

*From Warhorses to Ploughshares*  
*The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong*

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# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
Chart 1: Ancestry of Li Siyuan	xvi
Map 1: Map of Later Tang, ca. 926	xiv
Chapter 1: People and Places	1
The Icon	1
The Shatuo People	6
The Life and Legacy of Li Keyong	11
Imperial Women	15
Sons	18
Surrogate Sons	21
The Supreme Sibling Rivalry	24
Cast of Political Characters	26
Chapter 2: Royal Passage	33
The Slow Climb	33
The Aborted Reign of Zhuangzong	39
Unruly Guards and Bodyguards	42
The Tepid Regent	49
Chapter 3: Political Events: The Tiancheng Reign, 926–930	63
Chapter 4: Political Events: The Changxing Reign, 930–933	89
Chapter 5: Institutions, Reforms, and Political Culture	121
Governing Officials	121
Law and Order	126
Campaign against Corruption	131
Historical Practices and Projects	134
Culture	137
Education and Examinations	140
From Finances to Technology	147

Chapter 6: Volatile Periphery	155
The Shatuo-Kitan Rivalry	155
Nanping	162
Sichuan in Revolt	164
Epilogue	177
The Aborted Rule of Li Conghou (r. 933–934)	177
Trials of the Surrogate Son: Li Congke (r. 934–936)	181
Chronology of Events for the Reign of Mingzong	185
Table 1: Degree Conferrals under Mingzong, 926–933	191
Sources Cited	193
Index	199

## *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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

A descendant of the Shatuo Turks, Emperor Mingzong came to personify inter-racial 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*).<sup>3</sup> 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

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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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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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).<sup>5</sup> The monarch's predecessor, Zhuangzong, had toiled for more than a decade in laying the dynasty's territorial foundation, only to perish three years

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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*.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.

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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.”<sup>13</sup> 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 Chuyue Turks, or they may represent an amalgam of numerous tribes, including the Hu, Tartars, Huihu, and Tuhun.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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

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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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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*.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> Guochang had acquired some measure of celebrity decades earlier by leading raids against the Huihu Uighurs.<sup>32</sup>

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, Miaojiilie, even though Siyuan was a mere soldier at the time.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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

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33. XWDS 32.350.

34. XWDS 4.31.

area already containing clusters of Shatuo settlers.<sup>35</sup> 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*).<sup>36</sup> As a teenager, if not sooner, Keyong had joined his father in battle to evolve as a superior warrior and strategist.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> Woman Liu even coached women in the royal household in archery and horseback riding, activities that harken back to the Tang, where a daughter of the dynasty's founder commanded men in the field.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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-

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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.

ebred for “her noble character and lifelong commitment to family,” which obviously papered over deficiencies in pedigree.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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*.<sup>61</sup> 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."<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 reputed 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.<sup>64</sup> 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,

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64. WDHY 1.15–16.

galloping swiftly with bows taut and arrows cocked, left roadside observers awestruck.”<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

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!"<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> 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.”<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> The men, a combination of Shatuo, Inner Asians and Han

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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.”<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup>

Family organization in Inner Asia seems more receptive to the practice of indiscriminate adoptions, where “family” and “tribe” are often conflated.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.

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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.”<sup>83</sup> 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).<sup>84</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>85</sup> 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."<sup>86</sup> 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

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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!"<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> 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.<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> 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.<sup>95</sup> 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).<sup>96</sup> 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

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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!<sup>97</sup>

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.<sup>98</sup> 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.<sup>99</sup> 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 counselor, 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.<sup>100</sup> 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).<sup>101</sup> 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

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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).<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> 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).<sup>104</sup> 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 oversee 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 ( <i>Boxue hongci</i> )	1
	Doctoral ( <i>Jinshi</i> )	8
927.12	Doctoral	23
	Miscellaneous ( <i>Zhuke</i> )	9
928.12	Doctoral	15
	Miscellaneous	4
929.12	Doctoral	13
	Miscellaneous	2
930.12	Doctoral	15
	Miscellaneous	9
	Classical Expository ( <i>Mingjing</i> )	4
931.07	Doctoral	4
932.12	Doctoral	8
	Miscellaneous	81

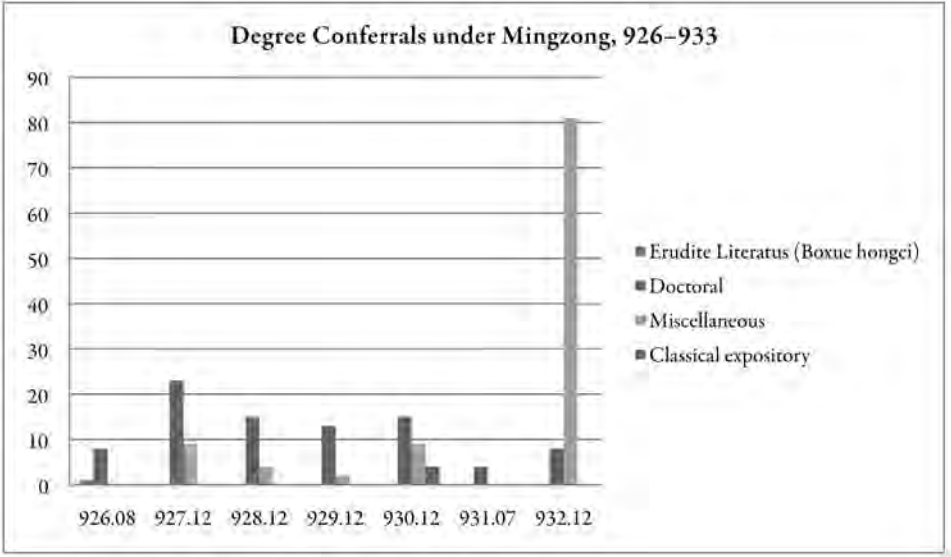
Totals:

*Jinshi*: 86

*Zhuke*: 105

*Boxue*: 1

*Mingjing*: 4



Totals:

*Jinshi*: 86

*Zhuke*: 105

*Boxue*: 1

*Mingjing*: 4



# Index<sup>1</sup>

- Abaoji 阿保機, r. 907–926, death of, 155; as Kitan founder, 14; Li Keyong and, 155; sons of, 160; widow of, 157–58
- abdications, historically, 113–14; in Later Tang, 112–13
- actors and musicians: favor in Zhuangzong's reign, xii; Jing Xinmo as, 133; staff reductions under Mingzong, 56
- adopted sons: *Historical Records* on, 39; as distinct from foster sons, 59; inclusiveness in selecting, 17; protection privilege for, 125
- Altar of Heaven. See *Yuanqiu*
- Altar of Imperial Sacrifices. See *Taishe*
- ambassadors: credentials of, 139–40
- Amai 阿埋, d. 932: minority among the Tangut, 101
- amnesties and pardons: emptying prisons, 98; following Kaifeng mutiny, 71; imperial illness and, 112; Kang Cheng on, 130–31; Mingtang ceremonies and, 91; sacking An Chonghui and, 73
- An Chonghui 安重誨, d. 931: allegations of Bian Yanwen, 96–97; auspicious omens and, 138; background of, 26–27; backing the inept Cui Xie, 72; banquet for, 69; to complement sentence reviews, 126–27; concentrated powers of, 68; Congrong and, 19–20; Consort Wang and, 18; death of, 172–73; disciplining officials, 111, 114, 130; dismissal of, 97–98, 131, 169–70; expedition against Shu, 171–72; in forming Duanming Academy, 140; frictions with Congke, 92–94; frictions with Mingzong, 77; hawkish policies of, 100; Huo Yanwei and, 78; illiteracy of, 77; as interim commissioner, 55; intrigues against Wu, 70, 92; maligning of Congke, 92–94; petitions to resign from, 169–70; plot against Ren Huan, 73–74; policy reversals for, 175; punishing Congcan, 82; purging cronies of Zhuangzong, 58, 66; reproach by Kang Fu, 86–87; slaying heirs to Zhuangzong, 51–52; son of, 55; on tour of Weizhou, 76–77; and Wang Du, 158; at Weizhou, 44, 46; wife of, 172–73; Zhao Feng's support of, 104; Zheng Jue and, 65; and Zhu Hongzhao, 114, 172–73
- An Chongruan 安崇阮, d. 944, flight from Kuizhou, 174
- An Chongxu 安崇緒, d. 931, son of An Chonghui, relocation of, 92
- An Congjin 安從進, d. 942: in Tangut suppression, 108; as trusted lieutenant, 97
- An Shentong 安審通, in Dingzhou suppression, 158
- An Xilun 安希倫, d. 931, eunuch ally of An Chonghui, 173
- Analects*, in child prodigy exam, 145
- apoplexy. See *fengji*

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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.

- Asan 阿三, nickname of Li Congke, 21, 178  
 Army of Righteous Sons, *Yi'erjun* 義兒軍, 21–24  
 asbestos, in walls of the northwest, 108  
 Astronomy Bureau 司天臺, cooperation with History Bureau, 136  
 audience suspensions: for Abaoji, 156; for Gao Ke, 111; for Huo Yanwei, 78; on inauspicious days, 87; profiling honorees, 76; for Xia Luqi, 174; for Yuan Jianfeng, 76; for Zhu Shousu, 76
- Baguan* 八館, Eight Institutes, as misnomer for the Six Schools, 142–43  
 Baiyu Ravine 白魚谷, in Tangut interior, 101  
 banquets: for An Chonghui, 69; on birthday, 67; for civil and military officials, 65; concluding Mingtang ceremonies, 90; for councilor group, 74; with eunuchs as hosts, 81; eunuch presence at, 98; for Fan Yanguang, 115; hosted by governors, 68–69; at Huijie gardens, 68, 98; for Kang Yicheng, 74; ritualized nature of, 68–69; for Shi Jingtang, 69, 74; for vanquished Liang officers, 25; for Zhao Zaili, 69  
 Basic Annals, *Benji* 本紀: on chronology for the mutiny, 47; for dynastic histories, 134; on grave lands, 151; on military rotations, 64; on selling slaves, 132  
 Beijing 北京, 23, 31. *See also* Youzhou  
 Beizhou 貝州, as part of Wei/Bo command, 42  
 Ben Tuoshan 奔托山, as Later Tang envoy, 157  
 Bian Yanwen 邊彥溫, d. 930, in maligning An Chonghui, 96–97, 172  
 Bianzhou 汴州. *See* Kaifeng  
*bie* 別, discriminations, 22  
 Binzhou 邠州, Shanxi: home of Consort Wang, 17; instability at, 52, 101  
 Books, School of, *Shuxue* 書學, resuscitation of, 142  
*Boxue hongci* 博學宏詞, degree in erudition: conferral of, 143–44; Li Yu's credentials as, 30  
 Buddhism: Consort Chen and, 14–15; favor by Zhuangzong, 77; Later Zhou controls on, 149; leaders from Taishan, 112; prayers for peace, 87; restrictions on clerical movement, 84; sentient beings and, 78; sway over Li Conghou, 177; Zhao Feng's attacks on, 30, 83–84  
 canal construction, 149–50  
 Cao 曹氏, d. 925, consort of Li Keyong: background of, 16, 118; death of, 41; mourning for, 43; pregnancy of, 6, 13–14, 17  
 Cao 曹氏, d. 936, empress of Mingzong: consort status of, 69; daughter of, 16; elevation to Pure Concubine, 76; investiture as empress, 95; noble death of, 184; at Zhenzhou, 46  
 capital punishment: fasting on days of, 129; for forging documents, 125; on inauspicious days, 87; reviewing cases of, 128; waiver for Congke, 93–94  
 Cegu Sheli 則骨舍利, Kitan captive, 162  
 Censorate, *Yushitai* 御史台: in investigating suicides, 126; in reviewing criminal sentences, 126–27; in scrutinizing official misconduct, 97; source of scholarship on Tang, 136  
 Census, responsibility for, 148  
 Central Asia, origins of writs of immunity, 128  
 Changan 長安: Congke at, 98–99, 180; elite families from, 144; governors of, 54; imperial tombs at, 58; the honest Hou Kehong at, 102–3; palace staff at, 56; Persians at, 140; plunder at, 164; protocol at, 72–73; sacking of, 12; in Shu campaign, 53–54, 169; surrender of, 53; Tangut threat to, 101  
 Changchun Palace 長春殿, banquet at, 65  
 Changxing reign 長興, 930–933, Eternal Restoration, 90  
 Chanzhou 澶州, strategic city near Weizhou, 42  
 charity: for commoners, 102–3; for officials, 91, 102, 122–23; scope of, 147

