mention Li Ling at all. Therefore, many scholars suspect this version to have been invented by Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian. See Wen Haiqing 溫海清, "Beiwei, Beizhou, Tang shiqi zhuizu liling xianxiang shulun 北魏、北周、唐時期追祖李陵現象述論," *Minzu yanjiu* 民族研究 3 (2007): 73-80.

³³ *SS*, 95.2358.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.2358-59. Zhao Yi asserts that Shen Yue forged many records to prove that the Tuoba rulers were "barbarous." See Zhao Yi, *Nianershi zhaji*, 9.185-186.

³⁵ *NQS*, 57.999-1001.

Tuoba, on the one side, and Chinese dynasties on the other. The hybrid Tuoba origin, therefore, serves to define the Tuoba Wei as “barbarians” in contrast to the Chinese dynasties, which include the Southern Dynasties that they themselves served.

For similar reasons, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian both refer to the Tuoba and the Northern Wei as “Plaited Barbarians” (*suolu* 索虜).³⁶ The word *suo* 索 means “plait,” although the reality is that the Tuoba had abandoned the plaited hairstyles many years previously.³⁷ The word *lu* 虜 originally meant “to capture” and was often used to denote barbarians in the Chinese context.³⁸ Note that, in most cases, the pre-modern Chinese called other peoples by their autonyms.³⁹ So why did Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian go against that custom and introduce the neologism “plaited barbarians”? The main reason perhaps, is that this new name could trivialize the Tuoba as “barbarians,” as in the case of attributing a hybrid Tuoba origin to them.

The distinct plaited hairstyle was a major component of the stereotype of a “barbarian” in traditional Chinese contexts.⁴⁰ In the *Analects*, Confucius claims that, had it not been for the great efforts of Guan Zhong 管仲 (725-645 BCE) in defeating barbarians, “we might well be wearing our hair down and folding our robes to the left.” 吾其被髮左衽矣 (*Analects*, 14:17).⁴¹ This oft-quoted sentence renders a non-Chinese hairstyle (unbound or plaited) and an equally non-Chinese clothing style two crucial components of the “barbarian” stereotype. The unusual hairstyle hence served as a collective indicator of all “barbarians,” and not of a specific non-Chinese tribe. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the *Nan Qi shu* also cites Confucius’ saying to describe the Tuoba people as having unbound hairstyles, even though the Tuoba people actually had plaited hairstyles. Apparently, both the unbound and plaited hairstyles represented the same stereotypical image of “barbarians” in Xiao Zixian’s

³⁶ . For the study of the Tuoba people, see Li Zhimin 李志敏. “Suotou wei jibian qie kunfashi shuo bianwu 索頭為既辮且髡髮式說辨誤,” *Minzu yanjiu* 4 (2005): 50-56.

³⁷ *SS*, 95.2321. *NQS*, 57.983.

³⁸ *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 explains that *lu* 虜 is “to capture.” See Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 316. During the Western Jin Dynasty, *lu* had already been frequently used to refer to “barbarians.” For instance, the Western Jin scholar Jiang Tong 江統 (?-310) labeled “barbarians” *lu* in his famous “Xirong lun” 遷戎論 (Discourse of Migrating Barbarians). See *JS*, 56. 1529-1535.

³⁹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Western Jin described the Tuoba as the “Xianbei tribe of Liwei 鮮卑力微.” It is highly possible that the early Tuoba people used this name.

⁴⁰ Abramson provides a detailed study of how the different hairstyles and clothes of non-Chinese people were used to formulate the “barbarians” stereotype in the Tang Dynasty. See Marc Samuel Abramson, “Deep Eyes and High Noses: Constructing Ethnicity in Tang China (618--907)” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2001), 245-291.

