From Warhorses to Ploughshares

The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong

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Preface

Several decades ago, when I entered the profession, pre-modern China historians tended to study individual dynasties as self-contained entities with their own distinct institutions and identities. They focused on the major dynasties like Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279), while ignoring transitional periods like the Five Dynasties (907–979). More recently, however, interest has shifted to periods of transition as the culmination of what preceded it and the foundation for what followed. My own books on the Five Dynasties, a historical translation and an imperial biography, confirm the positive changes that accompanied a period commonly denigrated as a chaotic turn backward. In my biography of Li Cunxu (885–926), the Shatuo monarch posthumously known as Zhuangzong (r. 923–926), I fleshed out the many layers of cooperation between Shatuo rulers and Chinese subjects; I highlighted the ongoing deference for Tang models of governance well into the Five Dynasties period, even as rulers altered past practices to meet contemporary needs. But the genius of Zhuangzong as warrior did not extend to governance and he died in a mutiny of disgruntled soldiers after a brief reign of three years. The work on Zhuangzong represents important background for the current study of Li Siyuan (867–933), better known as Mingzong (r. 926–933). The lengthy treatment of the period of conquest in the previous volume allows me to focus here on the post-conquest era, which is inherently more fascinating, for the second Shatuo emperor evolved into a uniquely able successor. Mutinies rarely produce revolutions, but the policies of Mingzong often proved revolutionary in terms of either political vision or enduring impact.

Without question, Mingzong is the redoubtable icon of Shatuo rule in the tenth century, a period when three Shatuo dynasties ruled the Middle Kingdom in succession in the span of twenty-seven years. He is best remembered for deftly navigating the pull between Chinese and Shatuo traditions to create a "middle path" for his dynasty. Unlike his highly Sinicized predecessor, the marginally literate Emperor Mingzong consciously chose cultural autonomy for himself and his sons in their private lives, even as he developed a political record of close collaboration with civil and military advisors, the Chinese majority and other ethnic minorities. In terms of border policy, he steered clear of far-off missions and resorted to military interventions only in defense

of dynastic interests, in contrast with the grand expansionary policies of his idol Tang Taizong or even his own predecessor, Zhuangzong. Emperor Mingzong refused to pour more treasure into lost causes that ran the risk of entrenched warfare, so he tended to pull the plug on military actions when conditions on the ground dictated, sacrificing imperial face in the service of realpolitik. In terms of domestic policy, he balanced carrot and stick, meting out death sentences for corruption or immorality, while bestowing imperial citations upon honest officials: he succeeded in balancing Confucian positivism against the political and military discipline demanded by the times. A highly effective manager, he economized on expenditures, while channeling revenues to the public treasury, not his personal privy in the fashion of his predecessor. In less than eight years, he ushered in an era dubbed the "Small Repose," a time of rare bounty and stability by the standards of the day. This celebrated legacy was partly a function of Mingzong's personal qualities and partly a function of the eminently able men who governed on his behalf and women who counseled him at home, including at one point a mere maid.

Throughout the long history of China, second emperors often proved more critical to the legitimacy and the longevity of a regime than the better-known dynastic founders. They consolidated territorial gains and pacified recalcitrant foes, they set a positive political tone at court and created enduring institutions, and more importantly, they often salvaged their regimes from the egotistical excesses of founding fathers. Taizong of the Tang (r. 626–649), Yongle of the Ming (r. 1402–1424), and Kangxi of the Qing (r. 1661–1722) are illustrious examples of this phenomenon. For the twentieth century, the same might be said of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) in the People's Republic and Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–1988) in Taiwan. Emperor Mingzong played a similar role as a moderating influence in the Later Tang, the Yongle of the Five Dynasties. His predecessor had unwittingly deployed eunuchs and actors as extensions of his personal power to the detriment of the bureaucratic mainstay, he alienated powerful military machines with frequent rotations and campaigns far afield, and he separated Shatuo warriors from their homes in northern Shanxi by relocating the capital to Luoyang. Mingzong would reverse the worst practices of his predecessor. He governed in the spirit of Confucian benevolence, but benevolence interlaced with a healthy respect for the rule of law. The Shatuo dynasties that followed his own, the Later Jin and Later Han, regimes founded by military strongmen like himself, eventually came to ruin due to the reckless deeds of inept successors. The fraternal succession that elevated Mingzong to power, a practice rooted in Inner Asia, proved more suited to conditions in North China under the Five Dynasties, where unruly regional governors and predatory neighbors lay in constant wait to turn any vacuum in the Middle Kingdom to their advantage. The times demanded an experienced ruler and Mingzong was no disappointment.

Sometime before the twelfth century, the Shatuo disappeared as a distinct ethnic group, or at least the sources no longer identify them as autonomous. One historian attributes this development to a succession of natural disasters in their homeland, while others point to their assimilation into the Han Chinese majority.[1] The extinction of nomadic neighbors is hardly exceptional in the long history of China, but the Shatuo experience seems to have evolved in its own unique way, which makes this little studied period and poorly understood people highly relevant to the macro-history of China. It took just over a century for them to rise from obscurity to the pinnacle of political power in China, only to fall back to obscurity once again a century later. The dramatic twists were partly tied to their spectacular feats, especially as empire-builders, which made them a popular target for rivals. The changing fortunes also relate to critical decisions made in their formative period, especially with regard to choice of residence. They moved at least three times from the eighth to the tenth centuries, initially from the Yin Mountains of Ningxia and Shaanxi to the northern part of Shanxi under the auspices of the Tang government. After laying claim to North China in 923, they moved again from Taiyuan to Luoyang, from north of the Yellow River to the south. This allowed the country's leadership to become more in touch with conditions in China's heartland, but the shift also allowed the Shatuo elite to become acculturated in China at the expense of their own customs and traditions, eventually becoming indistinguishable from the people around them. They seem in great measure to have adapted too well.

I initially drafted a considerably more detailed work, which will be published in Chinese in coming years. For practical reasons, however, I had to produce a more focused treatment for the English version. The original discusses at greater length the military figures and policies of the reign, whereas the English version is focused on Mingzong's political legacy and relations with civilian courtiers. The original provided a broader treatment of border affairs, whereas this volume is focused on Later Tang relations with its premier foe, the Kitan, and the two regions to the south against which the administration waged war, Nanping and Shu. This biography was designed to serve as a companion volume to my translation, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, published a decade ago, so I have followed Ouyang Xiu's nomenclature in terms of the names of people and places. But admittedly Ouyang Xiu was far from a dispassionate voice and I have drawn upon a much wider body of primary materials to reconstruct the reign. I have also adopted the Chinese practice of abbreviating names by citing the individual's personal name, thus Feng Dao is abbreviated as simply Dao, allowing the reader to more easily relate the narrative here to the translation.

Dates follow Chinese convention: year/month/day.

1. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 143; Fu Lecheng, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," pp. 319–38.

Chapter 1
People and Places

The Icon

Among the fifty-five potentates of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era, few were as lionized in life and mourned in death as Li Siyuan (867–933), better known as the "Enlightened Ancestor," Mingzong. He acceded to the throne illicitly in 926 through military coup, but by dint of concrete deeds, he came to be embraced not just by skeptical courtiers in his day, but more importantly, discriminating historians centuries later. Writing 150 years after his death, Sima Guang (1019–1086), renders this rather generous tribute in the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance*:

> The monarch was instinctively inclined neither to paranoia nor acquisitiveness [like his predecessor]. Presiding over successive years of grain surpluses, he rarely deployed the country's armed forces. In the context of the Five Dynasties, his reign roughly approximates a Small Repose.

A similar tone of approbation appears in the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, where the cultural chauvinist Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), an early contemporary of Sima Guang, is forced to concede: "My elders say that Mingzong was genuinely noble in character and magnanimous in love for the people and rightly deserves recognition by the standards of Five Dynasties' rulers."[1] Mingzong's high standing among historians is a reflection of aspirations to preside over the most responsible government in his day—a regime of reasonable taxes, modest expenditures, minimal corruption, and vigilant oversight—a profoundly astute agenda for a man never born to rule.[2]

A descendant of the Shatuo Turks, Emperor Mingzong came to personify interracial harmony that transcends borders, as reflected in the mission, in his own words, "to serve as a unifying force between the Chinese and the barbarians" (*tong hua yi*).[3] Shatuo rule over the Middle Kingdom, which at the time included the entirety of North China and much of Sichuan, had begun a few years earlier and responsibility for its continuation rested very substantially upon him, and especially upon his ability

1. ZZTJ 278.9095; XWDS 6.60. For the key to the abbreviation of titles, see the "Sources Cited" section.
2. Zeng, "Lüelun Wudai Houtang," p. 3.
3. CFYG 65.694.

to bring disparate communities together. Serving as a bridge between peoples was no easy task, as the "barbarians" were hardly a homogenous group, while China was bedeviled by its own forces of fissure, the familiar duo of class and region. He needed to encourage these various groups to downplay their own interests in the service of a higher ideal, to set aside short-term benefit for long-term gain. Equally critical to Mingzong's historical repute was his effectiveness at creating an inner circle composed of pugnacious advisors and companions, men and women who fueled his ambitions and moderated his excesses. This book is a political biography of Mingzong, but it gives due attention to the larger community of civil and military officials, plus spouses, offspring, and extended family, who left an indelible imprint on the reign. Despite his many gifts, Mingzong was not without defects, but for most of his reign he managed to marshal the strengths of his inner circle to limit the potential damage caused by his own inexperience.

Although owing his throne to the military, Mingzong expressed a deep and lasting sense of responsibility to subjects, regardless of vocation or social station, his words resonating like those of a modern politician:

> At each meal, I cannot but reflect upon the hunger of our troops; at each dressing, I cannot but ponder the common people's exposure to the cold . . . I regard esteemed leaders across the Four Corners as my loyal subjects and the people in the myriad of districts as my beloved children.[4]

In this simple statement emerges a model for inclusive government. From the mightiest governors in the cities to the poorest of rural peasants, they were all his "beloved children."

Emperor Mingzong could rival the illustrious Taizong of early Tang in charity and frugality, charisma and discipline, but the Tang survived for nearly three centuries after Taizong's passing, whereas the line of Mingzong would be extinguished in merely two years—a seemingly undeserved fate. The culprit was partly serendipity, his seven and a half year reign cut short by death in his mid-sixties. Mingzong also suffered the misfortune of intrigue over the succession among several potential heirs, conflict that proved personally demoralizing in the final days of his life and politically destabilizing in death. It was an appalling end for the first Shatuo house to rule China under the Five Dynasties, but also a personal tragedy for the otherwise exacting monarch, whose greatest fault was a soft spot for family. The two Shatuo regimes to follow his own dynasty, the Later Jin and Later Han, were bereft of visionary leaders like Mingzong and governed for progressively shorter spells. The peak of Shatuo power thus coincided with the reign of Emperor Mingzong and the highest potential for his people as caretakers of the Middle Kingdom is reflected in his times. Precisely because the Shatuo later disappeared as a people, the recovery of their history is something of a sacred enterprise. For them, the historical record is all that remains.