- Chen 陳氏: consort of Keyong: as Buddhist nun, 85; skills at music and calligraphy, 14–15
- chen* 臣, subject, Shi Jingtang as, 183
- Chengdu 成都, Sichuan: Guo Chongtao's death at, 40; Meng Zhixiang's residence at, 95; reinforcing walls of, 167; riches seized at, 164–65; Wang Yan's surrender at, 53
- Chenqiao Garrison 陳橋鎮, incident in Song founding, 44
- Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jinguo) 蔣經國, 1910–1988, as second emperor, xii
- chief councilors: as fiscal overseers, 148; ineptitude of military men as, 72, 77; limited powers of, 68; offices of, 124
- child prodigy exam. *See tongzike*
- Chongqing 重慶, proximity of Nanping to, 63
- Chu 楚: currency of, 149; in Nanping suppression, 163–64; as place of sanctuary, 144
- chuanjian* 傳箭, “singing arrows,” as Shatuo tradition, 139–40
- Chunyu Yan 淳于晏, retainer of Huo Yanwei, 78–79
- Chuyue Turks 處月突厥, as ancestors of Shatuo, 8
- civil service exams; conduct of, 140–41, 143–47; degree conferrals, 191–92; timeframe for, 146
- civilian officials: concern with rites, 67; costumes of, 90; in expanding education, 140; gifts for, 91; on Hezhong suppression, 93–94; increased consultation of, 77; informal audience for, 121; ivory staffs for, 122; lack of cohesion among, 68; medicine for, 123; in opposition to Weizhou tour, 76–77; promotion of, 124; seeking sanctuary in military barracks, 110; suspension of audience for, 76; uniforms for, 122
- Comprehensive Mirror, Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑: on emperor's age at death, 119; on flight from the capital, 110; measuring seniority for, 126; on Meng Hanqiong, 99; on Mingzong's reign, 1; on son's education, 104–5; on vanquishing Kitan, 160. *See also* Sima Guang
- concubines, offspring of, 125–26
- consorts: of Keyong, 13–15, 16–17; of Mingzong, 15–18; of Zhuangzong, 18
- Confucianism: in Feng Dao, 83; and loyal service, 67; moral crisis of Tang Taizong and, 63; on mystics, 69; prejudice against legal experts, 130; publications pertaining to, 143; on virtuous rule, 78, 95; Zhao Feng's credentials in, 30
- Confucius, descendant of, 143
- conscript labor: clerical households and, 129–30; in Luoyang, 103; in Sichuan, 167
- copper, controls on, 148–49
- corruption: campaign by An Chonghui, 26; official collusion in, 132–33
- court composer. *See zhuzuolang*
- Cui Xie 崔協, at Directorate of Education, 141; elevation to councilor, 68
- currency, regulation of, 148–49
- da fanshu* 答番書, diplomatic communication, 140
- Daibe 代北, northern Shanxi, 9, 27
- Daizhou 代州, Shanxi: as Guo Chongtao's homeland, 39; Li Keyong's appointment to, 11; Zhang Jingda's posting at, 182
- Da jiangjun* 大將軍, General-in-chief, title for Congke, 98
- Dan 亶, Mingzong's formal name. *See* Li Dan
- Daoism: appeal to Tang rulers, 77; and cult figures, 90; imperial charity for, 87; as inspiration for Feng Dao, 75, 95; prayers for peace, 87
- daotianwu* 稻田務, rice production agency, 152
- Datong 大同, northern Shanxi, 9, 161
- Dazhong tonglei* 大中統類, institutional compendium, 136
- Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平, 1904–1997, as second emperor, xii
- Dengkeji kao* 登科記考, as source on exams, 143–44

- Department of State Affairs. See *Shangshubsheng*
- Desheng Post 德勝寨, modern Puyang, Henan, 37–38
- dianxia* 殿下, designation for heir-apparent, 95
- Ding Yanhui 丁延徽, pilfering millet, 133
- Dingzhou 定州: mutiny at, 139, 150, 158–60, 162, 183; Ren Huan at, 29; as strategic city, 21; surrender of, 80–81
- diplomatic communications, *da fanshu* 答番書, 140
- Directorate of Education. See *Guozijian*
- doctoral examinations: procedures and controversies, 143–47; table for, 191–92
- Dong Zhang 董璋, d. 932, governor of Eastern Chuan: alliance with Meng Zhixiang, 168–69; daughter of, 168; death of family, 169; demise of, 175; deployment to Shu, 165; imperial suspicions of, 168–69; in slaying Yao Hong, 170–71
- Dongdan kingdom 東丹國, founding of, 156, 160–61
- Dongdan Muhua 東丹慕華. See Li Zanhua
- Doulu Ge 豆廬革, d. 927: dismissal of 66; funeral duties of, 65–66; petitions for accession by, 50, 55; retention of, 64
- Duan Ning 段凝, d. 928: defection to Tang, 37–38; purge of, 58
- Duanming Academy 端明院, entrance exam for, 140–41; Feng Dao at, 29; founding of, 140; Zhao Feng at, 30, 82
- Duguan 都官, metropolitan officials section, on selling slaves, 132
- Du yan long* 獨眼龍, Single-eyed Dragon, 12
- dynastic history: for Tang dynasty, 134; for Later Tang, 134–35
- earthquakes: at Jinyang, 99; at Qinzhou, 100; at Xuzhou, 75
- Eastern Palace 東宮, of heir-apparent, 113
- educational reforms, 76, 140–43
- eunuchs: allied to An Chonghui, 173; gift of a horse, 81; as governor, 54; against Guo Chongtao, 53–54; hosted by emperor, 81, 98; at Jinyang, 52; mass death for, 55–56; purge at Luoyang, 55; rising clout of, 99; under Zhuangzong, 39. See also An Xilun; Ma Shaohong; Meng Hanqiong; Wang Chengxiu; Xiang Yansi; Zhang Juhan
- Fan Yanguang 范延光, d. 940: background of, 26–27; concern about imperial sons, 105, 116; critique of Shu policy, 175; in Dingzhou suppression, 158; on horse supplies, 153–54; under interim government, 55; in Kaifeng suppression, 71; as military commissioner, 98; on naming heir, 113; parting words with the emperor, 115; recall under Congke, 181; resignation of, 114, 116; on retaining An Chonghui, 170; suspicions of Li Zanhua, 102; in Tangut intervention, 100–101, 108; titular honors for, 114; as Weizhou commander, 183; as Weizhou native, 99; at Zhenzhou, 158
- fanshen* 蕃神, nomadic spirits, rites to 138
- fanyu* 蕃語, foreign language, 8
- Fei 廢帝, Emperor, Congke, r. 934–936. See Li Congke
- Feng Dao 馮道, 882–954, chief councilor: background of, 28–29; on Congke, 93, 181; consoling the emperor, 118; Daoist spirit of, 75; as Duanming academician, 140; as flatterer, 131; frictions with An Chonghui, 86; as funeral custodian, 178; as ideal collaborator, 104, 107; on hazards to the emperor's health, 109–110; historical censure of, 83; material aloofness of, 68, 103; on nature, 91–92, 103; on perils of peace, 81, 85–86, 109–10; on reducing penalties for crimes, 119; on releasing animals to the wild, 139; reservations about An Chonghui, 170; sacking of, 181; on Sage king, 83, 94–95; as symbol of social mobility, 124; titular honors for, 114;
- Feng Yun 馮贛, d. 934, Jinyang native: as fiscal commissioner, 114–15; as Luoyang's deputy custodian, 80; opposition of Congke to, 180; on reducing