⁴¹ D. C. Lau, *The Analects*, 196.

view. Therefore, both Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian mention one component of the “barbarian” stereotype, the plait, to describe the Tuoba people and the Northern Wei, which aims to belittle the Tuoba as belonging to the larger pool of “barbarians.”⁴²

The *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* also depict the Northern Wei as non-Chinese and strange, which is quite opposite to the Northern Wei’s image in the *Weishu* as a “normal” Chinese state. For example, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian mention the Northern Wei rulers by replacing their Tuoba names with Chinese words. They name Emperor Yuan (Tuoba Si 拓跋嗣) “Mumo” 木末 and Emperor Taiwu (Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾) “Foli” 佛狸.⁴³ Similarly, the *Nan Qi shu* specifically note many official Tuoba titles used by the Northern Wei. As it notes, Northern Wei noblemen were called *yangzhen* 羊真 (the normal term was *guiren* 貴人 in Chinese), ministers were called *siqindihe* 俟勤地何 (normal term: *shangshu* 尚書), and regional governors were called *modi* 莫堤 (normal term: *cishi* 刺史).⁴⁴ To Chinese ears, these Tuoba titles were meaningless and must have sounded bizarre.⁴⁵

All the aforementioned descriptions convey a clear image of the “barbarian” Northern Wei. In this image, the Tuoba people are the successors of the Xiongnu people; their state, the Northern Wei, is an alien one with a barbarous culture and strange names and titles. This image apparently indicates the Northern Wei’s failure to meet the ethnic criterion of legitimacy.

(2) In their histories Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian also underline that the Southern Dynasties’ rulers are authentic Chinese.

In order to express the Chinese-ness of the rulers of the Southern Dynasties even more, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian placed considerable emphasis on the noble blood of these rulers.

The noble blood of a ruler could greatly enhance his claim legitimacy. Compared with the *Weishu*, which traces the lineage of the Tuoba rulers to the Yellow Emperor, neither the *Songshu* nor *Nan Qi shu* introduces any legendary ancestors to

⁴² *NQS*, 57.983

⁴³ *Ibid.* Many present-day scholars study the Northern Wei by investigating the Tuoba language names recorded in the *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu*. See Yao Weiyuan 姚薇元, “Songshu suoluzhuan Nan Qi shu weiluzhuan beiren xingming kaozheng 宋書索虜傳南齊書魏虜傳北人姓名考證,” *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 清華大學學報 8.2(1933): 1-39. Luo Xin goes further and by saying that he suspects that Foli, the Tuoba name of Tuoba Gui, means “wolf” in the Xianbei language. See Luo Xin, “Beiwei Taiwudi de Xianbei benming 北魏太武帝的鮮卑本名,” *Minzu yanjiu* 4(2006): 71-74.

⁴⁴ *NQS*, 57.985.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.985, 991.

establish their rulers' authority. Rather, the two above histories, especially the *Songshu*, depict the noblemen of the Han Dynasty as the ancestors of the Liu Song rulers. The *Songshu* provides a detailed lineage to demonstrate that Liu Yu, the founder of the Liu Song Dynasty, is a direct descendant of the royal Liu house of the Han Dynasty.⁴⁶ The Han Dynasty was viewed as one of the most glorious dynasties in Chinese history because its rulers were supposedly powerful and their dynasty lasted for four centuries. This lineage thus directly supports the Liu Song Dynasty's legitimacy claim. The *Songshu* further indicates that although the Han Dynasty had collapsed, the people still cherished a deep yearning for it.⁴⁷ Since Liu Yu is a descendant of the Han Dynasty rulers, the Liu Song Dynasty is the reascent Han Dynasty, according to Shen Yue, who strives to impute the legitimacy of the Han Dynasty to the Liu Song Dynasty, which would mean it is endorsed by the historical criterion of legitimacy.

For a similar reason, tracing its links to the Han Dynasty also provides the Southern Qi with legitimacy. The *Nan Qi shu* argues that the founder of the Southern Qi, Xiao Daocheng, was a descendant of Xiao He 蕭何 (257-193 BCE), a distinguished prime minister under the Han Dynasty.⁴⁸ These two lineages of southern rulers thus suggest that they are the direct descendants of this nobleman of the great Han Dynasty.⁴⁹

Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian also provide a detailed description of the abdication procedures that generated the Liu Song Dynasty and the Southern Qi dynasties.⁵⁰ The abdications, with reference to the historical criterion of legitimacy, display the transfer of legitimacy between dynasties that shared historical links. The *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu* thus suggest that the Southern Dynasties inherited the legitimacy of previous Chinese dynasties, such as the Western Jin, the Cao Wei and the Han Dynasty.

⁴⁶ *SS*, 1.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 3. 60.

⁴⁸ *NQS*, 1.1.