4. CFYG 65.694.

The Five Dynasties of North China lasted only fifty-three years, while Mingzong's reign, shy of eight years, represents a mere slice of the whole. Why does this particular person merit our attention? Just as the tenth century had witnessed the gradual resurgence of civilian power, law and order, after the prolonged dominance of military men, the era of Mingzong provides evidence in microcosm of the trend toward civilian rule at an important turning point. Despite the importance of the Later Tang to this and many other developments, not a single book-length study has been written on the period in general or the reign in particular. In addition, the Five Dynasties was a time of intense competition for material and human resources, the most viable regimes prospering by raiding lesser regimes of talent. The high quality of personnel at the Later Tang court at its peak was a reflection of aggressive recruitment across the lines of class and culture, ethnicity and region. In effect, Mingzong had an impressive strategy for recruiting human talent. Moreover, the Five Dynasties was a time of fluid territorial borders and ethnic boundaries, as Inner Asians collaborated with Han peoples, the period witnessing levels of cross-cultural negotiation that mirrors the Tang at its peak in the seventh century, albeit on a smaller scale. Adopting the dynasty's name and residing in its palaces, Shatuo emperors were zealous in their embrace and preservation of Tang civilization. At the same time, we witness the negotiation of Chinese monarchy by the Shatuo on their own terms, weaving nomadic cultural and religious practices into the fabric of imperial life. Concerns about cultural autonomy and conflicts over its implementation as policy would powerfully inform Shatuo history at this critical juncture. They had become the ultimate political insiders, but the founding rulers never forgot their separateness as a people.

Historians have long dismissed the Five Dynasties as a time of endemic chaos and misrule, which may apply to some intervals, but scarcely the entire period. Overall, the south, home of nine of the Ten Kingdoms, fared noticeably better than the north; military conflict tended to be more sporadic, especially for the largest satrapies in the region: Wu, Shu, and Southern Han. The average southern state lasted over four decades, compared to a single decade for dynasties in the north. The five governments of North China, which followed one another in quick succession, were inherently less stable at the apex of power in the capital, although to a lesser extent along the periphery. The north also suffered from the dual threats of menacing neighbors along its expansive borders and a plethora of domestic enemies.

By any measure, the Later Tang under Mingzong was the exceptional bright spot in terms of containing domestic and foreign conflicts, while advancing a constructive agenda for governance. The dynasty presided over 170 prefectures, including 46 acquired after the conquest of Sichuan in 925, to create the largest area of any empire in its day (see Map 1).[5] The monarch's predecessor, Zhuangzong, had toiled for more than a decade in laying the dynasty's territorial foundation, only to perish three years

5. Mostern, "The Usurper's Empty Names," pp. 136–40.

later as his armies campaigned against Sichuan, an area that eventually proved easier to gain than to govern. In retrospect, Zhuangzong seems to have overextended the natural limits of an empire rooted in the regions north of the Yellow River. In contrast, Mingzong placed greater stock in preserving the status quo.[6] His modest ambitions with reference to empire had a downside: the beginning of a process whereby the newly acquired lands in the southwest would be ceded to local powerbrokers by his successor, while to the north the Kitan, a lesser power relative to the Shatuo in the 920s, were allowed to strengthen their hand north of the Great Wall and position themselves to reap the spoils of instability in the Chinese heartland decades later. Even the smallest of tributary states, Nanping, created its fair share of headaches. Thus, the virtues associated with the reign were precisely the factors that detracted from Mingzong's historical legacy over the long haul, impulses that led him to compromise with his enemies, rather than fight for principle.

Dramatic divergences in the competence and the character of the emperor's offspring also proved determinative of the dynasty's fate. Mingzong suffered the misfortune of virtually every great ruler in history: his progeny compared unfavorably to him.[7] Having lost his most promising sons before his accession, he concentrated on his oldest survivor, Li Congrong (d. 933), a youth proud of his command of the Chinese language.[8] Sometime around 932, Congrong acknowledged, "During leisure, I like nothing more than reading books and discussing the classics with scholars." But Mingzong, then sixty-six, responded with ambivalence rather than approbation, according to one version of the exchange in the *Historical Records*:

> I recall the former emperor's propensity for composing songs and poems, something of little value, it seems to me! . . . As a man advanced in years, the symbolic meaning of the classics eludes me, although I enjoy listening to scholars lecture on the topic from time to time. Study beyond that point is simply not worthwhile!

Elsewhere in the exchange, Mingzong cites his predecessor's obsession with base arts like acting and singing, a recent reminder of the potential for immersion in Chinese ways to distract Shatuo leaders from their martial duties. Without disparaging Chinese ways or discouraging the pursuit of literacy, the emperor pragmatically reminds the son of his family's identity as warriors from Inner Asia. In resisting the natural attraction to Chinese culture, Mingzong sought to set boundaries for his sons, intent on preserving some cultural practices rooted in the steppe. He did not necessarily succeed in changing the predilections of this particular son, but his sentiments helped to set boundaries for his descendants in navigating the world of Han and Hu, guidance that they ignored to their own peril.

6. Zeng, "Lüelun Wudai Houtang," p. 3.
7. WDHY 2.19–20. Another source cites four sons; XWDS 15.161.
8. XWDS 15.163; ZZTJ 278.9077; CFYG 158.1766–67, 270.3067; Fu, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," p. 331.

Despite his concern with preserving traditions native to his people, Mingzong evolved into a Son of Heaven with a visible presence among his Chinese subjects, as reflected in the frequency of imperial visits to scenic sites in Luoyang, late-night banquets with senior statesmen and family friends, and tours of the countryside to inspect farms and construction sites. Chieftains from Inner Asia commonly functioned more like esteemed peers than sovereigns sanctioned by Heaven, and the extroverted political style of Emperor Mingzong seems to have roots in another culture. His lifestyle preferences would place serious strains on palace managers and security details, but they provided an occasion to break through China's notorious imperial bubble. Unlike his predecessor, whose social and political lives tended to run along separate tracks, Mingzong became a regular presence in Luoyang, a presence which ran through the reign.

Emperor Mingzong also broke the mold of emperors of his day in managing to take leave of the capital for over a year without a single return trip. He had gone to Kaifeng in 927 on suspicion of a potential mutiny by the local governor. Despite the quick success of armies sent to suppress the mutiny, he made the remarkable decision to remain indefinitely. Four years earlier, his predecessor, Zhuangzong, had proposed personal command of armies against Sichuan, only to relent under pressure from officials. Mingzong not only proceeded with the trip to Kaifeng, but he even proposed a second imperial tour farther north to Weizhou. The desire for sojourns away from the capital seems to have waned in later life, due chiefly to the decline in domestic threats to the government. Nonetheless, an important precedent had been set by affording a reigning monarch some freedom of movement, a precedent that might have offered a welcome change for his successors. The experience had another important impact: it convinced Mingzong of the need to provide administrative experience away from the capital for his adult sons, after which they became his window on the world.

The political and social activism of Mingzong emanated from more than the simple urge to be liberated from the trifles of monarchy. It should rightfully be seen as a reaching out to the people of China from a ruler conscious of his identity as an outsider and anxious to shorten the space that separated him from his subjects. For two generations, the Shatuo had brought together various communities in the border region, complemented by a broad swathe of Han Chinese across the north, to consolidate their grip on the northern Yellow River region and conquer the Central Plains. Inner Asians, and especially fellow Shatuo who had figured prominently in the early stages of empire-building, remained visible in the post-conquest era as military advisors and imperial friends. The emperor's public persona served to camouflage the privileged standing of himself and his people. At the same time, Mingzong sought to ameliorate potential frictions within his capital by drawing widely upon the Chinese majority, not simply to manage civilian affairs, where their dominance was inevitable, but to share a larger portion of state resources and perquisites. The racial diversity of the administration in

the absence of artificial barriers between different ethnic groups through housing and marriage arrangements made the experience of the Shatuo unique in the history of minority rule for the past millennium. Thus, the Shatuo under Mingzong appear more protective of their own cultural identity relative to the Wei dynasty ruled by the Tuoba four centuries earlier, yet they ruled by similarly inclusive policies.

The Shatuo People

Mingzong went initially by Miaojilie, his Shatuo name, shifting to the Chinese name Li Siyuan as a young adult. Born in 867, the ninth day of the ninth month (October 10), Siyuan was the eldest son of a chieftain with the personal name Ni and a mother surnamed Liu, a grandfather called Yan, and a grandmother surnamed He (see Chart 1). The surnames of his mother and grandmother seem to suggest Chinese ancestry on Siyuan's maternal side, but for centuries, Inner Asians residing in China often adopted Liu as surname, so we cannot preclude some nomadic blood for his maternal side. Nonetheless, the distinct features of Inner Asians were clearly visible in his people, based on the sole surviving painting of a Shatuo emperor in the Five Dynasties, Zhuangzong, with his sharp facial features, full beard, and wide gait (see Figure 1).

Siyuan grew up initially at Yingzhou, northern Shanxi, roughly a hundred kilometers south of the Great Wall, when he was orphaned by the death of his father, Ni, at the age of thirteen *sui*.[9] His father's position as "chieftain" suggests considerable stature within the local warrior elite, which in turn implies exposure to the martial arts since youth. Siyuan had the good fortune to be old enough to be molded in critical ways by his biological parents, but young enough to bond well with a new family.[10] He subsequently came under the protective wing of Li Guochang (d. 887) and Li Keyong (856–908), confederates of his father then based at Jinyang, central Shanxi. The wife of Keyong and the mother of Siyuan shared the surname Liu, although there is no tangible evidence of familial bonds between the two women.

By seventeen *sui*, Siyuan had evolved into a scrappy fighter. Keyong's principal consort was pregnant with the future Zhuangzong when Siyuan arrived in Jinyang, so the youth filled a symbolic paternal void in a man then nearly thirty and without male heir. It was Keyong's father, Guochang, who first marveled at Siyuan's skills as hunter and archer, later bonding with him like his own father.[11] Siyuan made every effort to win acceptance in his new home, a better place for an ambitious Shatuo youth to realize his dreams. The subsequent devotion of Siyuan to his adopted community emanates from a strong sense of good fortune for escaping the fate of most teenage

9. In the absence of a concept for zero, the Chinese traditionally started life at one, making age counted in *sui* generally one year older than the West, although sometimes as much as two years, when birthdays came later in the year.
10. JWDS 35.482.
11. JWDS 35.491.

orphans in his day, abandonment or servitude. His modest beginnings help to explain Siyuan's preference for simple surroundings in later life, "his home devoid of valuables," contemporaries say, alluding to an aloofness to material comforts that would last a lifetime.[12] The contrast with the eldest son of Keyong was striking: Li Cunxu saw power and glory as a birthright and tended to be supremely arrogant and self-absorbed. Cunxu and Siyuan may have been raised in the same extended family, but the two men were a lesson in contrasts.