- penalties, 119; reportage on earthquake, 100
- fengji* 風疾, apoplexy, 109–10, 115
- Fengxiang 鳳翔: An Chonghui's passage through, 172; Congke at, 179
- Filial Piety, Classic on, Xiaojing* 孝經, for child prodigy exam, 145
- Finance, Ministry of, *Hubu* 戶部: civilian control over, 72; in investigating suicides, 126
- Fiscal Commission, *Sansi* 三司: eunuch subversion of, 99; Feng Yun at, 114; founding of, 148; Meng Hu at, 99; origins of, 57; powers of, 30; Ren Huan at, 30, 73, 122; on Shu, 165
- Five Dynasties: adoptions during, 22; asbestos use in, 108; circumspersion of women in, 8; copper shortages under, 149; dislocation during, 132; educational decline in, 141–42; examinations under, 144; Fiscal Commission under, 148; forces of fissure in, 2; geographic and social mobility in, 3, 124; informality of emperors in, 69, 106; military expertise in, 26; official historians under, 134; political conditions in, xii, 1, 3; professionalization of military in, 61; regard for Tang, 63, 136, 177; revenues commissioner under, 57; rumors in, 25–26; Shatuo power under, 2, 13; taxing under, 57; trending toward civilian rule, 3, 68
- Five Phoenix Tower, *Wufengtai* 五鳳臺, site of crowning banquet for Mingtang ceremonies, 90–91
- fortuneteller: Chonghui's alleged consultation of, 97; Chonghui's censure of, 96–97; on Consort Xia, 16; Ma Chongji as, 56; Zhou Xuanbao as, 25–26, 56, 69
- foster sons. *See* surrogate sons
- Four Gates Academy, *Simenxue* 四門學, 142
- fraternal succession: among Inner Asians, 12, 22, 59; among Shatuo, xii, 22, 84; Siyuan on, 51
- Fu Cunshen 符存審, 862–924, posthumous honors for, 98
- Fu Xi 符習, as Kaifeng governor, 82; as Zhuangzong loyalist, 44–45
- Fu Yanchao 符彥超, d. 934, as Jinyang loyalist, 52–53
- funeral rites, for Zhuangzong, 65–66
- Fuqing Senior Princess 福慶長公主, d. 932, wife of Meng Zhixiang, investiture of, 95
- Fuzhou 涪州, eastern Shu, 163
- Gao Conghui 高從誨, 891–948, son of Jixing, in normalizing relations with Later Tang, 164
- Gao Jixing 高季興, 858–928, Nanping governor: death of, 164; murder of Tang sailors and envoys, 163; trip to Luoyang, 162–63
- Gao Ke 高軻, d. 933, Palace Library director, suspending audience for, 111
- Gao Nian 高鞏, d. 933, singing partner of Congrong, 104
- Gao Xingzhou 高行周, on loyalty of troops, 24
- Gaozong 高宗, Tang emperor, r. 649–683, ties to Jinyang, 13
- Generalissimo, *Shangjiangjun* 上將軍, 157  
governor, *jiedushi* 節度使: background of nominees, 132; bodyguard of, 35–36; at Changan, 99; Conghou as, 177–78; as dynastic founders, 61; gifts to, 91; hereditary power of, 107, 133; illicit surcharges of, 131–32; marginal competence of, 77; powers to appoint underlings, 96; resentment of fiscal commissioner, 57; in Shu, 175; support staff of, 78–79; in Tangut lands, 107; tribute from 60, 67; writs of immunity for, 128
- grains: current price of, 75; role in stabilizing agrarian economy, 86
- Grand Canal: as economic hub, 39, 46; expansion of, 149–50
- grave lands, encroachment upon, 151–52
- Guangyun fa tian* 廣運法天, Monarch of Expansive Destiny, 112
- Guangshou Palace 廣壽殿: audience at, 110, 115, 178; renovations to, 82

- guanxue* 官學, public schools, 142
- gui bu ke yan* 貴不可言, precious promise, 25
- Guo Chongtao 郭崇韜, d. 926: commissioner under Zhuangzong, 26, 30–31, 39–40, 98; conquest of Kaifeng, 38; contribution to ritual expenses, 40; eunuch alignment against, 53; in Shu campaign, 53–54, 165, 170; warnings about Siyuan, 41; writ of immunity for, 170
- Guo Congqian 郭從謙, d. 927, aide of Zhuangzong, 49
- Guozijian* 國子監, Directorate of Education, reforms of, 141–42
- Han-Chinese: as adopted sons, 17, 24; alliance with, 3, 5, 10; attitude toward adoption, 22; in civil service, 31; ways of, 4
- Han Xizai 韓熙載, 902–970, earning doctoral degree, 144
- Han Yanyun 韓彥憚, Minister of Rites, officiating at Ancestral Temple, 75
- Han Yu 韓愈, 768–824, on Buddhism, 30
- Hanlin Academy 翰林院: entrance exams to, 140–41; Feng Dao at, 28; Li Yu at, 30; Zhao Feng at, 30; Zheng Jue at, 65
- He 何氏, grandmother of Mingzong, 6
- He 何氏, mother of Shi Jingtang, 27
- He Ning 和凝, 898–955, earning doctoral degree, 146
- He Ze 何澤, petition to install Congrong as heir, 112–13
- Hedong 河東, Shanxi: ancestral temples at, 75, 119; as Shatuo base, xii, 9, 23
- Henan prefecture 河南府, Luoyang: Congrong's death at, 117; posting of Congrong to, 17, 80, 84; retaliation against insurgents at, 118–19
- Heyang 河陽, 19, 28, 92
- Hezhong 河中: under An Chonghui, 57, 172–73; Congke, 19, 98; Yang Yanwen, 92–93
- History Bureau, *Shiguan* 史館: chief editors of, 136; Li Yu at, 104; citing Fan Yanguang on horses, 154; collaborative work at, 136–37; contemporary history at, 134–35; contribution to *Tang History*, 134; petition to assign tutor for Congrong, 79; publications of, 136; recording anomalies, 136–37; standards at, 135–36; Zhao Feng at, 104, 136
- Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* 五代史記: on actors and musicians, 39; on An Chonghui, 26; on Congcan, 20; on Congjing, 20; on Congke, 17; on Congrong, 4, 18, 104, 106; on Congwen, 21; on entertaining emperors, 68; on Feng Dao, 29; on foreign spirits, 138; on governor's support staff, 78–79; on Huo Yanwei's death, 78; on Kang Cheng's memorial, 130–31; on Mingzong, 1; on Ren Huan's demise, 73; on the retainer of Huo Yanwei, 78–79; on Shatuo surnames, 10; on singing arrows, 139; on surrogate sons, 22; translation, xiii; on Wang Du, 158
- holiday gifts: from governors, 60, 67
- horses: amassing by Kang Fu, 86; breeding grounds for, 45, 152; danger of accidents on, 109–10; decentralization of tribute involving, 153; Fan Yanguang on, 153–54; frictions with Tangut over, 100, 152–53; gift of, 81, 122, 137; as metaphor for life, 85; new supplies of, 152; saddles of, 91; Shatuo as horsemen, 8; theft of, 129
- Hou Kehong 侯可洪, honest commoner, 102–3
- Hou Yi 侯益, loyalist of Zhuangzong, 50–51, 57
- hu* 胡 or *buren* 胡人, northern peoples, 26
- Huang Chao 黃巢, d. 884, rebellion of 11–12
- Huangfu Hui 皇甫暉, Weizhou rebel, 42
- Huanghou dianxia* 皇后殿下, Empress sovereign, 95
- Huazhou 華州, Li Zanhua's posting at, 102, 110–11, 161
- Huazhou 滑州, conquest by Siyuan at, 47
- Hubu duzhishi* 戶部度支使, Director of Tax Bureau, 148
- Huihu 回鶻, 8, 10

- Huijie Gardens 會節園: recreation at, 82, 98; size of, 68
- Huiling 徽陵, regal tumulus of Mingzong, 119
- Hun Gonger 渾公兒, in slaying children, 127
- hunting, 74–75, 106, 139
- Huo Yanwei 霍彥威, d. 928: death of, 78; as defector, 25; as deputy to Siyuan, 40; plea to accede the throne, 50; political posturing of, 58; singing arrows, 139–40; tomb inscription for, 135–36; at Weizhou, 43–46
- huyu* 胡語, foreign language, 37
- imperial clansmen, rules pertaining to execution of, 94
- Imperial Guard, or Six Armies 六軍, 71. *See also* Palace Guard
- imperial tour: of Kaifeng, 70–76, 123; military miscalculations amidst, 71–72; planned tour of Weizhou, 76–77; Weizhou tour under Zhuangzong, 76
- Imperial University, *Taixue* 太學: chancellor of, 76; expansion of, 142–43; quota for, 141
- Inner Asia: adopted names in, 6; alliance with Shatuo, 3, 5, 10; An Chonghui's origins in, 26; chieftains from, 5, 163; expatriates from, 155; immediacy of Heaven in, 82; kickball from, 106; languages of, 86, 140; leadership style in, 103; presence in Shatuo armies, 21–23; relations with Tangut, 107; rites from, 100, 155; sculpture's popularity in, 9; succession in, 79; women as source of parental discipline, 14–15. *See also* Huihu Uighurs; Kitan; Tartars
- Interim Regency, *Jianguo* 監國, of Siyuan, 49–61
- iron monopoly, reforms to, 150–51
- ivory staff, *xianghu* 象笏, 122
- jade belt or girdle, *yudai* 玉帶: for Lu Wenjin, 157; for Meng Zhixiang, 176; from Shu, 164; for Wu, 92
- Jiangling 江陵, Nanping capital, 164
- jianguo* 監國, interim overseer, 51
- jianjunshi* 監軍使. *See also* military inspector, 55–56
- jianmusi* 監牧司, intendancy for horses, 152
- Jianzhou 劍州, in Shu war, 171
- jiao* 教, directives, 51
- Jiaqing Palace 嘉慶殿, renovations to, 82–83
- Jin, Prince of 晉王: Cunxu's accession as, 22; Keyong's accession as, 12
- Jin kingdom, Hedong, 9, 21–22, 34–35, 155–56
- Jing Jin 景進: flogging of, 133; as Zhuangzong favorite, 39
- Jing'ai Temple 敬愛寺, banquet at, 67
- Jingnan 荆南. *See* Nanping
- jinianlu* 紀年錄, chronicle for early Shatuo rulers, 134
- Jinjun* 禁軍. *See* Palace Guard
- jinshi* 進士, doctoral degree, 143–44
- Jinyang 晉陽, Shanxi (Taiyuan): Conghou at, 84; Congke at, 182; Congwen at, 21; earthquake at, 99–100; eunuch deaths at 55; fortunetellers from, 56, 69; Liu clan from, 13–14; offensive against, 34, 108; as residence of Fuqing Princess, 95, 125; as Shatuo base, 6, 12–13, 21; Woman Wei at, 17; in Zhuangzong's waning years, 51–53
- Jinzhenguan 金真觀, Buddhist temple, 85
- jiri* 忌日, inauspicious days, 87
- jisi shanchuan* 祭祀山川, conducting prayers to Gods of mountains and hills, 100
- Jiuqu Springs 九曲池, in Luoyang suburbs, 109
- jizi* 繼子, adopted son, 22
- Judicial Review, Court of, promotion trajectory for, 130
- Jun min tianshui* 均民田稅, equalizing agrarian taxes, 151
- Jurisprudence, examination on, 130
- Justice, Ministry of, *Xingbu* 刑部: career trajectory for, 130; in reviewing criminal sentences, 126
- Kaifeng 開封: children's murder at, 127; departing, 81–82; examinations at, 145; feting surrendering troops at, 25;