⁴⁹ Wei Shou questions the authenticity of the royal family lineages of the Liu Song and the Southern Qi dynasties. He accuses Liu Yu of changing his surname from Xiang 項 to Liu 劉 in order to pretend to have a close relation with the Han royal house. Wei Shou also argues that Xiao Daocheng, rather than being a descendent of Xiao He, is of the Chu people 楚人, a clan of southern "barbarians" in Wei Shou's eyes. See *WS*, 97.2129, 98.2161. Chen Yinque suggests that the *Chu* people were viewed as a clan of a lower civilizational level than Chinese people. See Chen Yinque, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao*, 160-180.

⁵⁰ *SS*, 3.61. *NQS*, 2.39.

In short, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian formulate two images in their histories. Their descriptions of the Northern Wei, such as their claims about its Xiongnu origin, the label of “plaited barbarians,” and various other factors, reinforce the image of a “barbarian” Northern Wei. By contrast, their depictions of the Southern Dynasties, such as their noble lineages and abdications, present the Southern Dynasties as epitomes of Chinese-ness. These two images lead to an obvious answer to the debate about the Northern Wei’s legitimacy: from a southern point of view, the Northern Wei Dynasty is as illegitimate as any other “barbarian” power, whereas the Southern Dynasties are legitimate, as previous Chinese dynasties were.

3.2 Views in the Tang Dynasty

Rather than focusing mainly on ethnic factors when discussing the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute, as historians in the Period of Disunion did, two Tang’s scholars, Li Yanshou and Huangfu Shi, provide us some new perspectives on legitimacy. To highlight the Tang Dynasty’s legitimacy, Li Yanshou accepts the legitimate status of both the Northern Wei and the Southern dynasties. To investigate the origin of the Tang Dynasty’s legitimacy, Huangfu Shi insists on the legitimate status of the Southern Dynasties by stressing their adherence to Confucian principles. In this section we shall examine how the above two scholars proved their ideas and why they arrived at contradictory conclusions.

3.2.1 Li Yanshou

Li Yanshou was an outstanding historian of the early Tang Dynasty.⁵¹ However, there is no record of the date of his birth or death. All we know is that he held various posts at the imperial court during the reign of Emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-649).⁵² From 643 onwards, Li Yanshou spent sixteen years writing his two histories, the *Beishi* 北史 (History of the Northern Dynasties) and *Nanshi* 南史 (History of the Southern Dynasties), which were submitted to the Tang court in 659 and ultimately

⁵¹ Li Yanshou also participated in the compilation of various official histories, such as the *Suishu* 隋書 (History of the Sui Dynasty) and the *Jinshu*. See Liu Xu 劉昫 and others comp. *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old History of the Tang Dynasty) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 73.2600.

⁵² Li Yanshou once served as the “Seals Secretary in the Chancellery” (*fuxilang* 符璽郎) and the “Assistant Magistrate of Censorate” (*yushitai zhubu* 御史台主簿). *Ibid.*, 73.2600-01.

included in the Twenty-Four Histories.⁵³ It is in these two histories that Li Yanshou discusses the legitimacy of the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties. Li Yanshou's relevant ideas can be divided into three parts. He suggests that (1) both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties are legitimate, (2) albeit that the former is somewhat more legitimate than the latter, (3) and both sides left legitimacy resources to the Tang Dynasty.

(1) In the postscript to the *Beishi*, Li Yanshou mentions that his father, Li Dashi 李大師 (570–628), claimed that it was ridiculous for historians in the Period of Disunion to define the Northern Dynasties and the Southern Dynasties as “Insular Barbarians” and “Plaited Barbarians.”⁵⁴ Li Yanshou agrees with his father's view and asserts that both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties were legitimate Chinese dynasties.⁵⁵ The ethnic factor obviously is no longer significant in Li Yanshou's discussion of legitimacy.

Li Yanshou offers various standards by which to judge legitimacy in both the *Beishi* and *Nanshi*. His standards are revealed by his discussion of the “illegitimate” (*jianwei* 僭偽, which literally means “usurped” and “false”) states. Li Yanshou defines all the so-called Sixteen Kingdoms as illegitimate since they failed to possess the Mandate of Heaven and did not have the correct dynastic phases. Moreover, these dynasties controlled merely a small part of the central realm, and lasted for short periods.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is clear that for him a legitimate dynasty is one that possessed the Mandate of Heaven, dominated a large part of China, and survived for a long period.⁵⁷ Li Yanshou points out that because the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties matched his standards of legitimacy, both were legitimate.⁵⁸

Based on his views of legitimacy, Li Yanshou provides two successions of legitimate dynasties during the Period of Disunion. In the *Beishi* he describes the

⁵³ Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 100.3343-54.