Figure 1
Official portrait of Emperor Zhuangzong, predecessor of Mingzong. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

12. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.330.

His people, the Shatuo, "people of the Sandy Steppes," a name perhaps transliterated from ancient Turkish, were descended from the Turks of Inner Asia, also dubbed the "Türgish" people. They had lived along the nomadic frontier of North China for many centuries, as part of China's "inner zone."[13] Historical references to the Shatuo, however, begin only with the Tang dynasty (618–907). They may have gone by other names or splintered off from other groups like the Chuye Turks, or they may represent an amalgam of numerous tribes, including the Hu, Tartars, Huihu, and Tuhun.[14] More likely, Shatuo tribes during their pre-historical period were conflated with other groups along the border by indiscriminating contemporaries. Increasingly over the course of the Tang, they became mercenaries of the court as part of an ongoing policy to "pit barbarian against barbarian" as a check on aggression against China itself, the Shatuo evolving as willing agents of Tang policy.

Reflecting the permeability of borders at the time, the Shatuo had once roamed a sizable area in China's northwest—extending from southern Mongolia into Ningxia and parts of northern Shaanxi—as traders in horses, sheep, and cattle, animals partly consumed by them but mostly traded along their southern frontier.[15] The Tujue Turks had dominated that swathe of porous borderland for much of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Shatuo likely constituting one ethnic community beneath the broad multi-ethnic umbrella of Inner Asian Turks. But the Shatuo evolved quickly into a distinct ethnic group after their move to the south and east. Historians believe that they also knew the language of the Tujue Turks, their own language having most likely derived from it.[16] Sources allude to Mingzong speaking a "barbarian language" (*fanyu*), which might have been his native Shatuo dialect, but more likely represents some variant of Tujue, the lingua franca of the Silk Road in Tang times and earlier.[17]

The early Shatuo, "with their reverence for spirits and fondness for divination," appear to have practiced some aspects of Manichaeism, a religion introduced to China in the period of division preceding Tang rule in the seventh century.[18] The sacrifice of animals upon the death of relatives may have emanated from that religion as well. Shamanism likely left an equally indelible mark on the daily religious practices of the Shatuo through their worship of gods and fear of nature.[19] The notion of a "Heavenly God" (*Tianshen*) also appears to have originated with the Turks of Inner Asia, who

13. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, p. 8; Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 152, Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 144.
14. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 132–72, esp. 132; ZZTJ 251.8140; Eberhard, *A History of China*, pp. 199–204.
15. JWDS 91.1200; XWDS ch. 46, p. 514; 51.577; Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 132–36; Fu, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," pp. 319–20; Wang Xusong, "Shatuo Hanhua zhi guocheng"; Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 168.
16. Chen Jianhua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 168.
17. Fan, "Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi."
18. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 158.
19. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 171–72.

exported their own distinct form of Buddhism to the Shatuo.[20] Admittedly, the Chinese also conducted divination to nature, but by the tenth century, better-educated Chinese tended to regard anomalies of nature as predictable, whereas northerners like the Shatuo tended to view nature as dangerously capricious and in need of constant assuagement. Like other Inner Asians, the Shatuo appear to have acquired a high regard for sculpture as craft, an aesthetic imported from the West, as reflected in the popularity of the Longmen Caves and their monumental icons with a succession of rulers, including Mingzong.[21]

Initially dubbed in historical sources as the "Turks of Shatuo prefecture" (*Shatuo Tujue*), occasional references to the "three tribes of Shatuo" suggest the coexistence of multiple confederations, the Shatuo ascent coinciding with the decline of the Eastern Turks in the eighth century.[22] Their armies in the ninth century may have been small, but Shatuo warriors seemed uniquely "brave and aggressive," courage in war buttressed by an enviable expertise in archery and siege warfare. Indeed, the best of their bowmen could deliver enough force to pierce the shield of foes with their arrows.[23] The Shatuo cooperated with the Uighurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic groups in the northwest at intervals in the mid-to-late eighth century, only for alliances to shift toward the Middle Kingdom after the decline of those two powers in the last century of Tang rule.[24] The Shatuo autonomy from the steppe evolved incrementally in concert with their expanding military presence south of the Great Wall, a development that took much of a century through a mixture of conflict and cooperation with Changan.[25]

After 809, with the blessings of the Tang government, a sizable cluster of Shatuo Turks representing several different tribes resettled in the Daibei region in northern Shanxi, their presence extending from the Taiyuan plains northward to Datong. Other clusters appear to have remained to the west and the north, thereby retaining more of their original culture.[26] During the Tang, the area went by the name of Hedong, the circuit east of the Yellow River, although "Jin" was a more popular appellation among locals and referenced the region's ancient name. The arid terrain and sparse vegetation of central Shanxi were ideally suited to the herding and hunting traditions of the immigrants, making for a permanent Shatuo presence. Relocation to the Chinese heartland facilitated regular contact with the government of China, as Tang commanders rallied the pugnacious Inner Asians to repulse insurgents in the empire's interior starting from the early ninth century, ultimately integrating the Shatuo into a "patrimonial

20. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 146–47.
21. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 147.
22. XTS 218.6153.
23. XWDS 4.33.
24. XTS 218.6154–58.
25. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 5–29.
26. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 141.

patron-client" relationship, to employ the terminology of one historian, a relationship cynically designed to advance the interests of Changan.[27]

Augmenting the tactical value of the Shatuo to the government in Changan was a steady growth in numbers. Based on reports of six thousand to seven thousand "tents" during the late eighth century, some scholars estimate the Shatuo population at just over thirty thousand people, including women and children.[28] The estimate appears overly conservative: the frequent inclusion of other Inner Asians and Chinese locals in major military actions militates against the isolation of Shatuo numbers, the basis for any estimate of total population. Moreover, the Shatuo realized a stunning surge in population, perhaps even a doubling in numbers from the late ninth to the early tenth centuries, partly by absorbing former mercenaries from the steppe and partly by striking a panoply of multi-ethnic marriages. By then, they had evolved into a group less Turkic in blood and more tied to the land as a semi-sedentary people. The combination of social prominence and strategic clout transformed the Hedong settlers into a pivotal force in the politics of the early tenth century, as an enfeebled Tang monarchy tottered on collapse. And heightened contacts with the Middle Kingdom over time allowed for changes in cultural practices, including the transmission of a written language to a people without their own writing system, nor for that matter a simple surname.

"The northern barbarians have no surnames," writes Ouyang Xiu in the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*.[29] The claim is surely overstated, as Ouyang Xiu tended to generalize for all northerners the customs of only some. But for the Shatuo Turks specifically, the adoption of surnames came late in their evolution as a people and likely in imitation of Chinese practice. The earliest known ancestor, Shatuo Jinshan, who dates to the late seventh century, clearly went by his personal name.[30] Li Siyuan's great-grandfather by adoption, who went by the name Zhuye Jinzhong, employed Zhuye as tribal name, which later writers misconstrued as surname. The grandson of Jinzhong, Zhuye Chixin would elect to abandon his Turkish name once the Tang throne bestowed on him the name Li Guochang in recognition of services rendered.[31] Guochang had acquired some measure of celebrity decades earlier by leading raids against the Huihu Uighurs.[32]

The conferral of the imperial surname and a Chinese-style personal name, usually accompanied by registry as Tang subject, constituted the highest form of patronage for meritorious service to the government in Changan, which employed the practice

27. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 146.

28. JTS 196.5257; Fan, "Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi," p. 77. Wolfram Eberhard's estimate of 100,000 Shatuo men at the peak of their power is clearly off the mark; see *A History of China*, p. 200; *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 142.

29. XWDS 4.39.

30. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 132; Fan, "Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi," pp. 71–73.

31. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 759, 786; JTS 19.674; XTS 218.6156–58.

32. ZZTJ 246.7942.

widely. Yet an action borne of strategic need had acquired an added layer of cultural meaning as Shatuo leaders became a symbolic extension of the ruling family and assumed its titles and offices. Such patent manipulation by the Son of Heaven met with surprisingly little resistance from many nomadic groups along the border, including Li Guochang and his eldest son, Li Keyong, who assumed a Chinese-style name in his mid-teens and employed it so exclusively that his original Shatuo name is forever lost to history. Keyong's adopted son Siyuan was similarly adamant about using his Chinese name and once killed a man in a fit of fury for blurting out his Shatuo name, Miaojilie, even though Siyuan was a mere soldier at the time.[33] For generations, the Shatuo took immense pride in their fictional relationship with the Tang monarchy as embodied in a shared surname. But the embrace of Chinese names and titles does not necessarily imply spineless subservience to the Middle Kingdom, as the word "patrimony" implies. The beauty of the Tang model of border management is that it entailed infinitely more carrot than stick, more benevolent bounty than coercive pressure. Moreover, in the absence of names in their indigenous language, the Shatuo would need to develop other ways to define community.

The Life and Legacy of Li Keyong

Despite the eagerness of the Shatuo to serve, and perhaps due to misplaced zeal, their collaboration with the Tang evolved unevenly, as parochial suspicions sometimes erupted into armed conflict. Li Guochang seemed "too aggressive and arbitrary in seeking validation from the Tang throne," from the perspective of Changan, taking an assortment of initiatives in the 870s that caused the court to consign him to the empire's northern fringe.[34] The Shatuo Turks even briefly retreated farther north to the "Tartar" regions of Mongolia in 880, following a string of setbacks inflicted by Changan. Yet a fresh wave of rebel activity a year later led by Huang Chao (d. 884), arguably the gravest peril to Tang rule in over a century, gave the Shatuo another chance to wrap themselves in the flag of dynasty and restore their reputation as credible mercenaries: they figured prominently in expelling insurgents from the capital in 883, forcing Huang Chao to retreat as splinter groups disintegrated. Soon thereafter, Guochang was succeeded by his son Li Keyong, then twenty-eight *sui*. Keyong wisely enlisted Tartar mercenaries along with fellow Turks in the final assault on the remnants of other rebel groups in China's northwest, which ended fruitfully within a year. Without the support of Shatuo mercenary armies, the Huang Chao rebellion might have proceeded for some years and wreaked considerably more havoc. The Tang court rewarded Keyong with an assignment as prefect of Daizhou, in northern Shanxi, an

33. XWDS 32.350.
34. XWDS 4.31.

area already containing clusters of Shatuo settlers.[35] The city was scarcely a hundred kilometers north of Yingzhou, the ancestral home of Siyuan.