- hunting at, 74–75; imperial stay at, 5, 70–76, 84–85; invasion of, 37–38; mutiny at, 27, 171; parading captives at, 80–81; residence at, 84–85; second fall to Siyuan, 47–48; Siyuan's tenure at, 40
- Kang Cheng 康澄, on amnesties, 112, 130–31
- Kang Fu 康福, d. 942: amassing of horses by, 86; as horse-breeder, 45, 152; as imperial friend, 86–87; in Tangut intervention, 101
- Kang Yanxiao 康延孝, defection to Later Tang, 37–38
- Kang Yicheng 康義誠, d. 934: background of, 27–28; and Congrong, 116; disgrace of, 180, 182; imperial visit to, 74; as nominal councilor, 114; salvaging reputation, 118; at Weizhou, 46
- Kangxi Emperor 康熙帝, r. 1661–1722, as second emperor, xii
- Keshengshi* 客省使, Visitor's Bureau, mission to Shu, 168
- Kitan 契丹: defections to, 161; deposing successor, 102, 110–11, 156; at Dingzhou, 80–81, 158–60; historic rivalry with Shatuo, xiii, 4, 155; horse supply of, 152–53; intervention at Hedong, 183; map of country, 102; music among, 158; relations with Tangut, 107; seals of office, 160; siege of Youzhou, 36–37; trading stations request, 157; war with Emperor Fei, 182; at Yan, 35. *See also* Li Zanhua
- Kong Qian 孔謙, d. 926, as revenues commissioner, 57
- Kong Renyu 孔仁玉, descendant of Confucius, 143
- Kong Xun 孔循, d. 932: on his own incompetence, 77; as imperial in-law, 80; as Kaifeng prefect, 47–48; as Luoyang custodian, 71, 150; as military commissioner, 68; petitions to accede the throne, 58
- Kuizhou 夔州: contest over, 163, 167; governor of, 174
- Langcan 廊餐, meal with a view, 121
- Langzhou 閬州, in Shu war, 170–71, 173
- laqian* 鑞錢, counterfeit cash, 148
- Later Han dynasty 後漢, 947–951, xii, 2, 61
- Later Jin dynasty 後晉, 937–947, xii, 2; founding of, 27, 183–84; official historians of, 134; professional armies under, 61
- Later Liang dynasty 後梁, 907–923: in appointing governors, 96; assault on Jinyang, 34, 108; banqueting defectors of, 25; containing regional power, 64, 133; erecting Five Phoenix Tower, 90; expanded military of, 61; and fall of Weizhou, 35–36; Hanlin Academy in, 144; historical treatment of, 135–36; Imperial University under, 142; liquidation of eunuchs in, 39, 55; loss of Kaifeng, 37–38; nominating officials under, 96; official seniority under, 125–26; political crimes under, 58; relations with Nanping, 162; rout at Desheng, 37; siege of Luzhou, 34; venues for entertainment, 68; wine monopoly reforms, 150
- Later Tang dynasty 後唐, 923–936: academies under, 140–41; adoptions in, 21–23; capital at Weizhou, 36, 44, 84; civil power in, 3; conquest of Kaifeng, 37–38; conscript labor in, 130; in constraining regional power, 96; contributions of Keyong to, 13; defection of Li Zanhua to, 160–61; defection of Lu Wenjin to, 156–57; at Desheng, 37; economy of, 75; fall of, 183–84; father to son successions in, 178; fiscal reforms of, 57–58; foreign currencies under, 149; hereditary servitude under, 57–58; history of, 24; History Bureau in, 134–37; horse supply of, 153–54; invasion of Shu, 53–55, 169–70; intervention against Tanguts, 108; martyrs to, 20, 184; monopoly reforms under, 150–51; official seniority under, 125–26; political peak of, 89; provincialism of, 28; relations with Kitan, 155–62; successions in, 22; Tang institutions under, 136; traitors to, 161;



- treasury of, 39, 47; writs of immunity under, 129
- Later Zhou dynasty 後周, 951–960: in confiscating bronze objects, 149; professional armies under, 61
- Law, School of, *Faxue* 法學, 142
- legal expertise: expanding pool of, 130, 144; preserving Tang practices, 136
- Lengquan Monastery 冷泉宮, Luoyang, imperial visits to, 66
- lèse majesté: case of Li Congcan, 82; case of Li Congwen, 21
- li* 吏, as senior aides, 26
- Li Chongji 李重吉, son of Congke; as guardsman, 116–17, 119, 179; death of, 180
- Li Congcan 李從瓌, d. 929: case of lèse majesté, 82; as imperial nephew, 20
- Li Conghou 李從厚, 914–934, r. 933–934, son of Mingzong: on contributions to father's funeral, 178; as emperor, 177–81; fiefs of, 109; growing favor for, 79–80; investiture as Prince of Song, 95–96; as Kong Xun's son-in-law, 71; marriage of, 80; posting at Jinyang, 84; as successor, 15, 19–20. *See* Min, Emperor
- Li Congjing 李從璟, d. 926, son of Mingzong: in bodyguard, 19–20; death of, 56; as hostage, 125; loyalty to Zhuangzong, 45, 47
- Li Congke 李從珂, 885–937, r. 934–936, adopted son of Mingzong: adoption of, 24; as assimilated Shatuo, 21; background of, 20–21; challenging Emperor Min, 178–81; death of, 184; at Desheng, 37; at Hezhong, 57; intrigues of, 92–94; mother of, 17; pretenses of, 79, 105; reign of, 181–84; restoration of, 98–99, 109; seizing the capital, 180–81; sister of, 179; son of, 116; at Weizhou, 45; youth of, 182. *See also* Fei, Emperor
- Li Congmin 李從敏, 898–951, nephew of Mingzong, as Prince of Jing, 109
- Li Congrong 李從榮, d. 933, son of Mingzong: assignment to Jinyang, 74; background of, 18–20; conduct at banquets, 104; and Consort Wang, 18; as custodian of Henan, 84; death of, 177; spying his father, 179–80; insecurities of, 79–80; family of, 117; father's censure of, 104–5; fiefs of, 109; investiture as Prince of Qin, 95; literary interests of, 4; marriage of, 137; in Mingtang ceremonies, 85; parallels with Liu Shouguang, 118; petition to install, 112–13; as potential successor, 15; rebellion of, 115–18; tutors for, 105–6; at Weizhou, 74, 76
- Li Congwen 李從溫, 884–946, adopted son of Mingzong, as adopted son, 21, 109
- Li Congyi 李從益, 931–947, son of Mingzong raised by Consort Wang, 18, 109, 179, 183
- Li Congzhang 李從璋, 887–937, nephew of Mingzong: as Prince of Yang, 109; in slaying of An Chonghui, 172
- Li Cunba 李存霸, d. 926, brother of Zhuangzong, 51
- Li Cungi 李存瓌, as envoy to Shu, 175–76
- Li Cunji 李存紀, d. 926, brother of Zhuangzong, flight south, 51
- Li Cunmei 李存美, brother of Zhuangzong, as invalid, 52
- Li Cunque 李存確, d. 926, brother of Zhuangzong, flight south, 51
- Li Cunshen 李存審, also Fu Cunshen, at Youzhou, 36
- Li Cunwo 李存渥, d. 926, brother of Zhuangzong, flight to Jinyang, 51–52
- Li Cunxiao 李存孝, d. 894, as Keyong's surrogate son, 23
- Li Cunxin 李存信, 862–902: as Keyong's surrogate son, 23; at Yanzhou, 33
- Li Cunxu 李存勖, 885–926, son of Keyong: historic frictions with, 155–56; and Kitan, 155–56; life of, xi; marriage life of, 76; and Siyuan, 24–25, 33; succession as prince, 82; at Yan, 35. *See also* Zhuangzong
- Li Dan 李亶, formal name of Mingzong, 67–68
- Li Gu 李穀, 903–960, as degree winner, 146

- Li Guochang 李國昌, d. 887: chronicle for, 134; as father of Keyong, 6; favor for Mingzong, 6–7, 10, 59, surname of, 11. *See also* Zhuye Chixin
- Li Hui 李暉, d. 947, surrender of, 35
- Li Jiji 李繼笈, d. 926, son of Zhuangzong, Prince of Wei: conflict with Guo Chongtao, 53–54; marriage of, 158; as potential successor, 51; in Shu, 30, 42
- Li Jijing 李繼璟, adopted name of Congjing, 45
- Li Jitao 李繼陶, d. 929, as imperial pretender, 81
- Li Kening 李克寧, d. 908, brother of Keyong, conspiracy of, 22, 84
- Li Kerou 李克柔, brother of Keyong, rescue by Siyuan, 33–34
- Li Keyong 李克用, 856–908, adopted father of Mingzong: chronicle for, 134; consorts of, 13–14, 17, 137, 185; deliverance by Siyuan, 33–34; devotion to Tang, 59; as emperor's adopted father, 6, 59, 68; fraternal challenge to succession of, 84, 114; historical treatment of, 134–35; hunting habits of, 139; on Kang Fu, 86; and Liu Rengong, 34; niece of, 95, 166; origins as governor, 61; relations with Kitan, 155; severity of, 13; and Shi Jingtang, 27; succession of, 11; successor to, 34; surname of, 11; surrogate sons of, 21–24
- Li Lin 李鱗, 860–947: associates of, 86; as minister of revenues, 92
- Li Qi 李琪: on inscription for Huo Yanwei, 135–36; as possible councilor, 68; on succession, 59
- Li Qianhui 李虔徽, as foe of An Chonghui, 96
- Li Renfu 李仁福, d. 933, Tangut leader, 107
- Li Renhan 李仁罕, as lieutenant of Meng Zhixiang, 174
- Li Renju 李仁矩, d. 930: commanding armies at Shu, 170; dependents of, 176; envoy to Shu, 167–68; residual armies of, 176
- Li Shaorong 李紹榮. *See* Yuan Xingqin
- Li Shimin 李世民. *See* Tang Taizong
- Li Siyuan 李嗣源, 867–933: adoptions of, 17; ancestral chart of, xvi; ancestry of, 6; in advance against Kaifeng, 37; cultural identity of, xi–xii; defense of Youzhou, 47; fiscal reforms as regent, 57; guerilla war tactics of, 36; at Luzhou, 34, 40; modest sexual behavior of, 18; new rules for official tribute, 60; progeny of, 15–21; releasing hereditary workers, 57–58; service at Yan, 34–35; service at Yanzhou, 33–34; service at Zhenzhou, 41; as successor to Zhuangzong, xi; taboos pertaining to personal name, 11; ties to Keyong, 13; at Weizhou, 35–36; youth of, 6–7. *See also* Mingzong
- Li Sizhao 李嗣昭, d. 922: as able foster son of Keyong, 23, 33–34; at Luzhou, 34; posthumous honors for, 98
- Li Tao 李濤, 898–961, earning doctoral degree, 144
- Li Tong 李同, on prisoner population, 126
- Li Xiang 李詳, court rectifier, reporting on local earthquake, 100
- Li Yan 李暉, d. 927, as envoy to Shu, 166
- Li Yanchao 李彥超. *See* Fu Yanchao
- Li Yanxun 李彥珣, failed envoy to Shu, 168
- Li Yichao 李彝超, Tangut leader, 107–8
- Li Yu 李愚, d. 935: background of, 30–31; as chief examiner, 144, 146; as councilor, 97, 107; at History Bureau, 104; poverty of, 123
- Li Yuan 李淵, founder of the Tang, r. 618–626, purge of, 63
- Li Zanhua 李贊華, the former Tuyu 突欲, Kitan turncoat, 899–936: defection to Later Tang, 160–61; at Dongdan, 156; at Huazhou, 110–11, 161; as potential puppet, 183. *See also* Dongdan Muhua
- Liang Wenju 梁文矩, 885–943, on abduction of Shu captives, 127
- lin di wang shen* 臨敵忘身, ignoring consequences, 36
- Lingzhou 靈州, insurgency at, 101
- liqian* 禮錢, promotion gratuities, 124
- Liu 劉氏, d. 923: as archer and horseman, 13–14; as wife of Keyong, 6

