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

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Chapter 4. Wang Tong's Views on the Legitimacy of the Northern Wei

Wang Tong was a thinker of the Sui Dynasty whose views on the legitimacy of the Northern Wei were frequently mentioned by later scholars, especially those in the Song Dynasty. This is why I discuss his thoughts in this chapter, after having discussed the views of Tang Dynasty scholars in the previous chapter.¹ As Warner points out, Wang Tong is a controversial scholar, and a great number of literati throughout history have questioned the authenticity of the writings ascribed to him.² Because of his significance and the fierce controversy that surrounds him, this chapter focuses on two topics related to Wang Tong: (1) his life and texts; (2) his ideas regarding the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. An attempt will be made to answer the questions of why and how Wang Tong supported the Northern Wei's political legitimacy and what made his views popular in later periods.

4.1 Wang Tong's Life and Texts

Wang Tong was a rather mysterious person, because not many records of his life can be found in historiographical writings.³ According to recent studies, he was born to an old family in about 584.⁴ Wang Tong was reportedly highly intelligent in his youth. In 601, at the age of eighteen, he acquired the degree of "Cultivated Talent" (*xiucai* 秀

¹ For further discussion on Wang Tong's influence in the Song Dynasty, see Section 5.1.1. Since the late Song Dynasty, however, scholars have not placed much emphasis on Wang Tong's views for various reasons. See Guo Tian 郭焜, "Songru duiyu Wang Tong xujing de butong pingjia jiqi yuanyin 宋儒對於王通續經的不同評價及其原因," *Henan shifan daxue xuebao* 河南師範大學學報 38.04 (2011): 230-234.

² Warner, *Transmitting Authority: Wang Tong (ca. 584–617) and the Zhongshuo in Medieval China's Manuscript Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1-3.

³ The following description of Wang Tong depends mainly on three related studies. The first is "Wenzhongzi shijia 文中子世家" (Hereditary House of Master Wenzhong), which was written by one of Wang Tong's disciples, Du Yan 杜淹 (?-628). This article contains the most original description of Wang Tong's profile and his family history, and concludes with an appendix to the *Zhongshuo*. See Zhang Pei, *Zhongshu jiaozhu*, 265-69. The second source is *Wenzhongzi kaolun* 文中子考論, a monograph that offers a comprehensive study of Wang Tong. See Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*. Ding Xiang Warner wrote the only English monograph about Wang Tong and his texts. See Warner, *Transmitting Authority*.

For the reasons for the absence of any mention of Wang Tong in the historical records, see Deng Xiaojun 鄧小軍, "Suishu buzai Wang Tong kao 隋書不載王通考," *Sichuan daxue xuebao* 四川師範大學學報 3(1994):77-83.

⁴ Chinese historians like to trace their origins to a noble or successful ancestor. Wang Tong's family likewise traced its origins to a royal prince of the Western Zhou Dynasty. For a study of Wang Tong's famous ancestors, see Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 14-21, 21-33.

才) and was appointed as “Revenue Manager of the Shu Region” (*shuzhou sihu* 蜀州司戶).⁵ He soon resigned from that position for unknown reasons and devoted the rest of his life to teaching and writing. From 605 to 614, Wang Tong composed his *Xu Liujing* 續六經 (Continuation of the Six Classics), but only one of them, the *Yuanjing*, survived.⁶ Wang Tong died in 617 when he was only thirty-three.⁷ His disciples selected the term *wenzhong* 文中 (which literally means “Culture abiding within”) from the canonical *I Ching* as Wang Tong’s posthumous title.⁸ Later scholars therefore often referred to Wang Tong as Wenzhongzi 文中子 (Master Wenzhong).

Present-day scholars principally rely on two major surviving texts when studying Wang Tong’s thought, namely *Zhongshuo* 中說 (Discourse on the Mean) and *Yuanjing* 元經 (The Primal Classic). However, the authenticity of the extant editions of these two texts is questionable.⁹

The *Zhongshuo* is the foremost resource for the study of Wang Tong. This book is a collection of conversations between Wang Tong and his students and it contains many dialogues relevant to the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. After Wang Tong died, his son edited the original edition of the *Zhongshuo* based on conversations recorded by Wang Tong’s disciples and his family.¹⁰ A few Tang scholars cited excerpts from the *Zhongshuo* in their writings, indicating that they had read it.¹¹ In about the mid-11th century, two Northern Song scholars, Ruan Yi and Gong Dingchen 龔鼎臣 (1010-1086), published updated editions of the *Zhongshuo* with annotations.¹²

⁵ Ibid., 59-63.