Keyong's mother, Woman Qin, was likely Chinese by birth, but the ways of her son were solidly rooted in the steppe. Early on, he won acclaim as an archer capable of "hitting twin flying ducks from a reclining position," heroic escapades that inspired the sobriquet "Dragon with a Single Eye" (*Du yan long*).[36] As a teenager, if not sooner, Keyong had joined his father in battle to evolve as a superior warrior and strategist.[37] It was doubtless during the combat of youth that Keyong lost the eye that inspired his nickname, although diminished eyesight had little effect on his agility as archer or his deftness at sizing up the opponent. Keyong succeeded Guochang in 883 with little known opposition, a sign that the practice of father-to-son succession had already been introduced to the Shatuo as early as the eighth century, the times of Jinshan, despite the preference for fraternal succession among many other nomadic communities at the time.[38]

The stewardship of Keyong over the Shatuo for the next quarter century proved beleaguered beyond belief for a man of his many gifts. Partly by intent and partly inertia, he became embedded in the Chinese world after securing Tang investiture as the Prince of Jin, a title passed on to his son. Still, relations with the south soured during Keyong's initial decade of power: Changan's enfeebled monarchs were often compelled by circumstance to slight the council of the Shatuo prince on domestic affairs while coddling rival governors like Zhu Wen, Keyong's arch rival. The court once even sanctioned military action against the Jin.[39] Meanwhile, the Shatuo took frequent recourse to plunder, sometimes for the sake of self-preservation, but often in a frustrated cry for validation, as in the sacking of the Chinese capital in 885. Only later did the alliance stabilize, Keyong proving more committed to the dynasty's survival than the bulk of the Chinese governors in his day.[40] In the process, the Shatuo came to be perceived by other Inner Asians as fundamentally "southern" in orientation, their future increasingly tied to China and divorced from the steppe.[41]

For much of the ninth century, the Jin satrapy's base of operations had centered on Jinyang, in the heart of Hedong circuit. The site held historic import as the base of operations for the Tuoba (Tabgach), Inner Asian founders of the Northern Wei dynasty in the early fifth century. Generations later, Jinyang served as the summer

35. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 142–43.
36. XWDS 4.32; JWDS 25.332.
37. JTS 19.681.
38. XTS 218.6154. Sources vary on the date of Guochang's death: the *Old History of the Five Dynasties* gives 883, while the *New History of the Tang* gives 887. On the discrepancy among various sources, see annotation in JWDS 25.332.
39. XWDS 4.32–38.
40. ZZTJ 260.8481.
41. Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, p. 32.

resort for Sui emperors. It was also the location from which the founders of the Tang unleashed their armies against the Sui capital of Changan. The Tang subsequently elevated Jinyang to the status of "northern capital," even though its rulers never governed from its precincts. The Tang royal family also married women from the city's illustrious families, including Gaozong, whose first spouse, Woman Wang, hailed from the area, like the father of her successor, the infamous Wu Zetian.[42] The ruling family of the Sui had similarly intermarried with the Jinyang elite and assigned a succession of imperial sons to the area, such as the dynasty's second monarch, Yangdi.[43] Jinyang's repute as the land of kings and queens would peak in the Five Dynasties era, when founders of three of the five houses to unify the north emanated from bases there—the Later Tang, Jin, and Han. The city was also seat of the scrappy Northern Han, the last of the Ten Kingdoms to defy the Song mandate, carrying its resistance until 979.

Li Keyong possessed a deeply ingrained sense of duty, fidelity, and honor, values rooted in the warrior traditions of Yinshan, where his formative years were spent, and which he brought to his new home in Hedong. It is noteworthy that these were precisely the character traits associated with Li Siyuan, Keyong's adopted son. Family and friends remembered Keyong's endearing personal qualities, but associates, especially subordinate officers, often saw a severe side as pertains to martial discipline. For example, Keyong frequently applied the full force of the law for the infractions of lieutenants, including castration for some crimes.[44] He also possessed a testy temper and stinging tongue. He once cursed and flogged a younger brother for the offence of "undue parsimony in provisioning troops." The physical injury of flogging, worsened by the withering censure, so mortified the sibling that he died suddenly.[45] Stories of this sort demonstrate that Keyong kept surrogates on a tight leash, including his own relatives. To the extent that kinsmen were not above censure, Keyong's sense of fairness seemed to compensate for the authoritarian streak. It was precisely this combination of strength and sentimentality that made Keyong the symbolic father and role model for two rulers in the Later Tang, Zhuangzong and Mingzong, although admittedly the former never inherited his father's personal discipline, while the latter lacked his even-handedness in husbanding family and friends.

At the center of Li Keyong's inner circle were two women, Woman Liu (d. 925), his legal spouse, and Consort Cao (d. 925), mother of four sons. Based on their surnames, the two women were likely of Chinese ancestry. The surname Cao had been adopted by numerous ethnic groups at the time, according to the Tang dynastic history, while northern Shanxi had a long history of cross-cultural intermarriage.[46] Sources are silent on the family roots of Woman Liu, although a Liu clan of Jinyang did enjoy some

42. *Cambridge History of China*, *Vol. 3*, pp. 153, 156, 201, 243, 245.
43. Yuan, *Sui Yangdi zhuan*, pp. 43–44, 62–63, 157.
44. JWDS 55.745, 91.1207; XWDS 14.142.
45. XWDS 14.148.
46. XWDS ch. 14, p. 141–42; HR pp. 130–32; XTS 212B.6243–45; Deng, "Lun Wudai Songchu."

prominence in Tang times, making for the possibility of a connection.[47] And indeed, the confidence of an upper-class woman seems to be borne out by her multiplicity of talents. A frequent companion of Keyong during the kingdom's early conflicts, Woman Liu advised him on assorted military and political matters in the assertive fashion of women from Inner Asia such as the wife of Kitan ruler Abaoji, the Lady Shulü, a younger contemporary.[48] Woman Liu even coached women in the royal household in archery and horseback riding, activities that hearken back to the Tang, where a daughter of the dynasty's founder commanded men in the field.[49] Royal women had a long and venerable history of serving in support missions of the sort, in China proper as well as Inner Asia.

By his early thirties, in the absence a son by his legal wife, Keyong bonded with Consort Cao, mother of his eldest surviving son.[50] The consort came to counsel Keyong on matters of personal and political conduct, much like his formal wife, her "soberly worded admonitions" sparing the lives of many associates who crossed the satrap during moments of foul temper.[51] She was the biological mother of Zhuangzong, whose filial devotion to her was legendary. In life, Consort Cao, a strict disciplinarian, had been a positive force in the life of her imperfect son, but her death in the summer of 925 would produce such paranoia as to unravel the reign in less than a year. She had been elevated to empress upon Zhuangzong's accession as emperor in 923, forcing Woman Liu's relegation to consort in later life. Woman Liu and Consort Cao, the leading women in Keyong's life, were wedded emotionally through their love and respect for him, sharing the sort of eternal bond rarely found between first wives and favored consorts. The amicable relations within Keyong's household provided a model for his sons, especially Siyuan, whose biological mother was surnamed Liu and future empress surnamed Cao.

Keyong had another consort in the person of Lady Chen. Native to the city of Xiangzhou in south central China (modern Xiangyang, Henan), she was once a ranking consort of the Tang emperor Zhaozong, who gave her to Keyong in 895, along with four female musical performers from his palace, in a special act of favor.[52] She is heralded as a rare beauty with a special knack for calligraphy, qualities that enhanced her appeal. Consort Chen and Keyong came to share such strong ties that she was the only consort allowed to visit him during a bout of depression brought on by a sudden dip in military fortunes. She apparently had no children, certainly no male children, for the consort left the Jinyang royal household upon Keyong's death in 908 to join a Buddhist nunnery, fulfilling a promise of long standing to him. She would resur-

47. *Cambridge History of China*, *Vol. 3*, p. 243.
48. Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 50; *Liao shi*, 71.1199–1200.
49. Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, p. 24; XTS 83.3642–43.
50. XWDS 14.150–51; HR pp. 140–41.
51. XWDS 14.142; HR p. 131.
52. JWDS 49.673–74; ZZTJ 260.8476.

face during Mingzong's reign in her new role as spiritual leader, a sign of her genuine devotion to the religion in the manner of other women within the Shatuo royal family.

The several leading women in Keyong's life, surviving him by nearly seventeen years, never lost their affection for him nor their affinity for one another—a phenomenon rare for any period. However powerful his passion for feminine beauty, one diminished only slightly by the advance of years, Keyong clearly possessed exceptional character traits that compensated for his roving eye.[53] By all indications, each woman offered a different kind of companionship at different stages in his life, the three as dissimilar from one another as they differed from him. The histories portray neither Woman Liu nor Consort Cao as especially attractive, a sign that Keyong placed other factors before beauty in the selection of consorts, factors ranging from command of the martial arts to competence in household affairs. Modern social historians have noted the strength of "mother-to-son bonding" among families from Inner Asia, in contrast with China's traditional stress on the "father-to-son" relationship.[54] These observations appear borne out by the experience of the Shatuo ruling family in Keyong's day, where mothers were often a leading source of parental discipline, while sons tended to be filial to mothers to a fault. This forced fathers into the role of nurturers, even spoilers of their sons.

Imperial Women

Inasmuch as Mingzong was an accidental emperor, the particulars about his married life in youth and the maternity of his children are scant and sometimes contested. We can confirm that he fathered at least six sons, although a larger number apparently died too young to receive formal names and investitures. The eldest son perished in 926 on the heels of the mutiny that swept him to power, a second son in 933 mere days before his own death, and at least one son earlier in life, leaving one adult male and several young boys as survivors. In addition, Mingzong fathered sixteen daughters, three of whom outlived him.[55] His progeny represents the offspring of several consorts before the accession and a harem of roughly twenty women afterwards. The modest size of his family made each child, male and female, a rare asset in striking strategic marriages.

The woman elevated posthumously by Mingzong as empress in the seventh year of his reign, Woman Xia, produced two sons destined to figure prominently in dynastic politics, Congrong, the son who nearly succeeded his father, and Conghou (914–934), the son who did succeed him as Emperor Min.[56] Extant sources are silent about the history of her relationship with the future monarch, including whether they were ever married in life. Upon her investiture as empress in 932, Woman Xia was cel-

53. *Xu Tang shu*, 35.288.
54. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 190; XWDS 14.141–43.
55. WDHY 2.20; 2.22.
56. JWDS 49.676; XWDS 15.157; WDHY 1.13.

ebrated for "her noble character and lifelong commitment to family," which obviously papered over deficiencies in pedigree.[57] The dynastic history reports an infraction in the household of Siyuan that caused him to beat her with a stick, the sort of corporal punishment common for servants, but unacceptably harsh for women of standing in the household such as wives and consorts. Once a fortune-teller predicted her future fate as imperial mother, Siyuan began to treat Woman Xia more generously, but the change came in the last years of her life, by all indications.[58] A background as household servant would have precluded her marriage to Siyuan as legal wife. In life, she was likely never more than a lesser consort, a fact confirmed by the fact that her investiture as empress was deferred until the end of the reign as a consequence of the advancement of her sons as royal princes. Sources do not reveal the identity of Siyuan's wife or wives in early life, so his first spouse may well have died young without issue, causing him to turn to consorts for companionship in his middle years, years largely spent on assignment away from home.