⁵⁴ Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 100.3343. Li Dashi died soon after he started writing his history, which portrays both sides as legitimate. His son, Li Yanshou, continued in his father's footsteps and finished that task.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.1-2. Li Yanshou, *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 1.1. Li Yanshou accepts descriptions by the dynasties themselves, in which they argue that their rulers have pure Chinese origins. In fact, Li Yanshou virtually copies relevant descriptions from the *Weishu*, *Songshu* and *Nan Qi shu*, with few changes.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.3062-63, 93.3062-85, 100.3343. It should be stated that Li Yanshou does not label the Sixteen Kingdoms as “barbarians” although most of them were ruled by non-Chinese people. Li Yanshou points out that these kingdoms share a similarity with Chinese dynasties since they were all situated inside the central realm and strove for the Mandate of Heaven.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.3062-63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

northern succession, which includes the Northern Wei and its various successors, including the Northern Zhou, Northern Qi, and Sui dynasties.⁵⁹ The *Nanshi* depicts the southern succession and includes four Southern Dynasties: the Liu Song Dynasty and its three sequential successors.⁶⁰ In both successions, the originators (the Northern Wei and the Liu Song Dynasty respectively) transferred their legitimacy, as well as the means to demonstrate this, to their successors by abdication.⁶¹

Chart 3. The Succession of Legitimate Dynasties in the *Beishi* and the *Nanshi*

The <i>Beishi</i>	The Northern Wei → Northern Qi → Northern Zhou → Sui
The <i>Nanshi</i>	The Liu Song → Southern Qi → Liang → Chen

(2) Li Yanshou uses two subtle means to demonstrate his favor of the Northern Wei and its successors. The first is to record northern reign titles in the *Nanshi*. Chinese historians traditionally recorded dates according to the reign title of rulers. For example, they would record that in the ninth year of the Kaihuang 開皇 reign period (581-600) of Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty 隋文帝 (r. 581-604), the Sui conquered the Chen Dynasty (591). However, when the central realm was ruled by more than one dynasty at the same time, each dynasty put forward the titles of their own reigns to demonstrate their legitimate status, rendering the dates refusing. Later historians usually referred to earlier eras by the reign titles of the dynasties they considered legitimate. Since Li Yanshou insists that both the northern and southern dynasties are legitimate, he adopts the reign titles of their rulers in the *Beishi* and the *Nanshi* separately. Remarkably, when a northern ruler adopted a new reign title, Li Yanshou records that title in both the *Beishi* and the *Nanshi*, but he does not do the

⁵⁹ Ibid., volume 1-12.

⁶⁰ Li Yanshou, *Nanshi*, volume 1-10.

⁶¹ Following Li Yanshou's concept of two successions, today's scholars of Chinese history use the term "Southern and Northern Dynasties" (*nanbeichao* 南北朝) to denote the China of the fourth to sixth centuries. This period began with the establishment of the Liu Song Dynasty in 420 and ended in 589 when the Chen Dynasty was united with the Sui Dynasty. Those ruling powers of northern China, the Northern Wei and its various successors, the Northern Qi, the Northern Zhou and Sui, are called the Northern Dynasties. The ruling powers of southern China, the Liu Song, the Southern Qi, the Liang and the Chen Dynasties are known as the Southern Dynasties.

same when southern rulers changed their reign titles.⁶² In other words, in the *Beishi* he records only the reign titles of the Northern Dynasties while in the *Nanshi* he records the reign titles of both the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Li Yanshou thereby shows a slight preference for the Northern Dynasties' legitimate status.