⁶ Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 3.

⁷ It is recorded that when he heard that Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang Dynasty, had revolted against the Sui Dynasty, he sighed, “People have already suffered from the political disorder for a long time. Heaven is about to begin the age of Yao and Shu. I cannot participate in it. What a destiny!” 生民厭亂久矣, 天其或者將啟堯、舜之運, 吾不與焉, 命也! Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 1.10-11

⁸ Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 138.

⁹ Various modern editions of the *Zhongshuo* exist. In the following discussion, the edition of Zhang Pei 張沛, one of the best annotations of the *Zhongshuo* as far I can see, is sourced. No present-day editions of the *Yuanjing* exist. The version in the *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書 from the *Zhongguo jiben gujiku* 中國基本古籍庫 (Database of Chinese Classical Ancient Books) was used as reference for this dissertation.

¹⁰ Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 33-38. An article named “Wangshi jiashu zalu” 王氏家書雜錄 is included in the appendix of the *Zhongshuo*. This article describes the production of the *Zhongshuo*. See Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 281-282.

¹¹ Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 106-115.

¹² Ibid., 119-122. There is no record of the publication date of these editions. Ruan Yi, as historical material indicates, lived during the first half of the 11th century. Gong Dingchen lived in the same period. Therefore, I suspect that their editions of the *Zhongshuo* must have been published in the mid-11th century. Warner offers descriptions of Ruan Yi’s life. See Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 206-207.

Only Ruan Yi's *Zhongshuo* survives.¹³ The *Yuanjing*, the only surviving book of Wang Tong's *Xu Liujing*, is a treatise supposedly written by Wang Tong which records the history of the Period of Disunion.¹⁴ This text probably existed during the Tang Dynasty, as Tang scholars mention it in their works.¹⁵ As with the *Zhongshuo*, Ruan Yi and Gong Dingchen published editions of the *Yuanjing*.¹⁶ Ruan Yi's edition finally prevailed.

In short, Ruan Yi left us the only extant editions of the *Zhongshuo* and the *Yuanjing*. However, his edition's portrayal of Wang Tong is implausible.¹⁷ As Warner points out, "There is, to begin with, the discrepancy between its representation of Wang Tong's lengthy roster of famous disciples and network of admirers among the court elite, on the one hand, and on the other hand the conspicuous absence of any mention of him in contemporary official records or in the writings of these ostensible pupils and admirers."¹⁸ That caused scholars throughout history to doubt the authenticity of Ruan Yi's editions, some of whom even suspect Ruan Yi of creating both texts from scratch.¹⁹ Today's scholars still have different views on the authenticity of Ruan Yi's editions. Li Xiaocheng, for instance, argues that most parts of Ruan Yi's *Zhongshuo* are authentic replicas of the original versions, whereas a considerable part of Ruan Yi's *Yuanjing* is probably fabricated.²⁰ Wechsler suspects that the extant edition of the *Yuanjing* was forged by Ruan Yi. Nevertheless, he points out that although Ruan Yi could have interpolated his ideas into the *Zhongshuo*, this book still "remains relatively dependable as the basic source" for Wang Tong's thought.²¹ Warner shares a similar view. She suggests that extant editions of the *Zhongshuo* and the *Yuanjing* reflect "a gradual process of accumulative editorial

¹³ Ibid., 8. According to Warner, "all extant editions [of the *Zhongshuo*] – those printed in the Song, the later facsimiles of Song editions, and redactions based on lost Song editions – derive from Ruan Yi's alone."

¹⁴ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 5.149

¹⁵ Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 144-150.

¹⁶ Ibid., 172.

¹⁷ Ruan Yi's *Zhongshuo* provides a roster of Wang Tong's disciples and friends that is demonstrably inauthentic. Many disciples in this roster became the minister in the early Tang Dynasty. However, it is surprising to see that few of them mentioned their tutor Wang Tong.