For the last three years of Mingzong's reign, the self-effacing Woman Cao (d. 936) presided over the Middle Palace as empress.[59] She is the only identifiable legal wife. Sources say little about her background, although the mother of Zhuangzong, Mingzong's predecessor, shared the same surname and hailed from a prominent Jinyang family, so the women were likely related in some way. As governor, the future Mingzong petitioned to come to the capital upon learning of Dowager Cao's passing in 925, signaling close personal ties to the deceased empress. Elevated to senior consort in 928 and empress in 930, Woman Cao, like Woman Xia, appears to have enjoyed no exceptional favor at the outset, as reflected in the four-year delay in formalizing her standing.[60] By her own admission, Empress Cao suffered from poor health, which contributed to a general disinterest in the ceremonial side of her position, such as outings in the capital or state banquets. The empress produced no sons by all indications, although she did give birth to the emperor's eldest daughter, the Yongning Princess, who married the celebrated Shatuo warrior Shi Jingtang (892–942). Sources say that Consort Cao once favored Consort Wang's installation as empress, a favorite of Mingzong for much of his life, but the Consort deferred to Empress Cao out of mutual esteem. The empress was also on intimate terms with Li Congke (885–937), the emperor's favorite adopted son, which certainly contributed in some measure to his success in navigating the perilous waters of Five Dynasties politics.

Over the course of the reign, Mingzong's two leading consorts evolved into key allies within the palace, Consort Wang deferring to the authority of Empress Cao while the empress protected the interests of the consort. A generation earlier, the

57. JWDS 49.676.

58. JWDS 71.946.

59. JWDS 48.668, 49.676; XWDS 15.157–60.

60. Once source suggests that Woman Cao had become the formal wife of Siyuan long before her formal installation as empress in 930; see ZZTJ 268.8770–71.

principal concubine of Li Keyong, Woman Cao, the mother of Zhuangzong, was similarly characterized as self-effacing and politically aloof. The younger Empress Cao may have begun as less passionately involved with Siyuan, but they grew in intimacy over the course of their marriage, as evidenced by the pair sharing meals and entertainment on a regular basis, at which they were attended personally by Consort Wang. Empress Cao thereby came to influence her husband in private ways, consistent with her preference for modesty, but many actions attributed to Consort Wang likely emanated from consultations with the empress. In their mutual affection and lack of malice, the relationship between the two primary consorts of Mingzong mirrored something of the camaraderie shared by the spouses of Keyong.

Only one consort, Woman Wei, was elevated to empress after Mingzong's passing, due to the accession of her son as emperor in 934. A widow of commoner background but stunning beauty, she had been abducted by Siyuan during a military action at Zhenzhou, likely in 893; her son, Li Congke, was roughly nine *sui*.[61] In time, she came to cohabit with Siyuan, while her son enlisted in his armies to earn his trust, before being formally adopted as son. The youth is portrayed in the dynastic history as "possessing a daring and imposing demeanor, scrupulous integrity, cautious tongue, plus a dauntless valor in combat that caused Mingzong to love him dearly."[62] Empress Wei surely had a hand in shaping such positive attributes in her offspring, although she died sometime after moving to Jinyang. Both mother and son were Chinese ethnics, which confirms that Mingzong was highly inclusive in recruiting consorts, adopting sons, and even arranging marriages.

The most influential of Mingzong's consorts over the long haul, Woman Wang (d. 947), happened to rise from the most humble of circumstances.[63] She was born to a family of pastry makers at Binzhou, in central Shanxi, then worked for a while as servant in the home of a prominent commander of the Liang dynasty. Some years of homelessness ensued before she caught the eye of the future Mingzong due to her repute for beauty of the sort that "causes flowers to wilt in shame." Consort Wang began as a sexual diversion who evolved into a political force in her own right by virtue of well-oiled palace networks. She was savvy enough to lavish gifts on members of the royal family in order to garner their goodwill. Even after the accession, Woman Wang often served the emperor and empress as menial servant, preparing his toilet, attending to her personal needs, or standing in attention as the imperial couple dined together, signs of her low self-esteem. At the same time, her close ties to Empress Cao and the eunuch Meng Hanqiong strengthened Consort Wang's position within the palace, enabling her to exert growing influence over affairs of the outer court. She gave birth to one daughter of record, who married Zhao Yanshou (d. 949), but apparently no

61. JWDS 49.676–77; XWDS 7.71; 15.158.
62. XWDS 7.71.
63. JWDS 49.677; XWDS 15.158–60; WDHY 1.16; ZZTJ 287.9366.

sons, so Mingzong allowed her to adopt a young boy, Congyi (931–947), the offspring of another consort, along with an orphan girl, to be raised in the household. Before long, the consort ran afoul of An Chonghui, the Military Commissioner intent on limiting the influence of palace favorites, although she enjoyed something of a reprieve after Chonghui's demise in 931. But Consort Wang became implicated indirectly in the intrigues of Congrong, the son purged by the emperor in 933, causing her to lose some favor in the final days of the reign, although she would live for another decade and wield considerable influence as the widow of a revered ruler.

The women in Mingzong's private life reveal much about his approach to building a family. His legal wife, Empress Cao, was valued preeminently for moral character. The consort most famed for beauty, Consort Wang, would cause the greatest trouble for the palace later in the emperor's life and after his death. A similar problem plagued other reigns in the Five Dynasties: legal wives tended to be more morally circumspect than consorts, women from elite backgrounds more ethically predictable than women outside the elite. The rule applies to Mingzong's predecessor as well, Zhuangzong, whose famously beautiful wife, Empress Liu, a woman of humble origins who supplanted his first wife after giving birth to a son, became the source of growing acrimony over the course of the reign.

Prior to the accession, the size of Mingzong's harem was typical of many men of means in the Five Dynasties, never exceeding several women. After the accession, his harem of twenty-two women, assisted by less than one hundred female workers, was miniscule relative to his predecessor, who acquired a harem reputedly of hundreds.[64] But emperors of traditional China generally recruited masses of consorts not chiefly for purposes of procreation or sexual diversion, as outsiders commonly think, but rather for the power over women that a vast harem symbolized. Mingzong's modest expectations with regard to this alluring symbol of monarchy and manhood make him something of an enigma. Advanced age partly contributed to the temperance in his sexual life, but the impression of his predecessor as sexually abandoned likely motivated Mingzong to set a better example for his own children.

Sons

The eldest son of Mingzong for the entire reign, Li Congrong, the offspring of Consort Xia, never managed to succeed his father, but his impact on the dynasty far exceeded the son who did. "He exuded a carefree elegance in demeanor and the perspicacity of an eagle in appraising others," the *Historical Records* writes, in affirmation of youth's superficial appeal to others. Congrong was also a skilled poet, who eventually attracted a sizable entourage of literarily inclined retainers. He loved pageantry as well: "Every time he entered court, the spectacle of several hundred cavalry to his front and rear,

64. WDHY 1.15–16.

galloping swiftly with bows taut and arrows cocked, left roadside observers awestruck."[65] The emperor insisted on political experience for Congrong as a young adult, culminating in his appointment as overseer of Henan prefecture, the administrative seat for the capital. A succession of esteemed military titles came his way as well, additional signs of imperial favor. Military Commissioner An Chonghui eventually found the young man's arrogant pretenses insufferable, but his reservations found little sympathy with the monarch. At the same time, Mingzong had refrained from installing either of his two adult sons as heir-apparent, in all probability to encourage improvements in Congrong, but the delay merely increased frictions between father and son to create an ugly confrontation in the emperor's final days.

Emperor Mingzong's sole male survivor, Li Conghou, likely a year or two younger than Congrong, emerges as the exact opposite in terms of personality and moral character. Dynastic histories describe him as "physically stout and sturdy with a propensity to be sparing in words, traits that enabled him to win a special place in the heart of Mingzong, whom he closely resembled."[66] Dynastic histories identify Consort Xia as his birth mother, the same mother as eldest son Congrong. Born in Jinyang, Conghou appears to have received a classics-based Chinese education focused on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, allowing him to acquire a modest grasp of its principal thrust. Mingzong was forty-eight *sui* at the time of Conghou's birth, the age when fathers tend to pamper their children and Conghou has the markings of a pampered child, lacking the firmness of his father. In the end, the two boys personified the emperor's own split personality: Congrong inherited his audacity as warrior, while Conghou acquired his political sensibilities. Sadly, neither son inherited both qualities.

To buttress his political résumé, the teenage Conghou was named the governor of Henan, followed by Kaifeng, Heyang, Zhenzhou, and Weizhou—some of the most strategic commands in the country. The postings benefited the son by separating him from the negative influences of the palace. Eldest son Congrong may have received higher salaries and titular honors, but Conghou held a wider range of posts. He enjoyed greater mobility because his personal security mattered less as a consequence of secondary standing in the succession. There are reports of dissension between the two brothers, especially jealousy on the part of the ill-tempered older son, problems clearly known to the monarch and his inner circle. There is no evidence, however, that Mingzong was prepared to break with Chinese convention by installing the younger son as successor, the preference of a rising body of advisors in the last years of the reign.[67]

As fate would have it, Mingzong suffered the loss of his most promising potential successor, eldest son Li Congjing (d. 926). Apart from boasting a distinguished record of military service, Congjing possessed a remarkably positive set of character

65. XWDS 15.163–64; JWDS 51.693–95.
66. XWDS 7. 69–70; JWDS 45.613–23.
67. ZZTJ 278.9078–79.

traits like humility and civility, plus a moral compass far surpassing any member of his family, including his own father. Zhuangzong had appointed him to a senior post in the Palace Guard (*jinjun*) shortly before the final showdown between his uncle, the reigning emperor, and his father, the future Son of Heaven. Congjing had numerous opportunities to abscond after his father's mutiny in the fourth month of 926, but he elected to remain with Zhuangzong in the capital. He ultimately perished in the midst of a mission to find a political solution to the civil war within his own family. In effect, Congjing placed loyalty to state above devotion to father; he chose death with honor over life without. At a time when betrayals and backstabbing were the order of the day, Congjing displayed the sort of moral fiber that inspired historians a century later to comment, "Congjing accepted death as the cost of abiding by his ruler, his demise worthy of our lament!"[68] Few would disagree that the dynasty would have fared far better had Mingzong been succeeded by his eldest son, a man nearly thirty at the time rather than the presumptuous Congrong or the naïve Conghou, men barely twenty.