The second method is the use of various synonyms to record historical events. For example, *beng* 崩, which literally means the collapse of a mountain, was often used to denote the demise of emperors in the traditional Chinese context.⁶³ The inferior word referring to the death of a person was *cu* 殂.⁶⁴ As with the different recordings of reign titles, Li Yanshou records the deaths of the northern rulers as *beng* in both the *Beishi* and *Nanshi*, but he records the deaths of the southern rulers as *beng* in the *Nanshi* and as *cu* in the *Beishi*.⁶⁵ Similarly, Li Yanshou uses the words *tao* 討 or *fa* 伐, which refer to a righteous military campaign, to denote military campaigns launched by the Northern Dynasties against the Southern Dynasties. However, similar attacks by the south are referred to as *qin* 侵 and *lüe* 略, which mean "invasion."⁶⁶ In sum, Li Yanshou views both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties as legitimate, but when making a comparison between the two, he clearly favors the north.

(3) To some extent, it was difficult for the Tang Dynasty to figure out its predecessor. On the one hand, the Northern Wei offered the Tang direct support for its legitimacy since the last emperor of the Sui Dynasty had transferred his throne to Li Yuan 李淵 (566-635), the founder of the Tang Dynasty.⁶⁷ However, the Northern Wei could have been an insufficient forerunner of the Tang Dynasty since it was a non-Chinese ruled dynasty that did not have a direct relationship with any other previous dynasty. The Tang Dynasty could thus have been seen as the successor of a non-Chinese dynasty without any historical link to the great Chinese dynasties prior to its period. On the other hand, the Southern Dynasties possessed what the Tang Dynasty desired, an inherited rulership dating back to all previous great Chinese dynasties.

⁶² He Dezhong, "Nanbei shi zhi zhengtong guan 南北史之正統觀," *Shixueshi yanjiu* 4 (2002):76-78. Similar view see Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛, *Shiqishi shangque* 十七史商榷 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2005), 55.515.

⁶³ *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, ed. Li Xueqin (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 5.159.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶⁵ He Dezhong, "Nanbei Shi," 77.

⁶⁶ Wang Mingsheng, *Shiqishi shangque*, 515.

⁶⁷ *Jiu Tangshu*, 1.5-6.

Moreover, they had firmly preserved Chinese culture and dominated southern China, which was also dominated by the Tang Dynasty. However, the Southern Dynasties were weaker than their northern peers and previous Chinese dynasties, and the Tang had few historical links to these dynasties.

Li Yanshou's conception provided a possible solution to the aforementioned dilemma.⁶⁸ First, he argued that both the northern and southern dynasties were far from being "barbarian" or "illegitimate." Next, Li Yanshou's notion of two successions of legitimate dynasties indicated that the Tang Dynasty inherited legitimacy from both sets of dynasties. The northern succession provided the Tang Dynasty with the inherited throne of and dominance over northern China, while the southern succession provided it with Chinese culture, a direct historical link with previous great Chinese dynasties, and supremacy over southern China. In other words, the Tang Dynasty was a superior dynasty compared to the preceding northern and southern dynasties. To support that idea, Li Yanshou even included the Sui Dynasty in the northern succession, even though this dynasty actually conquered the southern Chen Dynasty and dominated the entire central realm. In other words, Li Yanshou suggested that rather than being the successor of the Sui Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty was a fully-fledged legitimate Chinese dynasty by being the recipient of the legitimacy of all dynasties in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period.

In short, rather than maintaining a dichotomy between "barbarian" and "Chinese," Li Yanshou discusses legitimacy by referring to factors such as the possession of the Mandate of Heaven, the occupation of the central realm, and a long period of rule. He accepts the legitimate status of both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, although favoring the former one. Li Yanshou's views ultimately serve to highlight the Tang Dynasty as the successor of both the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

3.2.2 Huangfu Shi

Huangfu Shi was born in 777. He became a "Presented Scholar" (*jinshi* 進士) in 806 and once served as "Vice director of Ministry of Works" (*gongbu langzhong* 工部郎中). Historical records show that he was a disciple of Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), the

⁶⁸ Liu Pujiang, "Nanbeichao de yichan," 127-152. Notably, in the early Tang Dynasty, the court ordered historians to compile six authorized histories of its various previous dynasties. This massive compilation could indicate this dynasty's hope of inheriting the legitimacy of its various predecessors.

most famous Confucian of the Tang Dynasty.⁶⁹ Among his surviving works, a short essay named “Dong-Jin Yuan-Wei zhengrun lun” 東晉元魏正閏論 (Discourse about the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of the Eastern Jin and the Yuan [i.e. Northern] Wei Dynasty) is often mentioned by later scholars when discussing the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute.⁷⁰ The focus of this essay is a specific issue: whether the Eastern Jin or the Northern Wei is legitimate. Huangfu Shi argues that the former is legitimate while the latter is not.