¹⁸ Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 4. A great number of scholars in the Song Dynasty believed that Ruan Yi or Wang Tong's later generations forged that roster and network of admirers in order to improve Wang Tong's status. For a detailed study, see Howard J. Wechsler, "The Confucian Teacher Wang T'ung 王通 (584?-617) One Thousand Years of Controversy," *T'oung Pao* 63 (1977): 225-272. Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 68-93.

¹⁹ Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 1-2, 47. Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 145.

²⁰ Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 144-150.

²¹ Wechsler, "The Confucian Teacher," 258.

interventions,” suggesting that Ruan Yi’s editions are not authentic copies of the original versions.²²

Nevertheless, the authenticity of Ruan Yi’s editions does not matter greatly in relation to the study of Wang Tong’s thoughts concerning the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. The main reason is that Ruan Yi’s editions present a unified and consistent ideology of Wang Tong that distinguishes Wang Tong’s unique concept of political legitimacy from the ideas of most other scholars.²³ In addition, from the 11th century onwards, all scholars have relied on Ruan Yi’s editions to study Wang Tong. Whether or not Ruan Yi’s editions can be plausibly ascribed to Wang Tong, scholars in history were greatly influenced by “his” views on legitimacy in general and the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute in particular. Therefore in this dissertation the name “Wang Tong” is used when referring to the protagonist of the *Zhongshuo* and the alleged author of the *Yuanjing*, even though these two texts cannot be attributed to him in their entirety. For the same reason, the *Zhongshuo* and the *Yuanjing* are taken as valuable sources concerning the ideas of “Wang Tong,” even though parts of them may be problematic.

4.2 Wang Tong’s Views on the Legitimacy of the Northern Wei

The Sui Dynasty united the central realm in 589, ending the more than three-century-long Period of Disunion. The Northern Wei legitimacy dispute was still quite important in Wang Tong’s day since it was closely related to the legitimacy status of the Sui Dynasty, the successor of the Northern Wei.²⁴ Wang Tong’s underlying concern was how to demonstrate the Sui Dynasty’s legitimacy on the grounds of previous dynasties in the Period of Disunion.

Wang Tong discusses the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute from three perspectives. He investigates factors that relate to the dynasty’s political legitimacy. He also discusses two significant questions relevant to the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute and advances a complex succession of rightful dynasties to describe the transfer of legitimacy during the Period of Disunion.

²² Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 17. Warner also argues that “the *Zhongshuo* remained fluid throughout the first four centuries of its transmission, and that Ruan Yi was hardly the first individual, or the last, to evince a strong personal investment in the maintenance of Wang Tong’s legacy.” See Warner, *Transmitting Authority*, 48.

²³ We could find that Ruan Yi’s editions of the *Zhongshuo* and the *Yuanjing* have a considerable number of similar sentences or descriptions. See Li Xiaocheng, *Wenzhongzi*, 155-162, 166-172.

²⁴ Liu Pujiang, “Nanbeichao de yichan,” 146.

4.2.1 Evidence of Legitimacy

The *Zhongshuo* offers four pieces of evidence to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Northern Wei: (1) sacrifices to Heaven, (2) possession of the central realm, (3) protection of people, and (4) adoption of “the way of the virtuous kings.” In response to a disciple’s question about why the Northern Wei is legitimate, Wang Tong replies:

In an age of upheaval and division, when the masses suffer, whom should we turn to? [Whoever] sacrifices to Heaven and Earth and shelters the people, [he] is our lord. What else would we call someone who inhabits the realm of the former kings,²⁵ inherits the ways of the former kings, and parents the people of the former kings?

亂離斯瘼，吾誰適歸？天地有奉，生民有庇，即吾君也。且居先王之國，受先王之道，子先王之民矣，謂之何哉？²⁶

The above quotation contains four aspects that enable one to discern Wang Tong’s views on the legitimacy of the Northern Wei.

(1) The quotation mentions the Northern Wei’s sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. Serving as a significant legitimation method in Chinese history, the sacrifice to Heaven and Earth meets the cosmological criterion of legitimacy, because there is a link between a monarch’s sacrifice and his reception of legitimacy from Heaven. As described in Chapter 2, the Northern Wei had indeed offered regular sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. The *Zhongshuo* introduces this evidence to support the Northern Wei’s legitimate status.