Emperor Mingzong fathered several other sons, including Li Congyi, a boy raised by Consort Wang but born to another consort.[69] The child's wet-nurse had an illicit affair with Congrong, Mingzong's irascible son, who used the wet-nurse to spy on the palace of his own father, a matter that came to light after Congrong's purge in 933 and nearly brought about the expulsion of Consort Wang. Another youth identified in some sources as an imperial son is Li Congcan (d. 929). His "free-wheeling spirit and propensity for ostentation," sources say, would rile strict disciplinarians at court like An Chonghui. The government eventually executed Congcan for sitting on furniture in the imperial residence during his father's absence from the capital, an act of lèse majesté. The *Historical Records* convincingly argues that Congcan was actually the emperor's nephew.[70] The youth never received the numerous conferrals of titular rank afforded biological sons Congrong and Conghou over the course of the reign. More importantly, Mingzong conceded to official pressures to slay Congcan after only modest resistance, unlike parallel cases of misdeeds by other family members. Officials would have been less adamant about the death sentence and Mingzong would have resisted longer were the youth a potential heir to the throne.

In many ways, the most formidable survivor of Emperor Mingzong was not his flesh-and-blood, but adopted son Li Congke, the Chinese boy surnamed Wang whose mother, Woman Wei, had been abducted by the future monarch during a military action at Zhenzhou.[71] The boy was nine *sui* at the time and the older man in his late twenties. Congke evolved into a decorated warrior and strategist by his twenties, growing to seven Chinese feet in height.[72] As an adult, he had other redeeming

68. JWDS 51.692–93; XWDS 15.161–62; CFYG 286.3226.
69. WDHY 2.20; XWDS 15.158–60.
70. WDHY 2.20; XWDS 15.167.
71. JWDS 46.625–26; XWDS 7.71–72.
72. One Chinese foot is roughly ten inches.

qualities, such as "a scrupulous sense of integrity and cautious tongue," which further embellished the father's high regard for him.[73] Early on, he acquired the nickname Asan as a sign of endearment. One modern scholar describes Congke as a man "with a Chinese body but Shatuo personality," referring to his thoroughgoing assimilation of nomadic ways.[74] He served with distinction under Zhuangzong in the years preceding the founding of Later Tang in 923 and delivered him from many perilous straits in battle, causing Zhuangzong to exclaim, "Apart from being the same age as me, Asan's daring in battle is similarly akin to my own!" The comments speak to the strength of the fraternal bonds between the two men, both born in 885, who had spent much of their youth together at Jinyang and moved in similar circles in later life. But the camaraderie shared with Zhuangzong did not extend to the surviving son of Mingzong, whom Congke held in contempt.

A lesser known adopted son of Siyuan was Li Congwen, who served as deputy interim regent of the northern capital, Jinyang, during the reign of Zhuangzong, receiving investiture as Prince of Yan. The *Historical Records* posits that he began as a nephew of Siyuan before formal adoption as son, making him one of the few Shatuo ethnics adopted by Siyuan. He is characterized as a highly imperfect son, who during the reign of Mingzong "once reproduced imperial accessories and costumes for his own illicit use."[75] He dared to engage in such breaches of decorum due to the protection of his adopted father. Congwen served at five different provincial posts over the course of Mingzong's reign, including governor of the strategic Dingzhou and Zhenzhou commands in the northeast. The prestige of the commands held is another indicator of favor in the palace. A multiplicity of sources depict him as a mediocrity devoid of political sensitivities, which may well explain Mingzong's considered decision to limit his service to regional posts. Congwen subsequently survived his father to serve the Jin dynasty, suggesting amicable ties to Shi Jingtang in particular and the Shatuo military elite in general.

Surrogate Sons

Li Siyuan's youth coincided with the rise of the Jin satrapy's military might, as his own father by adoption, Li Keyong, presided over the expansion of a group of stalwart soldiers known as the Army of Surrogate Sons (*Yi'erjun*). Up to a hundred men skilled in battle or adept at strategizing had been adopted by Keyong to form the cream of a multi-ethnic fighting force, armies usually under the command of Keyong or some trusted confederate.[76] The men, a combination of Shatuo, Inner Asians and Han

73. XWDS 7.71.
74. Fu, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," p. 332.
75. JWDS 88.1156–57; XWDS 15.167–68.
76. XWDS 36.385–96; Fu, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," p. 325.

Chinese, were an invaluable asset in war, but they often proved a liability in peace, as aptly stated in the *Historical Records*: "Later Tang rulers had assembled the most intrepid and fiercely martial warriors of the age. Many contributed to its success at winning the world, yet the regime unraveled at their hands as well."[77] Indiscriminate adoptions were widely practiced in the Five Dynasties to advance military objectives, practices hardly confined to the Shatuo, as the *Historical Records* seems to infer.[78]

Family organization in Inner Asia seems more receptive to the practice of indiscriminate adoptions, where "family" and "tribe" are often conflated.[79] The popularity of the practice in the ninth and tenth centuries suggests a change in attitude toward adoption. Previously in China, the adoption of heirs was a social practice with legal sanctioning, where the rights and duties of both parties were strictly delineated. Chinese family organization tends toward exclusion rather than inclusion, employing "discrimination" (*bie*) to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Chinese families tend to regulate the recruitment of outsiders by limiting adopted heirs to members of the same surname.[80] But the loose family structure that allows for informal adoptions, as practiced among the Shatuo in the ninth and tenth centuries, runs against Han conventions.

By the tenth century, however, even military governors of Chinese ancestry had begun adopting sons indiscriminately. For example, the governor of Shu who later founded the Former Shu kingdom, Wang Jian, a contemporary of Li Keyong, adopted hundreds of sons during his long reign over Sichuan. Sibling rivalries should be understood in this context: the practice of fraternal succession prevalent in Inner Asia became interlaced with Chinese practices of father-to-son succession to create increased tensions, as siblings expected a greater voice in decision-making than Chinese convention allows.[81] Thus, three of the four Later Tang successions were irregular by Chinese standards. Fraternal friction was also behind the death in 908 of Keyong's surviving brother, Li Kening, who was accused of conspiring against his nephew, Cunxu, in order to succeed as Prince of Jin.[82] Sibling rivalries turned violent at two independent states in the south as well, the Min and Southern Han, a sign that a practice originating in the north had spread to the other end of China.

77. XWDS 36.385.

78. Usually "adopted sons" refers to *yangzi* 養子 in Chinese sources, but informal adoptions often take the form of *yizi* 義子 ("surrogate sons"), while adoptions for purposes of providing a successor and inheriting property usually employs the term *jizi* 繼子. I can think of no comparable terms in English to describe the various forms of adoption in China, all of which involved changes in personal as well as surname. After adoption as a teenager, Mingzong appears to have grown up in the household of Li Keyong, so I refer to him below as an "adopted son," while men raised by surrogate fathers later and life and outside the family compound, men like Yuan Xingqin, also known as Li Shaorong, are dubbed "foster sons."

79. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 150.

80. XWDS 17.187–88.

81. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 147; *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 148–49.

82. XWDS 14.149.

An array of personalities can be found among the Righteous Sons of Li Keyong. Perhaps the most distinguished in the cohort was Li Sizhao (d. 922), a Chinese commoner native to Hedong depicted as "scrupulous and substantial in character." He served his adopted father with rare filial devotion and forever relinquished alcohol consumption after a timely reprimand from Keyong for abuse of the substance. Sizhao possessed considerable martial valor, despite his diminutive physique. He was a frequent companion of Keyong in the 880s and 890s and became a role model for the other adopted sons. Sizhao even served with distinction as the prefect of Youzhou (modern Beijing), demonstrating managerial skills on par with his martial strengths. Indeed, he became so dear to the local populace that they did everything in their power to retain him in office, including "locking the gates to the city and forcing Sizhao to flee by night in disguise to avoid detection."[83] He perished in the heat of battle at Zhenzhou a year before the Tang victory over the Liang, his death an immense loss for the next generation of righteous warriors, few of whom were as selfless in placing the interests of the Jin kingdom before private agendas.

The antithesis of the high-minded Li Sizhao was Li Cunxiao (d. 894).[84] A native of northern Hedong with the original surname of An, he began by assisting Keyong to secure vital lands to the east and south of Taiyuan, often against stunning odds. In one deadly confrontation, an enemy commander taunted the adopted son in hopes of inducing capitulation: "You Shatuo, without a hole to hide in, have no recourse to surrender." Cunxiao responded with the sort of humor that cut through the tensions. "We Shatuo, in search of a hole to hide in, look forward to feeding your flesh to our troops. I entreat you to allow the portly men among you to join combat first!" And indeed the Shatuo prevailed in this particular battle, Cunxiao's lieutenants inspired by his cocky self-assurance. But later in life, he allowed petty frictions with another adopted brother, Cunxin, to drive him to mutiny against Keyong. In the final meeting between father and son, Cunxiao pronounced defensively, "Your son, in serving the Prince of Jin, has an unblemished record of accomplishments. It is solely the machinations of Cunxin that has brought about the current mishap." A bristling Keyong was not persuaded, insisting, "By drafting your call to war, you wronged me in every way. Did Cunxin do this as well?" He was quartered after reaching Jinyang, Keyong deferring to the will of his military council, but reluctantly in light of deeply held feelings for the talented youth. By the time of his death, Cunxiao had come to symbolize the self-destructive side of competition among the foster sons of Keyong.

83. XWDS 36.386–87.
84. XWDS 36.391–93; JWDS 53.714–17.

The Supreme Sibling Rivalry

Ultimately, the competition between Cunxiao and Cunxin was so keen because their gifts were equally prodigious. A generation later, Siyuan and Cunxu would clash for similar reasons, a sign that the practice of wholesale adoptions was the regime's most serious challenge as it transitioned from conquest to governance in the mid-920s. As a rule, the Army of Righteous Sons was a hotbed of feuding egos, conditions that worsened as the young men grew old. At the heart of the problem was the spread in age for the dozens of sons adopted by Keyong. Recruited over several decades, many youth were closer to him in age than to his eldest offspring, Cunxu. Thus, they could neither regard the son as peer nor accept his authority as emperor. Siyuan typifies the problem: eleven years younger than Keyong and seventeen years older than Cunxu, he resented the younger man's sense of entitlement. A generation later, a twenty-something Mingzong would adopt a son, Congke, a man almost thirty years older than his designated successor, Conghou, which similarly wreaked havoc on dynastic fortunes. History repeated itself during the Later Tang due to conflicting attitudes toward family within the regime's two largest ethnic groups, the Shatuo and the Chinese.