- Liu 劉氏, d. 926, empress of Zhuangzong: as companion, 69; cronymism of, 58; fiscal clout of, 39; flight north for, 49, 52, 53; orders of, 54
- Liu 劉氏, mother of Mingzong, 6, 14
- Liu 劉氏, d. 933, wife of Congrong, death of, 117
- Liu Cheng 劉澄, envoy to Shu, 174
- Liu Rengong 劉仁恭, d. 914: incarceration of, 118; at Yan, 34–35
- Liu Shouguang 劉守光, d. 914, at Yan, 28–30, 34–35, 157
- Liu Xu 劉煦, 885–944: at Hanlin Academy, 140; rise to councilor, 106
- Liu Xun 劉訓, in campaign against Nanping, 163
- Liu Ying 柳膺, selling documents, 133
- Liu Zan 劉贊, 876–935: punishment of 118–19; as tutor of Congrong, 105–6
- Liu Zheng'en 劉政恩, envoy to Shu, 176
- Liu Zhiyuan 劉知遠, 895–948, founder of Later Han, r. 947–948, advisor to Shi Jingtang, 182–83
- Liu Zhongyin 劉仲殷, father-in-law of Congrong, 137
- Lizhou 利州, in Shu war, 173
- Longmen Caves 龍門石窟, imperial visits to, 9, 98, 103, 109
- Lu Wenjin 盧文進, 876–951, defection to Later Tang, 156–58, 161
- Lu Zhan 盧詹, chief examiner, 145
- Lu Zhi 盧質, 867–942: in Mingtang ceremonies, 85; as right rectifier, 115
- Luo River 洛水, 78, 121–22
- Luoyang 洛陽, as Later Tang capital: appeal to Li Zanhua, 111; cronies of Congrong at, 80; game preserves at, 78; horses as tribute at, 152–53; Imperial University at, 141–42; layout of, 121–22; as new capital, xii, 39, 122; new tower at, 40; palace staff at, 56; plunder of, 49; rebuilding in Sui times, 90; reception of Lu Wenjin at, 157; receptivity to fires, 146; renovations to, 82–83; return to, 81–82; scenic sites at, 5; suicide at, 126; surrender of, 38; Zhuangzong's tomb at, 65
- Lutai 廬台, mutiny at, 69, 158
- Luzhou 潞州: mutiny at, 40; offensive against, 37; relief of, 34; Ren Huan at, 29
- Lü Zhirou 呂知柔, aide to Jiji, 54
- Ma Chongji 馬重績, fortuneteller, 56
- Ma Rangneng 馬讓能, in surrendering Dingzhou, 80
- Ma Shaohong 馬紹宏, eunuch of Zhuangzong, 43
- Ma Yanchao 馬彥超, Kaifeng officer, 71
- Manichaeism, 8
- Mao Chongwei 毛重威, lieutenant of Meng Zhixiang, 167
- Map of Kitan lands, 102
- marriage, of Congrong, 137–38
- Mathematics, School of, 142
- mausoleum: for Mingzong, 119; for Zhuangzong, 65
- mazhi* 麻制, edicts, 140
- Meilao Mogu 梅老沒骨, Kitan ambassador, 157
- Meng Gui 孟瓌, as son or nephew of Zhixiang, 175
- Meng Hanqiong 孟漢瓊, d. 934, eunuch: alliance with Consort Wang, 17; defection to Congke, 180; growing dominance of, 115; leading suppression of Congrong, 116–17; posting as director, 99; retrieving Conghou from Jinyang, 119; slandering An Chonghui, 172;
- Meng Hu 孟鵠, as fiscal commissioner, 99
- Meng Renzan 孟仁贊, son of Zhixiang, 166
- Meng Sheng 孟昇, d. 928
- Meng Zhixiang 孟知祥, governor of Shu, 874–934, founder of Later Shu, r. 934: aide to Guo Chongtao, 39; alliance with Dong Zhang, 169; on appointing his own governors, 96, 175; consolidating power in Shu, 174–75; critiquing government strategy, 173–74; daughter of, 168; defection of, 169–70; dependents of, 166; jade belt for, 176; on military dependents, 176; posting in Shu, 165; reinforcing city walls, 167; reverting to Tang, 175; sister of, 175; as Son of

- Heaven, 180; tribute to the capital, 168, 175; wife of, 39, 75, 125, 176, 180
- metropolitan officials section. *See Duguan*
- Miaojilie 邈吉烈, informal name of Mingzong, 11, 68
- Military Commission 樞密院: An Chonghui on, 26–27; authority of commanders from, 92–93; blame for Shu campaign, 173; civilians on, 77–78; on command for Shu suppression, 41; on command for Weizhou suppression, 42; eunuch subversion of, 99; as imperial foil, 87; imperial in-laws on, 97–98; on imperial tours, 76–77, 83; individual dominance at, 68; on installing heir, 113; in issuing official coupons, 72; as part of inner court, 115; predicting instability in Shu, 174; on punishing Li Congcan, 82; purview over, 77, 78; shakeup of, 114–15; on tour of Weizhou, 76–77, 83; Weizhou natives on, 99
- military: dependents of, 124–25, 176; discipline in, 64; rewards in, 108
- military retainers, in Five Dynasties, 132
- Min, Emperor 閔帝, r. 933–934. *See Li Conghou*
- Min 閩, southern state, sibling rivalry at, 22
- Mingfa* 明法, examination on illuminating legal traditions, 130, 146–47
- Mingjing* 明經, examination on classical exposition, 143–44, 146
- Mingtang Palace 明堂殿: plans for ceremonies at, 147, 167–68; rites under Mingzong, 40, 61, 81, 85, 89–90, 167–68; rites under Zhuangzong, 40, 60
- Mingzong 明宗, r. 926–933: on abdication, 112–13; on accession, 50, 58–59; accession gifts, 60; on age at death, 119; on agrarian economy, 86; aides of, 2; and An Chonghui, 77, 86–87, 92–93, 169–70, 173; ancestral temple for, 75; on anthropomorphic heaven, 82, 103–4; on auspicious objects, 60, 138; beating of servant, 16; birthday celebrations for, 66–67; burial site of, 178; canal work, 149–50; charity for officials, 123; on child prodigy exam, 145; on Confucian ethics, 66; conquest of Kaifeng, 37–38; with conscript workers, 103; copper controls, 148–49; curtailing administrative costs, 147; and Daoism, 77; daughters of, 15–18; on designating heir-apparent, 79–80; dimensions of domain, 3–4; domestic agenda of, 1; educational reforms under, 140–43; Empress Cao's dedication to, 184; entertaining nun, 85; extended stay in Kaifeng, 43, 81–82; on faithfulness, 102; as family man, 94; fasting, 87, 127, 129; Fiscal Commission under, 148; fiscal reforms of, 57–58; foreign language facility, 86; gifts of oxen, 102; harem of, 18, 76; historical repute of, 1–2; History Bureau under, 134–37; honors for Lu Wenjin, 156–57; horse supplies under, 152–54; hunting skills of, 6, 106, 139; on Huo Yanwei inscription, 135–36; immaterial ways of, 7; imperial tours under, 70–72, 74; infelicities of waning years, 147; as interim overseer, 51–59; investitures for family, 95–96; law and order, 126–31, 132; legacy of, 4; leisure of, 106; on livelihood of the people, 86; and Li Zanhua, 102, 160–61; love for subjects, 2, 5–6, 102; on loyalty of Hou Yi, 50–51; on loyalty to monarchy, 48, 67; marching orders for armies, 70–71; marriage alliances by, 137–38; on materialism, 68; maternity for children of, 15; mausoleum of, 119; and Meng Zhixiang, 165–69, 175; mimicking Tang Taizong, 64; Mingtang ceremonies, 89–91; monopoly reforms, 150–51; mourning Zhuangzong, 49, 60; mutiny at Weizhou, 27–28, 42–47; name change for, 66–67; name change for capitals, 84; Nanping war, 163–64; on nature, 91–92, 100, 103, 136–37; nephews of, 21; on networks of corruption, 132–33; nostalgia for warrior life, 107; on ominous days, 87; on political

- experience for sons, 5, 19–20, 105;  
 political savvy of, 2; praise for Feng Dao, 103–4; praying to God of Heaven, 90; prizes for examinees, 144–45; purge of eunuchs, 55–56; in realigning capitals, 84–85; recreational spots, 68; in recruiting aides, 6, 28, 31; relations with Kitan, 155–62; relations with Shu, 167–76; Ren Huan and, 64–65, 68, 72–74; on renovating palaces, 82–83; reproof by palace lady, 72–73; reproof by Feng Dao, 93–94; restoration of eunuchs, 99; rewarding honesty, 102–3; rivalry with Cunxu, 24–25; and rumors of Bian Yanwen, 95–96; sacrificial temple for, 78; as Sage King, 83, 94–95; secondary residence of, 84–85; on slaying grandson, 117; social life of, 5; son's aborted reign, 177–81; on son's education, 4, 79, 104–6; succumbing to apoplexy, 109–10, 115; sudden illness, 109; superstition of, 56, 69, 82, 87, 92, 137–38, 100, 112, 177; suppression of Congrong, 116–17; suspending audience, 76, 78, 87, 111, 156, 174; tax remissions under, 91; title of honor, 91, 119; on writs of immunity, 128–29; and Zhao Dejun, 160. *See also* Li Siyuan
- Mo 末帝, Emperor of Later Liang, r. 913–923. *See* Zhu Youzhen
- Mo 末帝, Emperor of Later Tang, r. 924–936. *See* Li Congke
- monetary policies, 148–49
- Mongolia, Shatuo presence in, 8
- monopoly: under three fiscal agencies, 148; in wine and iron, 150–51
- multi-ethnic armies, 21–23
- Murong Qian 慕容遷, senior courtier of Emperor Min, 180
- music: Kitan traditions, 157; at Tang court, 14; under Zhuangzong, 39, 48–49
- nanjiao* 南郊, southern suburbs, 85, 90, 167–68
- Nanping 南平: as occasional foe, xii, 4, 108; relations with north, 162–64
- nature: Feng Dao on, 91–92, 103–4; imperial understanding of, 91–92, 100, 103, 136–37
- Neidian* 內殿, Interior Palace, informal audience at, 121
- Neiyuan Garden 內園, as game preserve, 78
- Ni 覲, d. ca. 880, father of Mingzong, 6
- Nielieji 臯揆雞, father of Shi Jingtang, 27
- nine classics, *jiujing* 九經, reproduction of, 143
- Ningxia, Shatuo presence in, 8
- nongqiqian* 農器錢, farm implements tax, 150–51
- Northern Han 北漢, 951–979, as final holdout against Song, 13
- official misconduct, 131–33
- Old History of the Five Dynasties*, *Jiu wudai shi* 舊五代史, on Mingzong's accession, 54–55
- Ordos, site of horse pasturage, 153
- Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, 1007–1072: on chronology for mutiny, 47; historical biases of, xiii; on Mingzong, 1; on monopoly reforms, 151; on Shatuo surnames, 10. *See also* *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*
- Palace Guard: in Bian Yanwen affair, 96; under Conghou, 178–79; defections within, 48; empathy with Weizhou rebels, 43–44, 48; in Hezhong suppression, 93; intercepting Congrong, 116; as launching pad to monarchy, 61; plunder of Luoyang, 49, 110; professionalization of, 61; rotations in, 64, 110; shakeup by Emperor Min, 179; size of, 152; sons of An Chonghui in, 173; Yao Yanchou in, 93
- Palace Kitchens, staff reductions at, 56
- palace ladies: defending the imperial compound, 116; reproof of, 72–73
- Palace Library, *Mishubsheng* 祕書省: Gao Ke at, 111
- Parhae, Bohai 渤海: Kitan assaults on, 41, 156; Li Yu at, 30