(2) The quotation states that the Northern Wei had sheltered its people. Following the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, Heaven is viewed as the parent of all humanity.²⁷ The monarch, or the secular agent of Heaven, should thus ensure his

²⁵ In a Confucian context, the *xianwang* 先王 refers to legendary sage kings who practiced ideal politics. See Xinzhong Yao, *The Encyclopedia of Confucianism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 674-675.

²⁶ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 7.181.

²⁷ Since Heaven serves as the supposed parent of all humanity, a peaceful and prosperous life for the common people is one of the predominant concerns of Heaven. The *Shangshu* 尚書 says “Heaven and earth is the parent of all creature.” 惟天地萬物父母。It continues that “Heaven compassionates the people. What the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to.” 天矜於民，民之所欲，天必從之。 See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Vol. 3: The Shoo king, or, The book of historical documents* (London: Trübner & Co., 1865) 2, 283, 288.

mandate by cultivating his virtue and devoting himself to the wellbeing of his people. The sheltering of people is indeed the kind of rightful behavior that serves to advance the common people's wellbeing. In the period before the Northern Wei, people suffered considerably from wars and upheavals, and the most urgent wish for them, as mentioned at the beginning of the quotation, was to live a peaceful life. After the Northern Wei occupied northern China, it restored social order and brought peace to its people. The *Zhongshuo* hence introduces this evidence to support the Northern Wei's legitimacy.

(3) The quotation mentions the Northern Wei's occupation of the former rightful kings' domain, or the central realm, which, with reference to the geographical criterion of legitimacy, directly supports this dynasty's legitimacy. Further discussions of this evidence can be found at the end of this section, where Wang Tong's answer to the question of whether the Northern Wei had dominated the central realm is discussed.

(4) The quotation describes the Northern Wei's adoption of the ways of the former kings, which is to say the political principles of the legendary sage kings. In the *Zhongshuo*, Wang Tong also introduces the term of *wangdao* 王道 (the way of the king) to denote the ways of the former kings. He further explains the ways of the former kings as being in accord with Confucian political principles, such as practicing Confucian rites, and the maintenance of a benevolent and virtuous rule.²⁸ These Confucian political principles allegedly contributed to the ideal politics of the legendary sage kings. Historical records reveal that the Northern Wei had learned various Chinese-style policies from previous dynasties, which greatly benefited its people.²⁹

4.2.2 Two Questions Regarding the Northern Wei's Legitimacy

In addition to the four pieces of evidence, Wang Tong also discusses two issues that challenged the Northern Wei's legitimacy: (1) whether the "barbarian" background of

Confucianism shares a similar idea. Mencius, for instance, states that the rightful monarch has a duty to offer the people basic welfare, such as a peaceful and prosperous life, *Mencius*, trans. Lau, D. C. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992), 5-6.

²⁸ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 2.57. 3.70.

²⁹ See Section 2.1.4. Furthermore, as noted in the *Weishu*, Tuoba rulers such as the Emperor Xiaowen, the Emperor Xuanwu 宣武帝 (r. 499-515), and the Emperor Xiaojing 孝靜帝 (r. 534-550), reportedly favored Confucianism. See *WS*, 7.186-187, 8.215, 12.313.

the Northern Wei invalidated this dynasty's legitimacy, and (2) whether it dominated the central realm. Wang Tong answers both questions in favor of the Northern Wei.

(1) Flourishing in the Period of Disunion, the ethnic legitimacy criterion defines a Chinese ruler who abides by Chinese culture as the eligible holder of the Mandate of Heaven. Wei Shou, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian, as noted in the previous chapter, generally agreed on a corresponding relation between a Chinese-ruled state and political legitimacy. However, the *Zhongshuo* disagrees with that idea. It argues that ethnicity, whether Chinese or barbarian, has no role to play in judging political legitimacy. Although he supports the Northern Wei's legitimacy, Wang Tong does not portray the Tuoba ruler as "Chinese," as Wei Shou does. He actually acknowledges that the Northern Wei's rulers were "barbarians."³⁰ However, Wang Tong argues that many rulers of the southern dynasties became "barbarians" when they displayed a lack of virtues. As the *Zhongshuo* notes, "[because of the lack of] virtue of [rulers of] the Southern Qi Dynasty, Liang Dynasty, and Chen Dynasty, [I] criticized them as 'barbarians.'" 齊、梁、陳之德, 斥之於四夷也.³¹