During the Later Tang's formative years, from the death of Keyong in 908 to the founding of the dynasty in 923, the tensions between Cunxu and Siyuan festered to produce a steady stream of confrontations beneath the veneer of fraternal goodwill. The incidents themselves often seemed trivial, but action and reaction served to force subliminal suspicions to the surface and set the two men on a collision course. For example, Siyuan's sharp eye for martial talent caused him to recruit the scrappiest fighters for his own armies, which in turn made his forces invincible in battle. In the campaign against Yan in 913, he captured Yuan Xingqin, a valorous militia leader, then cemented bonds by adopting him. Cunxu soon learned of Xingqin's abilities and arranged a transfer to his own bodyguard, while conferring another name, Li Shaorong.[85] The action became an early indicator of competition between the two brothers over the kingdom's most important asset, skilled warriors, as Cunxu siphoned martial talent from Siyuan's armies. A deputy to Siyuan, Gao Xingzhou, anxious to deflate suspicions now apparent to the rank-and-file, reminded Cunxu sometime around 915: "It is solely in the service of Your Highness that we cultivate a cohort of stalwart soldiers."[86] The reassurances changed little and Cunxu began adopting foster sons to create his own rival network, after shunning the practice in early life. The incident highlights the intensely personal nature of loyalties between the adopted sons and their surrogate fathers. Cunxu saw himself as procuring the loyalties of Xingqin

85. XWDS 25.270. The generational identifier for Shaorong (Shao) differs from that for Zhuangzong's eldest son Jiji (Ji), which confirms that foster sons adopted late in life were treated differently from formally adopted sons. But there are other cases of adoptions where the same generational identifier is used.

86. ZZTJ 269.8794.

through a simple change of name, which in turn became the basis for building a deeper relationship. Although fighting nominally under the Jin banner, many if not most foster sons were loyal first and foremost to the individual commander with whom they shared the added bond of fictive kinship.

Tensions between Cunxu and Siyuan surfaced again in the late autumn of 923 at a banquet for decorated Liang commanders in the wake of capturing the capital. The dead emperor's chamber for formal audience had been selected as venue, a stage that automatically placed the assemblage of high-profile deserters on edge. At some point during the feast in a toast to the men, Cunxu, his eyes fixed on Siyuan, a pivotal leader of the final drive, mused provocatively, "My most intimidating foes in years past joining us in revelry today—who but *you* could have brought this about?" Those final words horrified the men in attendance, victors and vanquished alike, who sensed a combination of jealousy toward the brother and mistrust toward them. The entire group fell flat on the floor in terror, except for Siyuan, at which point Cunxu's ominous tone turned suddenly jocular: "I am merely poking fun at my chief officer, Siyuan. Your apprehensions are hardly justified!"[87] The levity intended by Cunxu had fallen flat. Moreover, the anecdote suggests that the bitter rivalry between the two brothers had evolved into a more visible rift whose repercussions might well extend to anyone associated with Siyuan. One officer in attendance at the Kaifeng event, Huo Yanwei (d. 928), a senior Liang defector, would become a subordinate of Siyuan and a confederate in the cabal against Zhuangzong several years later, the first banquet laying the seeds for his subsequent disaffection. It did not take long before differences between the brothers by adoption became grist for the rumor mill, including swarms of prognosticators given to nesting with the powerful to inflate their egos and play on their insecurities.

Sometime around 922, the fortune-teller Zhou Xuanbao, a face-reader of wide repute, was entreated by a friend of Siyuan to distinguish him from an imposter in a test of the man's talents. After handily identifying Siyuan, Xuanbao proceeded to reveal his "precious promise beyond words" (*gui bu ke yan*) as potential ruler of mankind.[88] It was widely known that the term "precious promise" had been used by a prognosticator centuries earlier to characterize Taizong of Tang, then prince, which fostered suspicions that turned him against his own elder brother.[89] An obviously flattered Siyuan later tried to recruit the man for as retainer, relenting only under pressure from civilian aides more sensitive to appearances. Gossip about imperial ambitions rose to high places all the same, prompting Zhuangzong to plant informants to conduct surveillance over Siyuan. His overreaction served to further poison already strained relations, leading to an outright rupture by early 926.[90] Superstition and rumormongering were

87. XWDS 46.505; JWDS 30.412, 417; 64.852.
88. XWDS 28.309; JWDS 71.945–46.
89. JTS 2.21; XWDS 28.309.
90. XWDS 38.408; 51.573.

a lethal combination in the politics of the Five Dynasties, entrapping even the best of emperors.

Cast of Political Characters

The preeminent political presence at Mingzong's court was An Chonghui (d. 931), a native of Yingzhou, home of the imperial ancestors in northern Hedong.[91] His father had descended from a family of local braves and served with distinction under Li Keyong. Chonghui is identified by the sources as a northerner (*huren*), but likely not a Shatuo ethnic. He had evolved as a trusted lieutenant of Keyong's adopted son, Siyuan, for a decade preceding the accession. A man of sharp mind, dedicated service, and scrupulous discipline, Chonghui proved uniquely gifted as strategist and military manager, gifts that made him a central figure in the mutiny at Weizhou that propelled Mingzong to power in 926. He subsequently held the post of Military Commissioner from the very outset of the reign and retained it for the next four and a half years. His position allowed for sweeping oversight over civil and military affairs, a combination of powers rarely afforded civilians.

Much like Guo Chongtao, his predecessor as military commissioner under Zhuangzong, An Chonghui was preeminently a master of strategy and logistics, his experience in battle negligible relative to the other figures in Mingzong's inner circle. The Five Dynasties had no shortage of courageous commanders, but ironically, it did suffer from a dearth of men able to apply their intellect to the game of war, handle the logistics of war, and formulate plans for post-war security, men commonly dubbed in the sources as "senior aides" (*li*). Although illiterate, Chonghui managed to handle these chores through assistance from a cluster of civilian leaders handpicked by him. He led the court's campaign against official corruption, often imposing the harshest penalties allowed by the law, but he managed miraculously to live by the same ethical standards: he left an estate of less than several thousand strings of cash at the time of death, scarcely enough for his own burial. (The biography of Chonghui in the *Historical Records* deserves a careful read, as it represents one of the most artfully crafted narratives in the entire work.)

Another prominent military commissioner in the last years of Mingzong's reign was Fan Yanguang.[92] A Chinese native of Xiangzhou (modern Anyang, Henan), Yanguang could boast service to the Jin kingdom dating to the days of Li Keyong. Later, he served under Siyuan during his tenure at Xiangzhou, evolving into a revered lieutenant. Yanguang was also held in high regard by the future Zhuangzong, for whom he once served as emissary during negotiations with a Liang defector. Although incarcerated

91. JWDS 66.873–76; XWDS 24.251–57; ZZTJ 269.8805; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 155–56.

92. JWDS 97.1285–88; XWDS 51.576–81.

by the enemy, he refused to divulge state secrets and resisted pressure to shift loyalties. Yanguang could also boast battlefield experience in the decade preceding the Tang unification of the north, proving consistently cautious about strategic risks. After a stint as senior military officer under Zhuangzong, he became a quick convert to Mingzong in 926. A year later, he figured prominently in the government suppression of the Kaifeng renegade Zhu Shouyin (d. 927), where he led an advance guard. This second event signaled a new appreciation of Yanguang by the monarch, who had joined campaigners.

Emperor Mingzong held An Chonghui and Fan Yanguang in high regard as dedicated professionals, but there is little evidence of intimacy with either man. The contrast with Shi Jingtang, a man twenty-five years younger than Mingzong, is striking.[93] This native of Jinyang was the offspring of Woman He and Nielieji, a skilled horseman who had served under Li Keyong as lieutenant, although the two men belonged to different Shatuo confederations. The family adopted Shi as their surname rather late in their history, most likely during Jingtang's own lifetime, which suggests that he was less acculturated in Chinese ways relative to the offspring of Keyong. He began as a lieutenant in the armies of Zhuangzong as well as Mingzong, on separate occasions delivering both men from dire straits on the battlefield. Dynastic historians laud Jingtang's skills as horseman and archer, a gift for "grand strategies" grounded in classical warfare, and a character of "solemn sincerity and few words." His uncanny sense of timing would place him at critical crossroads in the topsy-turvy history of Shatuo rule in China.[94] He was a critical presence during the mutiny at Weizhou in 926, spurring Siyuan into rebelling against the dynasty. During the reign of Mingzong, Jingtang led the suppression of Zhu Shouyin at Kaifeng in 927 as well as the Shu intervention in 930, the administration's most important domestic crises. A long professional association with the monarch was buttressed by marriage to his eldest daughter, the Yongning Princess.[95] Jingtang would ultimately establish his own dynasty, the Later Jin, an unimaginable feat without more than a decade of mentoring at the hands of Mingzong.

The fourth leading military figure in Mingzong's administration was Kang Yicheng (d. 934).[96] Born in the Daibei region of northern Shanxi, Yicheng hailed from one of the three Shatuo confederations in the region. He initially joined the armies of Keyong and subsequently played a pivotal role in Zhuangzong's fifteen-year conquest of North China, serving as head of elite cavalry units dubbed the "Furious Stampede," due to the intensity of their assaults. Yicheng's tenure under the command of Mingzong was far shorter than that of Shi Jingtang, but he did play a defining role in the Weizhou uprising of 926. Sensing ambivalence in the future monarch about joining the rebel

93. JWDS 75.977–89; XWDS 8.77–86.
94. XWDS 8.77.
95. WDHY 2.22.
96. JWDS 66.879–80; XWDS 27.296–97.

tide, Yicheng provided a timely incentive by turning sheer opportunism into an act of dynastic salvation:

> His Majesty [Zhuangzong] exhibits no concern for the welfare of the ancestral altars and cares little for the toil of warriors, but instead engages in debauchery and the pleasures of wine and music. Today, a recourse for survival will surely emerge if you accept the council of this body of military leaders, but you face certain annihilation by insisting on loyal submission to the current regime![97]

His evocative words persuaded Mingzong, who subsequently held the surrogate in high regard. Yicheng was deployed as governor of the strategic Heyang command and later recalled to the capital to serve as overseer over the elite imperial bodyguard (*shiwei qinjun*). He represents one of the most enduring commanders of the era, despite his penchant for placing personal interests before loyal duty, especially in the waning years of the reign.

Sadly, none of the martial protégés of Mingzong compare favorably to him in terms of native ability, as reflected in his capacity to evolve from hardened soldier into visionary sovereign. The deficiencies of men in his inner circle of military advisors may represent to some degree an indictment of the emperor's approach to recruitment, inasmuch as elevation to those esteemed ranks required a close relationship with Mingzong in addition to a long professional association with the Later Tang government, and ideally its predecessor, the Jin satrapy. This shortsighted strategy for filling the most important posts in the land would have serious ramifications for the dynasty in the wake of the emperor's passing. Fortunately, this imperfect cohort of military leaders was balanced by a stellar cluster of civilian advisors.