- Pei Hao 裴皞, chief examiner, 144  
 Pei Zhaoyin 裴昭隱, in theft of horse, 128  
 Perils of Peace, Feng Dao's rhetoric on, 81, 85–86, 109–10  
 Persia, language of, 140  
*pida* 批答, response to questions, 140  
 Pingyao 平遙, Shanxi, 50  
 Pingzhou 平州, 157–58  
 polo: Shi Jingtang's fondness of, 182; Zhuangzong's fondness of, 84  
 prisons: emptying of, 98; reducing size of, 126  
 prominent families: in the capital, 132–33; regulations against bribery, 132; rules about socializing, 129–30  
 protection privilege. See *yinbu*  
 Pusanu 菩薩奴, informal name of Conghou, 177  
 Puzhou 濮州, 107
- Qianjin zhi zi, zuo bu chui tang; baijin zhi zi, li bu yi heng* 千金之子，坐不垂堂。百金之子，立不倚衡, on sons worth a thousand ounces of gold, 110  
 Qianzhou 虔州, posting of Li Zanhua to, 111  
 Qin 秦氏, mother of Li Keyong, 12  
 Qin, Prince of 秦王. See Li Congrong  
 Qinling Mountains 秦嶺山, 171  
 Qinzhou 秦州, earthquake at, 100  
*qiquan* 契券, food and housing coupons, 72  
 Qionghua Senior Princess 瓊華上公主, 166
- regional officials, spurning extralegal fees, 132  
 Ren Huan 任圜, d. 927: background of, 29–30; conflict with An Chonghui, 72; defense of Doulu Ge, 66; as fiscal commissioner, 73–74; on official uniforms, 122; plot against, 73, 131; prostitute of, 72; rise to councilor, 64–65; in Shu, 29–31, 54–55, 148, 165; Zhao Feng's defense of, 74  
 Ren Maohong 任茂弘, father of Ren Huan, 29  
 Ren Tuan 任團, brother of Ren Huan, 29  
 Ren Zan 任贊, prospective tutor for Congrong, 105  
 retainer, special accommodation for Huo Yanwei, 78–79  
 Revenues, Ministry of, *Hubu* 戶部, 92  
 revenues commissioner. See *Zuyongshi*  
 Rites, Ministry of, *Libu* 禮部: on appellation for empress, 95; as examination officiator, 144; officiating over ancestral temple, 75; promotion trajectory for, 130; purview of, 77  
*Rites of the Kaiyuan Period* 開元禮, 146  
 Ruizong 唐睿宗, r. 710–712, Tang Emperor, as symbol of fraternal succession, 59
- Sagacious, Wise, Spiritual, Martial, Literate, Virtuous Reverent and Filial Emperor 聖明神武文德恭孝皇帝, Mingzong's title of honor, 91  
 Sang Weihuan 桑維翰, 899–947, advisor to Shi Jingtang, 182–83  
*Sansi* 三司. See Fiscal Commission  
 Secretariat, *Zhongshusheng* 中書省: as publisher of classics, 143; on staffing Directorate of Education, 141  
 senior aides, *li* 吏, 26  
 seniority system for officials, relaxing rules of, 125–26  
 Shamanism: among Shatuo, 8; among Turks, 138  
*Shangjiangjun* 上將軍. See Generalissimo  
*Shangshusheng* 尚書省, Department of State Affairs, taxing powers at, 57  
 Shatuo 沙陀: absence of racial barriers among, 5–6; adoptions among, 21–23; aesthetics among, 8–9; cavalry of, 154; conflating tribe and family, 22; Congke's high regard among, 94; cooperation with Chinese, xi, xiii, 5–6; cultural conservatism of, 3, 52, 139; dynasties founded by, xi–xiii, 1, 2; examination performance for, 146; extinction of, xiii; facial features of, 6; Feng Dao and, 29; fiscal irresponsibility for, 147; fraternal frictions among, 84; fraternal succession among, 51; history of, 58, 64, 134–35; homeland of, xiii;

- kingship among, xi; martial duties of, 4; military elite among, 178; music among, 158; population of, 10; relations with Kitan, 155–62, 183; relations with Tangut, 107; relations with Turks, 8–9; in routing Kitan, 36–37; sense of community, 11; sense of vulnerability for, 171–72, 174; Shi Jingtang as, 27; in siege warfare, 34; southern orientation of, 12; wedding practices among, 137–38; writing system of, 10, 140
- Shi Gui 史圭, at Military Commission, 77–78
- Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭, 892–942, founder of Later Jin dynasty, Gaozu, r. 937–942: ambush of, 171; background of, 27; and Congwen, 21; deployment at Shaanzhou, 57; entertaining emperor, 69, 74; fine for, 127; in founding dynasty, 183–84; at Jinyang, 161, 182–83; at Kaifeng, 47, 71, 74; and Kitan, 183; in Mingtang ceremony, 90; reassignment of, 179; in Shu, 169, 171–73; spurning Emperor Min, 180, 182–83; at Weizhou, 44–46; wife of, 16, 95, 105, 182
- Shi Yanqiong 史彥瓊, actor favored by Zhuangzong, 39
- Shilu* 實錄, 134–35. *See also* Veritable Records
- Shishifeng* 實食封, fiefs of maintenance, 109
- shiwei qinjun* 侍衛親軍, imperial bodyguard, 28
- Shou'an Princess 壽安公主, also Yongning Princess, daughter of Mingzong, 109
- Shu 蜀, Sichuan: abductions at, 127; armies from 55, 57, 64; autonomy of, 3–4; conquest of, xiii, 1, 5, 29–30, 40, 53–54, 163–64, 171–72; consorts from, 56; Daoist master at, 77; declaration of independence for, 180; governor's tribute from, 91, 175; fall of Wang Yan at, 166; fate of royals from, 50, 127; Li Yu at, 30–31, 97, 166; Meng Zhixiang at, 96, 125; mission of Li Yan to, 166; mission of Li Renju to, 168; realignment with Luoyang, 175; transition to Tang control, 165; wealth of, 53, 147; under Wang Jian, 22
- Shufei 淑妃, Pure Consort, 95
- Shulü Empress Dowager 述律后, d. 947, wife of Abaoji: assertiveness of, 14; gifts for, 157–58
- Shumiyuan* 樞密院. *See* Military Commission
- sibling rivalries: Cunxiao and Cunxin, 23–24; Cunxu and Siyuan, 24–26
- Silk Road: languages of, 8; Tangut control of, 100
- Sima Guang 司馬光, 1019–1086: on Meng Hanqiong, 99; on Mingzong, 1; on vanquishing Kitan, 160. *See also* *Comprehensive Mirror*
- sinécures, abolition of, 147
- singing arrows. *See* *chuanjian*
- Sishui 汜水, Luoyang's suburbs, 47
- Six Armies, under direction of Congrong, 84
- Six Canons of Tang. *See* *Tang liu dian*
- Six Ministries, and Fiscal Commission, 148
- Six Palaces, in Forbidden City, 115
- slavery: in the armed forces, 132; in Zhao kingdom, 99
- Small Repose, *Xiaokang* 小康, xii, 1
- Song dynasty 趙宋, 960–1279: economic controls under, 148, 151; fiscal commission under, 142; founding of, 44; grave lands seized under, 151–52; higher education under, 142; land surveys in, 151; official exams under, 144; temple of Mingzong in, 78
- Song, Prince of宋王. *See* Li Conghou
- Songzhou 宋州, 158, 162, 180
- Southern Han 南漢: autonomy of, 3; sibling rivalry at, 22
- Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋, Conghou's fondness for, 19
- Su Yuan 蘇願, as envoy to Shu, 174
- sui* 歲, Chinese measure for age, 6, 119
- Sui dynasty 隋朝, 581–618: rebuilding of Luoyang, 90; resort at Jinyang, 12–13
- suicidal deaths, investigation of, 126
- Suizhou 遂州, Xia Luqi at, 168–69, 173–74
- Sun Yue 孫岳: as fiscal commissioner, 115; punishment for, 118–19