A conversation recorded in the *Zhongshuo* provides us with more clues.³² It says that when Wang Tong explained to his disciples why the Northern Wei Dynasty was legitimate, he let out a heavy sigh. His disciples were confused by their master's behavior. One of them, Wang Ning 王凝 (who was Wang Tong's younger brother), told the others that what the master lamented was the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven. As Wang Ning explained, the Confucian canonical *Book of Documents* has a sentence which says "the Mandate of Heaven does not constantly reside in any certain regime; it only goes to those who possess virtue." 天命不於常, 惟歸有德.³³ He then concluded with a rhetorical question: since people greatly benefited from the virtuous rule of the "barbarian" Northern Wei, why would Heaven not grant the Mandate to that dynasty?³⁴ According to the text, Wang Tong pointed out that Wang Ning's answer had demonstrated his full understanding of the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven: to pursue it, rulers should adopt a virtuous rule. Whether they were ethnically

³⁰ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 1.14.

³¹ Ibid., 5.149.

³² Ibid., 1.14.

³³ Ibid. Actually the extant *Book of Documents* does not include this sentence, although it does state, "(Heaven's) appointments are not unchanging," 惟命不於常; "Heaven graciously distinguishes the virtuous," 天命有德. See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, part 2*, 397, 74.

³⁴ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo yizhu*, 1.14.

Chinese or non-Chinese, rulers become illegitimate once they failed to adopt the moral rule. This idea is clearly in accord with the logic of the moral criterion of legitimacy, namely that the monarch's moral character and conduct make his rule legitimate.

(2) The second issue is whether the Northern Wei dominated the central realm. What defines the central realm is an important issue since dominance over the central realm, according to the doctrine of All Under Heaven and the geographical criterion, renders a dynasty legitimate.³⁵ The *Zhongshuo* seems to convey a mixed attitude to the central realm, arguing that the central realm refers to a geographical area occupied by the great dynasties of Chinese history, and the place that adopted the Confucian culture and political principles. The following conversation from the *Zhongshuo* provides clear indications of this.

Dong Chang said: "How great is the central realm! [This is] where the five emperors and three kings established their rule, and where robes, caps, rituals, and righteousness emerged. Therefore, the sages admire it. When the central realm is united, the sage would illuminate this unity. When the center realm has two regions, would the sage eliminate this situation?" The master replied, "Right! No others but the central realm is sure to be the model."

董常曰: "大哉, 中國! 五帝、三王所自立也, 衣冠禮義所自出也。故聖賢景慕焉。中國有一, 聖賢明之。中國有並, 聖賢除之邪?" 子曰: "噫! 非中國不敢以訓。"³⁶

Wang Tong agrees with his student's view of the central realm, which indicates two of its attributes. Firstly, it is a geographical location, namely the place where the ancient sage kings established their rule. Secondly, it is the place where Confucian principles – represented by the robes, caps, rituals, and righteousness – emerged and flourished. Apparently, the central realm is a mixed notion with geographical and cultural

³⁵ In the present day, the term denoting the central realm, the *zhongguo* 中國, refers to the nation of China, a political entity within a certain territory. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction, the *zhongguo* in the context of ancient China was not used to refer to any specific ruling regime or state. In this dissertation various synonyms for the central realm are mentioned, such as *Zhonghua* 中華, *Zhongzhou* 中州, and *Zhongyuan* 中原, which, similarly to the central realm, refer to the place where Chinese people lived and Chinese culture prevailed. For terms relating to the central realm in a traditional China's context, see Li Dalong, "The Central Kingdom," 323-352.

³⁶ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 7.180-181.

meanings. This is quite similar to Huangfu Shi, who describes the place where people cherish “ritual” and “righteousness” as the central realm.

Wang Tong introduces his views on the central realm to explain why the Northern Wei gradually became legitimate. The *Zhongshuo* firstly grants legitimate status to the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song Dynasty, not the Northern Wei, during the same period (396-479).³⁷ It further explains that the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song dynasties were more qualified rulers of the central realm since they cherished the desire to reoccupy northern China, provided their people with a peaceful and flourishing life, and firmly adopted Confucian principles.³⁸ By contrast, the Northern Wei during that period occupied only parts of northern China and it was far from a fully-fledged Chinese-style state.