Among the civilian courtiers during the reign, Feng Dao (882–954) presents one of the most powerfully compelling narratives on the times, its challenges as well as opportunities.[98] Native to Yingzhou, in modern Hebei, Dao initially served the asinine satraps of Yan, where Liu Shouguang had imprisoned his own father before seizing power. Dao subsequently turned to the Prince of Jin for sanctuary.[99] He served initially as secretary to the Jin, his frugal lifestyle and selfless generosity impressing the future emperor. Dao served as deputy minister of finance and Hanlin academician under Zhuangzong, his tenure cut short after several months due to mourning duties for his father. His restoration to office two years later coincided with the mutiny of the future Mingzong in the fourth month of 926, an event that culminated in the unexpected death of Zhuangzong. Rather than waiting for the dust to settle in the struggle between the two camps, Dao rushed to Luoyang to join other officials in embracing the elevation of Mingzong to interim custodian and later emperor, an endorsement critical to swaying the hearts of other civilians in government. Dao's career would flourish like

97. JWDS 66.879.
98. JWDS 126.1655–66; XWDS 54.612–15; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, pp. 21–22.
99. XWDS 39.422–27.

few others under the new administration. He became Duanming academician in the fifth month of 926 and soon thereafter chief councilor, a post that he retained for the entire reign.

A man of extremely humble origins, Feng Dao was often scoffed at by contemporaries for his peasant mannerisms and lack of social graces, precisely the qualities that a monarch with his own deficiencies in pedigree would find refreshing. Dao's speedy ascent to the administration's highest offices and academies reveals much about the political courage of Mingzong, who remembered that the worst of incompetent courtiers under his predecessor were men of vaunted pedigree. Dao held onto power by being at once optimistically principled and pragmatically adaptable. Few civilian courtiers of the time could move as comfortably between the civilian and military branches of government and few Han Chinese statesmen were as sensitive to the sensibilities of his Shatuo patrons. In the many conversations with the emperor that appear in subsequent chapters, Dao emerges as a man of rare insight into the ever evolving needs of his government. He also possessed an almost philosophical appreciation of the human condition, becoming the emperor's personal tutor and political guide in the process. A century later, Dao became the object of derision by historians as a comprador of sorts; this attitude is reflected in the *Historical Records*, which reviles him for serving four of the five dynasties, including two alien regimes, the Shatuo and the Kitan.[100] But the conduct of Dao under Mingzong was beyond reproach. Dao deserves a more balanced treatment that gives due consideration to his first decade in the public eye, where he left an indelible imprint on court affairs while bettering the lives of the people. He had rightly appraised his own day as a moment of rare opportunity for the public servant, so he served with the sort of dedication noticeably absent a decade later under demonstrably lesser rulers.

Another eminently able civilian leader during Mingzong's early reign was Ren Huan (d. 927).[101] Although native to the western capital of Changan, Huan was raised in Jinyang, the Shatuo capital in Hedong, where Li Keyong developed a "profound affinity" for his father, Ren Maohong, and arranged a marriage for Huan's younger sibling, Ren Tuan, to his own niece. Each of the five sons of Maohong possessed unique talents, with Huan depicted by historians as "exceptionally elegant in demeanor and effective in debates." He served the Jin satrapy in various civilian support positions in the locales, including Luzhou and Zhenzhou. Huan's ability to combine "benevolence with courage"—that is, his creative intermingling of the best in civil and military cultures—instantly impressed the Prince of Jin, who named him governor for the strategic Zhenzhou and Dingzhou in 923. By late 925, Huan's initially minor role in dynastic fortunes would radically change with his assignment to the Shu campaign, where he

100. XWDS 54.611–12.

101. JWDS 67.894–96; XWDS 28.305–07; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, p. 151.

served as adjutant to the Prince of Wei, Jiji, Zhuangzong's eldest son, then nominal overseer for the campaign. Over the course of several months, Huan would witness a shocking succession of events: the death of Guo Chongtao in Chengdu, the suicide of Jiji near the western capital, and the slaying of Zhuangzong in his own palace. In his meeting with Siyuan in the fourth month of 926, at the conclusion of the Shu campaign, Huan sufficiently impressed the future emperor that he elevated him to chief councilor from the very outset of the reign, later expanding his duties to include oversight over its Fiscal Commission in order to make the most of his famous managerial skills. His one-year tenure was among the shortest under Mingzong, but Huan's life and death doubles as a mirror on the political uncertainties of the early reign.

Another courtier of moral probity was Zhao Feng (d. 935).[102] Native to the northeast, Youzhou, Feng hailed from an established family, "famed for their training in Confucianism," only to flee the region due to the ineptitude of the local governor. Financially well-to-do, Feng is best remembered for his charity towards others and strong sense of civic duty. He was also a powerful advocate of Confucian values and viscerally hostile toward Buddhism: his histrionics in exposing a bogus tooth of the Buddha, which he smashed to bits in the presence of the emperor, is reminiscent of Han Yu's famed memorial a century earlier repudiating another religious relic, the Bone of the Buddha, with its strong xenophobic resonances.[103] Feng initially served the Liang dynasty at Yunzhou before converting to the Prince of Jin after he acquired the city. An appointment ensued in the capital as Hanlin academician in 923, soon after the accession of Zhuangzong. The reign of Mingzong led to further honors as Duanming academician and chief councilor starting in 931. Zhao Feng's rising star at court coincided with the dominance of Feng Dao and the pairing of the two men proved highly fruitful at the outset. They often worked in concert with a succession of military commissioners, advising them on political conventions, historic precedents, and institutional oversight, in addition to mundane matters like the preparation of documents. Zhao Feng was among the most pointedly critical members of the civilian administration, to his own detriment in the end.

The final prominent civilian at the court of Mingzong, someone a generation older than Feng Dao, was Li Yu (d. 935).[104] He hailed from a clan long on pedigree, the Li of Zhaojun, although Yu spent his formative years in Parhae (Bohai), an autonomous state in southern Manchuria. An erudite of the classics with expertise in Confucian rituals, he earned the highly coveted "erudite literatus" degree (*boxue hongci*) and entered public service in the waning years of the Tang dynasty. Yu later served the Liang dynasty, then the Later Tang as receptions officer and Hanlin academician. Like Ren Huan, Li Yu also played a visible role in the Shu campaign in 925, at the invitation

102. JWDS 67.889–90; XWDS 28.308–10.
103. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Emperor*, pp. 175, 270.
104. JWDS 67.890–94; XWDS 54.620–21.

of the emperor's son, Jiji, whom Yu served as administrative assistant. He provided a sometimes harsh counsel to overseer Guo Chongtao, once pressing the armed forces to advance against Shu at a time when most officers preferred to hold back. Yu's assertive posturing and astute instincts reflects exceptional comfort with military men and issues of warfare, a remarkable feat in light of his illustrious ancestry. He was a dignified man of principle who preferred to sleep on tattered rugs in affirmation of his aloofness to material things. But a personality inclined to be excessively direct and stubborn made for a difficult colleague.

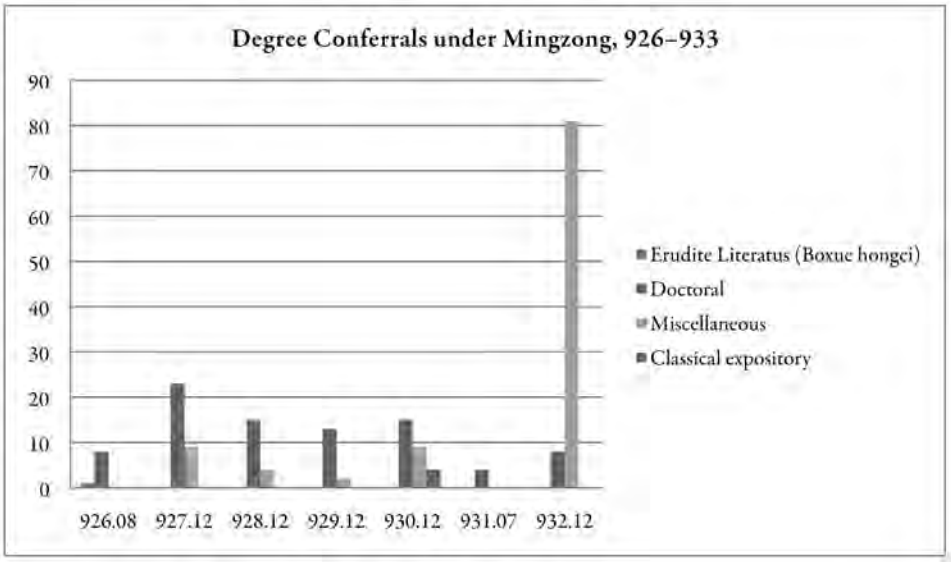
The aforementioned civilian advisors of Mingzong were Chinese ethnics by all indications, men with the necessary literacy to govern the country on behalf of marginally literate military men. They hailed from different parts of the country, none from the ancestral home of Hedong. In fact, two of the four councilors, including Feng Dao, came from the Yan region centered on present-day Beijing, where the ineptitude of the last governor created a hemorrhage of talent to the Shatuo base. The contrast with the military leadership at Mingzong's court is striking, a multi-ethnic group from a fairly narrow geographic region that revolved around the old base of central Shanxi. Emperor Mingzong's inner circle, whether civilian or military, was diverse in terms of class background as well, unlike the pedigree-conscious Tang dynasty at its height.

The administration had an impressive record of recruiting senior civilians capable of crossing professional lines. Chief councilors Ren Huan and Li Yu possessed extensive experience in commanding armies and laying strategic plans, their dual credentials no doubt critical to their sudden leap to power. It is also noteworthy that two of the aforementioned chief councilors had personal experience during the campaign against Shu in 925, which began as a ringing victory only to devolve into a pit of internecine conflict that ruined a succession of illustrious careers while toppling an emperor. Their presence likely tempered the will of the new emperor for direct military intervention in Sichuan on the scale of the past, except as a last resort. Mingzong's preference for negotiation over military confrontation in dealing with the overlords of Sichuan is often seen as a simple reaction to the policies of his predecessor, an assumption that understates the influence of these veterans of the Shu campaign, Ren Huan at the outset and Li Yu toward the end.

Table 1: Degree Conferrals under Mingzong, 926–933

Year	Exam	Degrees
926.08	Erudite Literatus (*Boxue hongci*) Doctoral (*Jinshi*)	1 8
927.12	Doctoral Miscellaneous (*Zhuke*)	23 9
928.12	Doctoral Miscellaneous	15 4
929.12	Doctoral Miscellaneous	13 2
930.12	Doctoral Miscellaneous Classical Expository (*Mingjing*)	15 9 4
931.07	Doctoral	4
932.12	Doctoral Miscellaneous	8 81

Totals:
Jinshi: 86
Zhuke: 105
Boxue: 1
Mingjing: 4



Totals:
Jinshi: 86
Zhuke: 105
Boxue: 1
Mingjing: 4

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1. The names of all persons cited in this work appear in the Index, but a different rule was necessary for place names: only places important to the wider history of Later Tang rule or places cited several times have been afforded an entry.