Huangfu Shi first distinguishes four ways to establish a dynasty: (1) by virtuous abdication (e.g. the legendary sage kings); (2) by taking rightful opportunity (e.g. the Shang and Zhou Dynasty); (3) by violent military power (e.g. the Qin Dynasty); (4) by righteous replacement (e.g. the Han Dynasty). These four ways, Huangfu Shi stresses, ensure that the succession of legitimate dynasties progresses sequentially and uninterrupted throughout Chinese history. He then points out that the Northern Wei failed to establish its power through any of these four means. Huangfu Shi then points out that rather than the Northern Wei, the Eastern Jin is the heir of the succession of legitimate dynasties, since that dynasty could be shown to be the continuation of the Western Jin. The Western Jin belongs to the legitimate line of succession because it inherited the throne through the Cao Wei monarch’s abdication.⁷¹

To further elucidate his ideas, Huangfu Shi mentions two potential refutations of his conclusion. The first one concerns the definition of the central realm. One could argue that the Northern Wei was legitimate since it occupied the central realm.⁷² Huangfu Shi replies with a new view on the central realm.

The central realms are what they are because of ritual and righteousness; the barbarians are what they are because they lack of ritual and righteousness. How could (their distinctions) be tied to the land?⁷³

所以爲中國者，以禮義也；所謂夷狄者，無禮義也。豈繫於地哉？

⁶⁹ Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu Xin*, 176.5267.

⁷⁰ Huangfu Shi’s essay is included in Rao’s book. See Rao Zongyi, *Zhongguo shixue*, 86. Yang Shaoyun does a detailed study on Huangfu’s essay, see Yang Shaoyun, “Reinventing the Barbarian,” 149-154.

⁷¹ Rao Zongyi, *Zhongguo shixue*, 86.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ This translation is from Yang’s version. See Yang Shaoyun, “Reinventing the Barbarian,” 151.

The central realm has no fixed territory. Rather, any place where people cherish “ritual” and “righteousness,” two crucial components of Confucianism, can be seen as the central realm.⁷⁴ “Barbarian area” refers to a place where people forsake ritual and righteousness. Huangfu Shi stresses that, given that the Eastern Jin in his view firmly preserved Confucian codes, southern China, which was controlled by this dynasty, should be seen as the central realm.⁷⁵ By contrast, in his view the Northern Wei had brutally ruled its people and failed to follow Confucian principles. Although this dynasty occupied the Chinese heartland, the North China Plain, its territory could not be viewed as the central realm.⁷⁶ Although Emperor Xiaowen had launched various reforms to adopt Chinese cultural conventions, Huangfu Shi argues that these attempts came too late and ultimately failed.

The second refutation focuses on the succession of legitimate dynasties. Opponents could argue that the Northern Wei was followed by the Northern Zhou, which in turn was followed by the Sui, and further by the Tang.⁷⁷ This suggests that the Tang Dynasty inherited its legitimacy from the Northern Wei. Therefore, to deny the Northern Wei’s legitimacy could in turn place the legitimacy of the Tang Dynasty in danger. Huangfu Shi replies with a new succession of legitimate dynasties, arguing that the legitimate throne was transferred from the Eastern Jin to the Liang Dynasty through the Liu Song and the Southern Qi Dynasty. Thereafter, the Northern Zhou held that throne from 555 by conquering the Liang Dynasty.⁷⁸ The Sui Dynasty received its legitimate rule from the Northern Zhou and transferred it to the Tang Dynasty. Huangfu Shi stresses that his succession ensures that the Tang Dynasty inherited its legitimacy, which is ultimately from the Eastern Jin, and hence from all the great Chinese dynasties prior to the Eastern Jin.⁷⁹