However, the situation changed after the collapse of the Liu Song Dynasty in 479. The *Zhongshuo* labels the subsequent southern dynasties, the Southern Qi, Liang, and Chen, illegitimate and argues that these dynasties failed to possess the central realm since they lost the territory in northern China, abandoned the desire to reunite the central realm, and were ruled by fatuous rulers who abandoned Confucian principles.³⁹ By contrast, as the *Zhongshuo* points out, after Emperor Xiaowen ascended the throne in 490, the Northern Wei had occupied northern China and adopted Confucian principles. This dynasty thus became the new ruler of the central realm. To echo that conclusion, the *Zhongshuo* says that:

because of their [lack of] virtue, I criticized the Southern Qi, Liang, and Chen as ‘barbarians.’ [This critique aims to] illuminate the replacement of [the ruler of] the central realm, a replacement which is accomplished by the endeavors of [the ruler of] the Taihe reign [477 to 499, the reign title of Emperor Xiaowen].”

齊、梁、陳之德，斥之於四夷也。以明中國之有代，太和之力也。⁴⁰

Apparently, Wang Tong argues that from the Taihe reign onwards, the Northern Wei in his view became the legitimate rulers of the central realm.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 7.183.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 7.183-184.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.149.

⁴¹ It should be noted that the *Zhongshuo* also posits the superior legitimate status of the Zhou and Han dynasties compared to the Northern Wei and any other dynasties. The *Zhongshuo* records that Wang Tong suggested to Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty that he name the Han Dynasty, rather than the

4.2.3 Succession of Legitimate Dynasties

To describe the transfer of legitimacy during the Period of Disunion, Wang Tong puts forward his version of the succession of legitimate dynasties, which is recorded in both the *Zhongshuo* and the *Yuanjing*.⁴² This succession depicts not only the gradual loss of legitimacy of the Southern Dynasties but also the progressive development of the Northern Wei's legitimacy.

Chart 5. Wang Tong's Version of the Succession of Legitimate Dynasties

Period	Legitimate	Semi-legitimate	Illegitimate
290-396	Western Jin, Eastern Jin		Sixteen Kingdoms
397-497	Eastern Jin, Liu Song	Northern Wei	Sixteen Kingdoms
479-588	Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui		Southern Qi, Liang, Chen, Northern Qi

Wang Tong clearly considers six dynasties to be legitimate (Western Jin, Eastern Jin, Liu Song, Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui), and his succession defines all other dynasties as illegitimate (Sixteen Kingdoms, Southern Qi, Liang, Chen, and Northern Qi). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the use of reign titles is a crucial sign that reveals a historian's attitude toward political disputes. In the following paragraphs the stages of Wang Tong's succession are described in relation to the reign titles used in the *Yuanjing*.

The first stage began in 290, when Emperor Hui 晉惠帝 (r. 290-307), the famously insane Emperor of the Western Jin Dynasty, ascended the throne. It ends in 396 when the Tuoba people occupied the northern part of the Northern China Plain, and soon after established their Northern Wei Dynasty. In this stage, the *Yuanjing* adopts the reign titles of only the Western and Eastern Jin to record dates, and it refers

Northern Wei, as his dynasty's rightful predecessor and the provider of the dynastic phase. Ibid., 10.257-58.

⁴² Ibid., 7.183-184. There is still no present-day edition of the *Yuanjing*. This dissertation will adopt the version in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 from the *Zhongguo jiben guji ku* 中國基本古籍庫 [Database of Chinese Classic Ancient Books], <http://server.wenzibase.com/>.

to the rulers of these dynasties as “emperors” (*di* 帝), the supreme political title in Chinese history and a clear indication of legitimacy.⁴³ The Western Jin was widely acknowledged as a great dynasty and it dominated the central realm. The Eastern Jin, as discussed in the previous section, was viewed as legitimate in the *Zhongshuo* since this dynasty had firmly dominated southern China, cherished a desire to unite the central realm, and took care of its people.