- Suo Zitong 索自通, as custodian of western capital, 93
- surrogate sons, 21–24. *See also* Army of Righteous Sons
- suspending audience, for University chancellor, 76
- Sweet Water Pavilion 甘水亭, Luoyang, 68
- Taibai Mountains 太白山, Shanxi, 77
- Taimiao* 太廟, Imperial Ancestors temple, 90, 98
- Taishan 泰山, monks from, 112
- Taishie* 太社, Altar for Imperial Sacrifices, 81
- Taiweigong 太微宮, Daoist cult figure, 90
- Taiyuan 太原: as Shatuo home, xiii, 99, 113, 182. *See also* Jinyang
- Taizong 唐太宗, Tang Emperor, r. 626–649: on death of a horse, 128; in deposing his father, 63, 113; Emperor Min's regard for, 177; historical consciousness of, 135; as Mingzong's role model, xii, 2; promise of, 25; reign name of, 61. *See also* Li Shimin
- Tang dynasty 唐朝, 618–906: abdications under, 113; alliance with Shatuo, 9–10; ambivalence toward Keyong, 12; conferral of surname, 10–11; Daoism's appeal under, 77; dynastic history of, 13, 134; elite families of, 146; exploitation of history, 63; fiscal institutions under, 148; imperial names under, 68; Imperial University in, 141–42; marriage alliances under, 13; nostalgia for, 58–59; official uniforms in, 122; palace staff during, 56; preserving legal traditions of, 136; revenues commissioner under, 57; succession turmoil during, 63; tombs of, 58; tribute system in, 155; Turks under, 8; women's military training in, 14; writs of immunity in, 128–29
- Tang liu dian* 唐六典, Six Canons of Tang, 136
- Tangut 黨項: border with, 87; horse trade with, 152; military intervention against, 100–101, 107–8; written language of, 140
- Tartars, 8, 11
- taxes: equity of, 151; official fraud, 151; remission of, 91
- technology: canal construction, 149–50; textile production, 157
- Ten Kingdoms, *Shiguo* 十國, 907–979, stability of, 3
- Tiancheng reign 天成, 926–930, Heaven's Fulfillment, promulgation of, 61, 90
- Tianjin Bridge 天津橋, Luoyang, adjacent to Forbidden City, 116
- Tianshen* 天神, as heavenly god, 8–9
- Tianxia bingma da yuanshuai* 天下兵馬大元帥, Grand Commander-in-chief, as title for Congrong, 112
- Tianxiong command 天雄軍, 35–36. *See also* Weizhou
- Tibetans 吐蕃: as allies of Shatuo, 9; borderlands of, 54, 87
- tiequan* 鐵券, writs of immunity, 128–29
- tonghua yi* 統華夷, as unifying force, 1
- Tongguang 同光, reign of Zhuangzong, 923–926: launch of, 39; overlap with Tiancheng, 61
- Tongtianguan* 通天冠, as ceremonial cap, 89–90
- tongzike* 童子科, 145. *See also* child prodigy exam
- trading stations, along Kitan border, 157
- tributary system, *chaogong* 朝貢: auspicious animals as, 139; horse trade and, 152–53; along Silk Road, 100–101; as trade, 155
- Tuhun 吐渾 (Tuyuhun 吐谷渾), 8
- Tujue Turks 突厥: relations with Shatuo, 8; spirits of, 138
- Tunei 禿餒, Kitan commander, death of, 80–81, 159
- Tuoba 拓跋 (Tabgach), Wei founders, 6, 12
- Turks: Buddhist practices of, 8–10; in Central Asia, 128; in Inner Asia, 8–10
- Turui Beimeilao 禿汭悲梅老, as Kitan envoy, 157
- Tuyu 突欲. *See* Li Zanhua
- Uighurs: as Shatuo allies, 9; written language of, 140. *See also* Huihu Uighurs



- Veritable Records, *Shilu* 實錄: for dynastic histories, 136; for Xuanzong, 134; for Zhuangzong, 134
- Wang 王氏, d. 947, consort of Mingzong: adopted son of, 17–18, 109, 179; association with Congrong, 116; background, 16; daughter of, 17; favor for Congke, 94, 183; frictions with courtiers, 114; implication in palace scandal, 179; investiture as Pure Consort, 95; investiture as Virtuous Concubine, 76; ties to Meng Hanqiong, 99; at Zhenzhou, 46
- Wang 王氏, empress of Tang Gaozong 唐高宗, 13
- Wang Chan 王蟾, as erudite, 144
- Wang Chengxiu 王承休, d. 926, eunuch governor in Shu, 54
- Wang Du 王都, d. 929, rebellion at Dingzhou, 80–81, 158–60
- Wang Jian 王建, 847–918, Former Shu ruler, r. 908–918, adoptions by, 22
- Wang Jianli 王建立, 877–946: elevation to councilor, 77; as Zhenzhou officer, 46, 158
- Wang Jumin 王居敏, overseer of the Household of the heir-apparent, on imperial tutor, 105
- Wang Rong 王鎔, 873–921, as Zhao governor, 99
- Wang Sitong 王思同, d. 934: rout of, 180; in Shu campaign, 174; at Tongzhou, 57; in western capital, 169
- Wang Yan 王衍, Former Shu ruler, r. 918–926, apprehension of, 53, 166
- Wang Yanqiu 王晏球, 868–929; defection of, 48; in Dingzhou suppression, 158–60
- Wang Yanzhang 王彥章, 863–923, Liang commander, 38
- Wang Zongbi 王宗弼, d. 925, Shu royal, 54
- Wangdu 望都, satellite city of Dingzhou, 159–60
- Wansheng Garrison 萬勝軍, Kaifeng's suburbs, 48
- Wanzhou 萬州, in eastern Shu: contest over, 163, 167; loss of, 173
- Wardrobe Stewardess Wang 司衣王氏, 179–80
- wedding, for Congrong, 137–38
- Wei 魏氏, consort of Mingzong, mother of Congke: background of, 17, 20; death of, 178
- wei* 偽, illicit, with reference to Liang, 135–36
- Wei dynasty 北魏 (Northern Wei), 386–535, cultural inclusiveness of, 6, 12
- Wei, Prince of 魏王, son of Zhuangzong. *See* Li Jiji
- Wei Yue 韋說, d. 927: dismissal of, 66; funeral rites duties for, 65–66; as political holdover, 64
- Wei Zheng 魏徵, 580–643, as advisor to Tang Taizong, 67
- Wei/Bo command 魏博軍, rebellion at, 26, 42–46. *See also* Weizhou
- Weizhou 魏州, modern Daming 大名, Hebei: acquisition of, 35–36; Conghou at, 119; Fan Yanguang at, 183; governors of, 69; imperial tour to, 5, 76–77, 83, 124; as Jin capital, 36; loyalists at, 50; mutiny at, 26, 42–45; name change for, 84; presence of natives on military commission, 99. *See also* Tianxiang command
- Wen Tao 溫韜, d. 928, plundering Tang tombs, 58
- Wenming Palace 文明殿: accession at, 60–61; titular honors at, 94; venue for informal audience, 121–22; venue for special events, 100, 108
- Wenzong 唐文宗, Tang emperor, r. 827–840, as example of fraternal succession, 59
- western capital. *See* Changan
- Western Palace, Luoyang: venue for Mingzong's wake, 178; venue for Zhuangzong's wake, 59–60, 65
- White Horse Slope 白馬坡, site of monastery in Luoyang, 138
- wine monopoly, reforms to, 150

- women: abduction of, 17, 20; beating of, 16; calligraphy skills of, 14; class and circumspection among, 18; as consorts, 15, 17, 76; in defending palace walls, 116; faith of, 15; filial devotion among, 15; fiscal powers of, 39; in harem, 18; infidelity of, 52; marriages for, 15, 137–38, 168; and martial arts, 14; as martyrs, 184; as palace ladies, 72–73; as partners, 172–73; as prostitutes, 72; release from palace, 56; reproof of, 72–73; as source of parental discipline, 15; staff reductions in, 147; suicide of, 126; as Tang royals, 13, 52; undesirability as hostages, 125; as wives of officers, 125
- writ of immunity. *See tiequan*
- Wu 吳, southern state: autonomy of, 3, 163; diplomatic outreach to, 173; intrigues of, 92; as potential target, 70; as sanctuary for northerners, 144; support for Nanping, 164
- Wu Qianyu 武虔裕, as cousin of An Chonghui, 168
- Wu Zetian 武則天, 624–705: as empress of Tang Gaozong, 13; in erecting Mingtang temple, 89
- Wu Zhen 烏震, in suppressing Kitan, 157
- Wuyue 吳越, frictions with north, 173, 175
- wuzibei 無字碑, blank slab, Cui Xie as, 72
- Wuzong 唐武宗, 814–846, Tang emperor, r. 840–846, as example of fraternal succession, 59
- Xi 奚 tribesmen, at Dingzhou, 159
- Xia 夏氏, consort of Mingzong: background of, 15–16, 18–19, 95; fortunetellers on, 16; posthumous elevation to empress, 109; sons of, 95, 105
- Xia 夏氏: as Consort of Zhuangzong, 52; remarriage to Li Zanhua, 161
- Xia Luqi 夏魯奇, d. 931: armies of, 176; death of, 173–74; dependents of, 176; in Nanping war, 163; at Suizhou, 168, 171
- Xian Jiwei 咸繼威, burglarizing homes at Zhengzhou, 132
- Xian'an Tower 咸安樓, Kaifeng, site for parading prisoners of war, 80
- Xiang Yansi 向延嗣, eunuch aide to Li Jiji, role in executing Shu royals, 54
- Xiangzhou 襄州, Henan, 26
- Xiangzhou 相州, modern Anyang, Henan, 45, 152
- Xiao Xifu 蕭希甫, censor indicting Doulu Ge, 66
- Xiazhou 夏州, as Tangut capital, 108
- Xie Yuangui 解元龜, as Daoist master, 77
- Xifang Ye 西方鄴, defection to Siyuan at Kaifeng, 48
- Xingsheng Palace 興聖宮, Luoyang, 49
- Xingyuan 興元, strategic region near Shu, 174
- xiqian* 錫錢, tin currency, 149
- Xixia 西夏. *See* Tangut
- Xu, Prince of 許王, adopted son of Consort Wang, Congyi, 109
- Xu Shenhuan 許審環, d. 932, rebellion at Lingzhou, 101
- Xu Zhigao 徐知誥 (Li Bian 李昇), 888–943, Southern Tang founder, r. 937–943, as chief councilor for Wu, 92
- Xuanwu command 宣武軍. *See* Kaifeng
- Xuanwu Tower 宣武樓, Luoyang, death of royal family at, 184
- Xuanzong 唐宣宗, 810–859, Tang emperor, r. 846–859, Veritable Records for, 134
- Xuzhou 徐州: earthquake at, 75; posting of Feng Yun at, 100
- Yabing 衙兵, governor's guard, 35
- Yamen 衙門, rules about socializing at, 129–30
- Yan 琰, grandfather of Mingzong, 6
- Yan 燕, northern border command: contest with, 24, 28, 31, 34–35, 56, 155; Lu Wenjin at, 156; prince of, 12
- Yang Guangyuan 楊光遠, d. 944: deployment to Jinyang, 183; on Kitan captives, 162
- Yang Lingzhi 楊令芝, envoy to Shu, 166
- Yang Renzheng 楊仁晟, d. 926, Wei/Bo leader, 42