Chart 4. Huangfu Shi’s Version of the Succession of Legitimate Dynasties

Ways of Establishment	Succession of Legitimate Dynasties
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⁷⁴ Rao Zongyi, *Zhongguo shixue*, 86.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Huangfu Shi also points out that while Emperor Xiaowen had embraced Chinese cultural conventions, his dynasty soon collapsed, causing the Northern Wei’s territory to ultimately fail to become the central realm. Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid. As many scholars note, Huangfu Shi actually made a serious mistake here. The Liang Dynasty was conquered by the Western Wei Dynasty, not the Northern Zhou.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Abdication	Yao→ Shun→ Xia Dynasty
Rightful Opportunity	Xia→ Shang→ Zhou
Military Power	Zhou→ Qin
Righteous Replacement	Qin→ Han
Abdication	Han→ Cao Wei→ Western Jin→ Eastern Jin→ Liu Song → Southern Qi→ Liang
Righteous Replacement	Liang→ Northern Zhou
Abdication	Northern Zhou→ Sui→ Tang

As with previous scholars, Huangfu Shi uses the criterion of adherence to Confucian culture to support his view of legitimacy. On the one hand, he defines the central realm, the supposed territory of the legitimate dynasty in the traditional Chinese context, not geographically but culturally. This idea could have originated with his tutor, Han Yu, who considered Confucian moral principles the essence of Chinese and “represented Chinese acts of immorality as tantamount to barbarization.”⁸⁰ Although Han Yu did not directly discuss the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute, Huangfu Shi apparently subscribes to his mentor’s idea and applies faithfulness to Confucian culture as a crucial factor in defining the central realm and legitimacy. On the other hand, he indicates that the presence or absence of Confucian culture distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate rule. For instance, Huangfu Shi asserts that the brutal rule and absence of Confucian principles meant the Northern Wei failed to be legitimate.⁸¹ His version of the legitimate dynasties excludes the Chen Dynasty but includes the Northern Zhou. The reasons for that could be that the Chen Dynasty was reportedly far weaker and more fatuous than previous Southern Dynasties, while the Northern Zhou served as the predecessor of the Tang Dynasty and this dynasty’s rulers were famous for their adoption Confucian culture.⁸²

In conclusion, positing adherence to Confucian culture as the crucial factor of legitimacy, Huangfu Shi argues that the Eastern Jin, rather than the Northern Wei, is

⁸⁰ Yang Shaoyun, “Reinventing the Barbarian,” xii.

⁸¹ Huangfu Shi actually does not mention the link between the Northern Wei’s illegitimate status and this dynasty’s non-Chinese rulers, although he agrees with Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian and accuses the Tuoba people of being the successors of the Xiongnu people.

⁸² The Northern Zhou had actually launched a Buddhist and Daoist persecution in 574, but firmly supported the Confucianism throughout their reign.

legitimate. His version of the succession of legitimate dynasties means that the Tang Dynasty should derive its legitimate status from the Eastern Jin, not the Northern Wei.

3.3 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was on early discussions of the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. During the Period of Disunion, Wei Shou, Shen Yue, and Xiao Zixian shared a similar view on legitimacy – legitimate rule is defined as a Chinese-ruled state that inherits Chinese culture and occupies the central realm. However, due to their differing political allegiances, these scholars had distinct answers to the question of the Northern Wei's legitimacy. The northern historian Wei Shou portrayed the Southern Dynasties as “insular barbarians” due to their “barbarous” territory and rulers. He described the Northern Wei as “Chinese” due to the Tuoba rulers' adoption of Chinese culture and their Chinese lineage. The southern historians Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian stressed that the Northern Wei were “plaited barbarians” due to their rulers' Xiongnu origin and that dynasty's non-Chinese culture. They described the Southern Dynasties as Chinese by stressing their rulers' noble blood. Apparently, the ethnic criterion of legitimacy was more favored during the Period of Disunion.

During the Tang period, scholars' views on legitimacy were more diverse. Li Yanshou suggested that the Tang Dynasty inherited its legitimacy from both the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, since they had both acquired equal legitimate status by occupying the central realm and surviving for a long time. Huangfu Shi argued that the Tang Dynasty received its legitimacy from the Eastern Jin and its successors rather than the Northern Wei due to their adoption of Confucian principles. Apparently, the ethnic criterion for legitimacy was no longer popular. Rather, criteria such as the geographical and moral ones were appealed to in relevant discussions. Both Li Yanshou and Huangfu Shi defined a legitimate dynasty by its possession of the central realm. The latter historian further argued that adherence to the Confucian moral principles of “ritual” and “righteousness” also made the central realm a legitimating rule.