The second stage begins in 397 and ends in 479, the year in which the Liu Song Dynasty collapsed and abdicated its rule to the Southern Qi Dynasty.⁴⁴ For this period, the *Yuanjing* adopts a dual system of reign titles. It uses the reign titles of the Eastern Jin and Liu Song Dynasty to record the date in most cases. However, when the Northern Wei adopted a new reign title, the *Yuanjing* also notes that title after the southern reign title. For example, in 397, Emperor An of the Eastern Jin 晉安帝 (r. 382-419) adopted the reign title Longan 隆安 (397-401), while Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei 魏道武帝 (r. 386-409) adopted the reign title Huangshi 皇始. The *Yuanjing*, therefore, records that year as “the first year of the Longan reign period of the Emperor An” 安帝隆安元年, followed by a note that this is “the first year of the Huangshi reign period of the Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei” 魏道武帝皇始元年.⁴⁵ The dual recorded reign titles echoes the assessment in the *Zhongshuo*, in which superior legitimacy is assigned to the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song Dynasty compared with the Northern Wei. Moreover, the *Yuanjing* refers to the rulers of the Eastern Jin, Liu Song, and Northern Wei as “emperors,” and hence it appears that its compilers considered all three dynasties legitimate.⁴⁶

The third stage begins in 479 and ends in 588, when the Chen Dynasty was conquered by the Sui Dynasty.⁴⁷ During this period, the *Yuanjing* has only the reign titles of the Northern Wei and its descendants (Northern Zhou and Sui).⁴⁸ It also refers to the northern rulers as “emperors.”⁴⁹ By contrast, the *Yuanjing* not only abandons the reign titles of contemporaneous Southern Dynasties but also explicitly denotes

⁴³ Wang Tong, *Yuanjing*, volume 1-6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., volume 7-8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74. Once the Northern Wei changed its reign title, the *Yuanjing* notes that new title after the Southern Dynasties. In other times during this stage, the *Yuanjing* records only the Southern Dynasties’ reign titles.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁷ Wang Tong, *Yuanjing*, volume 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 102, 104-106.

them as “illegitimate.” In the words of the *Yuanjing*, the Southern Qi was “false” (*wei* 偽), and the Liang and Chen were “usurped” (*jian* 僭).⁵⁰ The *Yuanjing* compilers evidently saw only the Northern Wei as legitimate. As mentioned in the previous section, the *Zhongshuo* displays the same view, namely that the Northern Wei is legitimate during this period due to its possession of the central realm and adoption of Confucian political principles.

In short, Wang Tong advances a three-stage succession of legitimate dynasties to cover China’s history from the third to the sixth century. During the first stage (290 to 396), the Western Jin and its successor, the Eastern Jin, possessed the status of legitimacy. In the second stage (396 to 479), the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song Dynasty had superior legitimacy, while the Northern Wei had inferior status. In the final stage (479-588), only the Northern Wei and its descendants held exclusive legitimacy, while all contemporaneous Southern Dynasties (Southern Qi, Liang, Chen), were illegitimate. Wang Tong finally builds the Sui Dynasty’s legitimacy on the grounds of two kinds of dynasties: the Chinese dynasty of the Western Jin and its successful successors, the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song, and the “barbarian” Northern Wei and its successors.

The succession of legitimate dynasties in the *Yuanjing* has an interesting ending, which reveals Wang Tong’s complex feelings about the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute.⁵¹ Rather than following historical reality and noting that the Chen Dynasty was conquered by the Sui Dynasty, the *Yuanjing* says that “the Liu Song, the Southern Qi, the Liang, and the Chen Dynasty perished [in 479]” 晉、宋、齊、梁、陳亡.⁵² The *Zhongshuo* notes a conversation which could provide us with some clues.

Shu Tian asked: “The Jin and the Liu Song had perished a long time ago. [The *Yuanjing*] lists their names here [when the Chen Dynasty ended]. What does this mean?” The Master replied: “[The Eastern Jin] is the old residence of China’s civilization; the gentleman did not wish it to perish prematurely. The Liu Song Dynasty had the merit of restoring the Jin Dynasty as well as the desire to reoccupy the central realm. [The gentleman] also did not want this dynasty to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 102,103,105

⁵¹ Wang Tong composed the first nine volumes of the *Yuanjing*, ending in the year the Chen Dynasty died out. His disciple Xue Shou continued to write the tenth volume of the *Yuanjing*, which records the historical period before the Tang Dynasty briefly united China.