- Yang Shihou 楊師厚, d. 915, Weizhou governor under Liang, 35
- Yang Siquan 楊思權, commander loyal to Congrong, 80
- Yang Yanwen 楊彥溫, d. 930, intrigues against Congke, 92–93
- Yangdi 隋煬帝, 569–618, Sui emperor, r. 604–618, connections to Jinyang, 12–13
- yangzi* 養子, adopted son, 22
- Yanmen 雁門, northern borderland, 75
- Yanzhou 延州, modern Yan'an, Shaanxi, 107
- Yanzhou 兗州, Shandong, 92
- Yao and Shun 堯舜, ancient Sage Kings, 94–95, 127, 131
- Yao Hong 姚洪, d. 930, as martyr, 170–71
- Yao Yanchou 藥彥稠: rout of, 180; in Tangut intervention, 101; as trusted lieutenant, 97
- Yao Yanwen 姚彥溫, guardsman at Kaifeng, 48
- Ye capital 鄴都, 84. *See also* Weizhou
- Yellow River 黃河: casualties in wars along, 127; imperial crossings of, 70; rupture of dikes at, 100
- Yelü Deguang 耶律德光, 902–947, Kitan ruler, r. 926–947: accession of, 113, 156, 160–61; compliment for Shi Jingtang, 183
- Yelü Tuyu 耶律突欲, also Yelü Bei 倍. *See* Li Zanhua; Tuyu
- yesbi* 野史, unofficial historical materials, 134
- Yi River 伊水, imperial inspection at, 103
- Yi'erjun* 義兒軍. *See* Army of Surrogate Sons
- Yin Mountains 陰山, Ningxia, as Shatuo home, xiii, 13
- yinbu* 蔭補, “protection privilege”: expanded access to, 125; the forging of documents pertaining to, 133
- Yingzhou 應州, Shanxi: ancestral temple at, 75; birthplace of An Chonghui, 26; birthplace of Mingzong, 6, 12
- Yingzi Ravine 罍子谷, near Zhengzhou, 49
- yizi* 義子, surrogate sons, 22
- Yonghe Palace 雍和殿, as place of rest for ailing emperor, 115, 118
- Yongle 永樂皇帝, 1360–1424, Ming Emperor, r. 1402–1424, as model ruler, xii
- Yongle Princess 永樂公主, also Xingping Princess, younger daughter of Mingzong, 109
- Yongning Princess 永寧長公主, eldest daughter of Mingzong, wife of Shi Jingtang, 16, 27
- You puye 右僕射, right rectifier, Lu Zhi as, 115
- Youzhou 幽州, modern Beijing: governors of, 149; Kitan assault on, 36–37, 40–41, 155–56; Li Sizhao as prefect of, 23; musical instruments from, 158; siege by Kitan, 35; troops from, 158
- Yuan Jianfeng 袁建豐, regional governor, suspension of audience for, 76
- Yuan Xingqin 元行欽, d. 926, adopted son of Zhuangzong and Mingzong: assignment to Weizhou, 42–43, 45, 47–48, 50; death of, 56–57; defeat at Yan, 35
- Yuande Palace 元德殿, Kaifeng, banquet site, 74
- Yuanqiu* 圓丘, Altar of Heaven, 90
- Yunzhou 鄆州, Shandong: in conquering Liang, 37–38; posting for Shi Jingtang, 182; ruptured dikes at, 100
- Yuyingshi* 禦營使, commissioner of imperial sojourn, 71
- zaichen* 宰臣, councilor group, banquet for, 74
- Zela 則刺, captive Kitan commander, 162, 183
- Zhang 張氏, d. 931, wife of An Chonghui, accompanying him to Shu, 172–73
- Zhang Jian 張籤: as Changan custodian, 54; as palace guard commander, 96–97
- Zhang Jin 張進, defense commissioner, in burglarizing homes at Zhengzhou, 132
- Zhang Jingda 張敬達, d. 936: deployment at Jinyang, 183; posting at Daizhou, 182
- Zhang Juhan 張居翰, d. 928, dismissal of, 56
- Zhang Pu 張溥, University chancellor, 142–43

- Zhang Qianzhao 張虔釗, receives councilor powers, 114
- Zhang Quanyi 張全義, 850–926: endorsement of Siyuan, 43; favor by Zhuangzong, 69; founding agency for rice cultivation, 152; suburban residence of, 66, 69; surrender to Later Tang, 38;
- Zhang Wenbao 張文寶, chief examiner, 145
- Zhang Xian 張憲, d. 926, loyalist at Jinyang, 52–53
- Zhang Yanchao 張彥超, d. 956, Shatuo ethnic, defects to Kitan, 161
- Zhang Yanlang 張延朗: as fiscal commissioner, 148; as palace services officer, 55
- Zhang Zhaoyuan 張昭遠, court historian: on naming an heir, 79; on selecting tutors for Congrong, 105; warnings about Congke, 79
- Zhang Zunhui 張遵誨, aborted mission to Shu by, 168
- zhangfu* 章服, ceremonial garb, 100
- Zhao 趙國, state of Wang Rong, 99
- Zhao Dejun 趙德鈞, d. 943: imperial accolades for, 159–60; on Kitan captives, 162; as Youzhou governor, 145
- Zhao Feng 趙鳳, d. 935: assignment to Kaifeng, 82; background of, 30; as chief editor at History Bureau, 135–36; as civil service examiner, 144–45; congratulations from, 93; as councilor, 83–84; in defense of An Chonghui, 97, 170; defense of Ren Huan, 74; dismissal of, 104, 131; as Duanming academician, 140; on fortuneteller, 69; on tour of Weizhou, 76–77; on writs of immunity, 128–29
- Zhao Jiliang 趙季良: council to Meng Zhixiang, 169; as governor, 174–75; posting in Shu, 165–66
- Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤, 939–976, Song founder, Taizu, r. 960–976, in Chenqiao mutiny, 44
- Zhao Yanshou 趙延壽, d. 949, adopted son of Zhao Dejun: marrying Consort Wang's daughter, 17; as military commissioner, 98; on naming heir, 113; son of, 145
- Zhao Zaili 趙在禮, 882–947: banquet for, 69; rebellion at Weizhou, 42
- Zhao Zan 趙贊, son of Zhao Yanshou, as child prodigy, 145
- Zhaojun Li 趙郡李氏, as elite family, 30
- zhaoling* 詔令, mandate, 51
- Zhaozong 唐昭宗, 867–904, Tang emperor, r. 888–904, consort of, 14
- zhen shidaiifu* 真士大夫, Feng Dao as genuine man, 103
- Zheng Jue 鄭珣, d. 930: elevation to councilor, 64–65; as Hanlin academician, 65; imperial charity for, 102; retirement of, 77
- Zhenguan reign 貞觀, 626–649, of Tang Taizong, 61, 63
- Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要, writings on Tang Taizong, 63
- Zhengzhou 鄭州, Henan: burglarized homes at, 132; earthquake at, 75; path for Mingzong's armies, 49; residence of Zheng Jue, 123
- Zhenzhou 鎮州: birthplace of Congke, 20; Conghou's posting at, 96; governors of, 19, 77, 114; Lu Wenjin's passage through, 157; raid on, 17, 23, 39; regents of, 21; Siyuan's posting at, 40–41, 44, 46, 49, 125
- Zhi neishisheng* 知內侍省, director of palace affairs, Meng Hanqiong as, 99
- Zhibai* 知白, Pristine Knowledge, as Daoist title, 77
- Zhide Palace 至德宮, suburban retreat, 66, 111–12
- zhong* 眾, the masses and the military elite, 70
- Zhongxing Palace 中興殿: birthday celebrations at, 67; inaugural audience at, 61
- Zhongzhou 忠州, in eastern Shu: contest over, 163, 167; loss of, 173
- Zhou Dewei 周德威, d. 918: posthumous honors for, 98; in relieving Luzhou, 34; at Yan, 35, 155
- Zhou dynasty 周朝, ca. 1046–256 BCE, music of, 65–66
- Zhou Lingwu 周令武, northern prefect, 75

- Zhou Xuanbao 周玄豹, d. 935: favored fortuneteller, 25; retention at Jinyang, 69
- Zhu Hongzhao 朱弘昭, d. 934: backing of eunuchs, 99; cautioning Congrong, 116; at Dingzhou, 160; as interim custodian, 90; maligning An Chonghui, 172; as military commissioner, 114, 178; resistance from Congke, 179–80; retribution for Congrong's associates, 119; in Shu, 166; support for An Chonghui, 77; support for Wang Jianli, 77
- Zhu Jin 朱瑾, foster son of Keyong, 33
- Zhu Shousu 朱守素, University chancellor, suspension of audience for, 76
- Zhu Shouyin 朱守殷, d. 927: mutiny of, 27, 71, 81; as policeman, 49; and Ren Huan, 73; as spy of Zhuangzong, 43
- Zhu Wen 朱溫, 852–912, emperor of Liang, r. 907–912: controls on Weizhou, 35; death of, 117; origins as governor, 1, 12; as recipient of writ of immunity, 128
- Zhu Xuan 朱瑄, d. 897, foster son of Keyong, 33
- Zhu Yougui 朱友珪, second emperor of Liang, r. 912–913, in slaying father, 117–18
- Zhu Youqian 朱友謙, d. 926: ally of Guo Chongtao, 54; recipient of writ of immunity, 128–29
- Zhu Youzhen 朱友貞, third emperor of Liang, r. 913–923, succession of, 117
- Zhuangzong, founding Later Tang emperor, r. 923–926: Abaoji on, 156; accession of, 84; affinity for Wang Rong, 99; ancestral temple for, 98; arrogance of, 7; biography of, xi, 33; bloody purges under, 173; Congjing's loyalty to, 20, 45–46; and Congke, 21, 179; conquest of Kaifeng, 37–38; consorts of, 76, 161; in death, 110; delays in naming heir, 79; devotion to Tang, 58–59; favor for Duan Ning, 58; Feng Dao's critique of, 75; Feng Dao's tenure under, 29; funeral rites for, 59–60, 65–66, 119, 178; and Guo Chongtao, 26, 97; favor for actors, 4, 39, 133; horse pasturage under, 152; hunting habits of, 139; imperial altar to, 98; imperial tour of Weizhou, 76; Kening's challenge of, 84; kickball and, 106; loyalist of, 81; Mingtang ceremonies under, 89; in mourning mother, 41; offer to lead Weizhou suppression, 43; portrait of, 7; in realigning capitals, 84–85; refined tastes of, 82, 105; regicide against, 117–18; reign of, xi–xii, 51–52; relations with Kitan, 155–56; relations with Nanping, 162–63; restrictions on city ramparts, 167; Shi Jingtang's critique of, 27–28; Shu conquest under, 3–5, 42, 164–65; son's death and, 53–55; Veritable Records for, 134; Wang Du and, 158; at Weizhou, 35–36, 76; wife's death and, 52; women of, 18, 76; writs of immunity by, 128–29; at Yan, 35; youth of, 6; and Zhu Shouyin, 71. *See also* Li Cunxu
- zhuke* 諸科, various fields exam, 143–47
- Zhuozhou 涿州, northern border town, 156
- Zhuye Chixin 朱邪赤心. *See* Li Guochang
- Zhuye Jinzhong 朱邪盡忠, great-grandfather of Li Keyong, 10
- zhuzuolang* 著作郎, composer, assigned to History Bureau, 137
- Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒. *See Comprehensive Mirror*
- zuyongshi* 租庸使, revenues commissioner, 57