⁵² Wang Tong, *Yuanjing*, 106.

perish prematurely [....]" Shu Tian asked: "Master, could I ask what your ambition is?" Master replied with tears, "I can forget the wish of the master of Tongchuan.⁵³ To record that five Southern Dynasties perished at the same time, [is] to mourn the total depravity of the ways of the former sage kings [by these Southern Dynasties]. Therefore the gentleman exaggerates his words in order to highlight the collapse [of these southern dynasties...]."

叔恬曰：“晉、宋亡國久矣，今具之，何謂也？”子曰：“衣冠文物之舊，君子不欲其先亡。宋嘗有樹晉之功，有複中國之志，亦不欲其先亡也....”

叔恬曰：“敢問其志。”文中子泫然而興曰：“銅川府君之志也，通不敢廢。書五國並時而亡，蓋傷先王之道盡墜。故君子大其言，極其敗...”⁵⁴

Of course, the Southern Dynasties did not perish at the same time. The reason for that kind of expression derives from Wang Tong's deep sympathy for the Southern Dynasties. Being a Chinese scholar, Wang Tong had a natural proclivity toward the southern Chinese dynasties. This could be manifested in two ways. The first is the use of *wang* 亡 (perish) to denote the end of the Southern Dynasties. In the context of ancient Chinese historiography, *wang* means that a state ceased to exist, not through external military attacks, abdication, or other extraordinary circumstances, but by collapsing or destroying by itself.⁵⁵ By writing that all Southern Dynasties had perished, not by military conquest (as happened to the Liang and Chen dynasties), or through abdication (as with the Eastern Jin, Liu Song, and Southern Qi dynasties), the *Yuanjing* clearly reveals a sympathy for the Southern Dynasties. The second way is to record that the Southern Dynasties perished at the same time. This serves to indicate that five southern Chinese dynasties, whether legitimate or illegitimate, still existed after they really perished. Only when the Chen Dynasty ended, does the *Yuanjing* add the record of these previous dynasties' ending, highlighting Wang Tong's sorrow about the southern Chinese dynasties' ultimate loss of Confucian political principles and the Mandate of Heaven.

⁵³ Honorific name of Wang Tong's father.

⁵⁴ Zhang Pei, *Zhongshuo jiaozhu*, 7.183-185.

⁵⁵ *Chunqiu Gongyangzhuan zhushu* 春秋公羊傳注疏, ed. Li Xueqin (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 241.

4.3 Conclusion

Wang Tong plays a significant role in the intellectual history of the Northern Wei legitimacy dispute. His views bridge relevant scholarly considerations before and after the 11th century in three ways.

First, Wang Tong points out two indications of the Northern Wei's legitimacy, namely sacrifice to Heaven and occupation of the central realm, which were popular ways of understanding legitimacy during the Period of Disunion and the Early Tang period. Wei Shou and Li Yanshou, for instance, understood legitimacy in relation to the aforementioned two criteria. Wang Tong also suggests the new criterion of the adoption of Confucian political principles. The mid-Tang scholar Huangfu Shi has a similar view. In fact, from the Song Dynasty onward, Confucianism gradually became the most influential ideology in discussions about *zhengtong*.

Next, the two questions Wang Tong focused on were previously hardly mentioned, as most scholars, such as Wei Shou, Shen Yue and Xiao Zixian, shared the view that Chinese ethnicity and the occupation of the central realm were the two crucial proofs of legitimacy. Wang Tong rejects and reassesses that conception. He not only argues that the right moral rule could legitimize the ethnically non-Chinese Northern Wei but also interprets dominance of the central realm as the occupation of the central realm, as well as stressing the preservation of Confucian political principles. These two ideas became increasingly influential from the Song Dynasty onwards, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

Finally, Wang Tong's version of the succession of legitimate dynasties is a transitional one in history. On the one hand, prior to the Song Dynasty, the idea prevailing idea that the succession of legitimate dynasties was continuous. Similar to Gao Lü and Huangfu Shi, Wang Tong's version described that the Mandate of Heaven was inherited consecutively by dynasties in history. On the other hand, Wang Tong suggested a dual linear succession, which had not been seen prior to his period. The Tang scholar Li Yanshou developed that kind of succession and argued that two parallel successions existed during the Period of Disunion. Nevertheless, both kinds of succession, the continuous and dual one, were entirely denied by scholars from the Song Dynasty onwards.