

Fire and Ice

Li Cunxu and the Founding of the Later Tang

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Preface

My scholarly foray into the Five Dynasties, as a carpetbagger from the Southern Song, began with a translation of Ouyang Xiu's *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, published in 2004. I subsequently produced biographies of two Later Tang emperors, Zhuangzong (Li Cunxu), the dynasty's founder who ruled for three years, and Mingzong (Li Siyuan), his illustrious successor who reigned for over seven years. The English manuscript on Zhuangzong, drafted in 2005, was masterfully rendered into Chinese by Ma Jia, a former Brown University colleague in East Asian Studies, then published in Beijing in 2009. I followed up with a biography of Mingzong, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*. The English version was published in 2014 and work on the Chinese translation is well underway. At the time, I did not pursue publication of the Zhuangzong manuscript in English.

After putting to bed the project on Mingzong, I became convinced of the need to bring the Zhuangzong book to Western audiences, as it contains extensive treatment of the period preceding the Later Tang founding, precisely when the small satrapy along the empire's periphery evolved into the leading contender for imperial power. My own insights into Zhuangzong have been much enriched by intensive research on his successor. The two rulers are largely a lesson in contrasts, but understanding the special challenges of the first reign is critical to contextualizing the stunning achievements of the second. Moreover, I have been able to make use of secondary scholarship produced in the last decade, since drafting the original manuscript, including a biography of the monarch's father, Li Keyong, which draws extensively upon a little-known tomb inscription unearthed at Daixian, Shanxi, the most authoritative source on the family's early ancestors. My treatment of the origin of the Shatuo people has been entirely overhauled as a consequence. For these reasons, this English version should supersede the Chinese original.

The two biographies, used alongside my *Historical Records* translation, should provide a sizable body of primary and secondary materials for use in undergraduate teaching, my intended audience. The biographical format should also enhance this particular book's accessibility to the nonspecialist. In the following pages, I have tried to highlight the positive characterizations of Li Cunxu and his reign, while

minimizing the generally negative depictions of him in official sources for the period, the two dynastic histories and Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror*. In reality, all three sources, written in the Northern Song, relied heavily on the "Veritable Records" for the reign, a document produced by court historians under Mingzong, who needed to impugn Zhuangzong's political record and personal life in order to justify the mutiny against him. I have tried to counter such biases through extensive use of *Cefu yuangui*, an eclectic mix of primary sources less influenced by the agendas of official historians. But Li Cunxu will always be an enigma.

Regardless of one's position on Zhuangzong's political record, the genius behind nearly two decades of military conquests receives nearly universal praise, strategies studied by aspiring rulers and their advisors for centuries to come. His successor, Mingzong, was the rare emperor able to excel at warfare and governance in almost equal measure, which in turn, allowed the Later Tang to last thirteen years, a decent patch of time in the context of the Five Dynasties, where the average dynasty lasted ten years. But Mingzong often emerges in the sources as perennially tailoring his actions to project the right image, aware of the eyes of history upon him. His public persona thus seems rather contrived. The appeal of Li Cunxu to audiences today lies in his human imperfections—the strength of his romantic impulses and depths of his narcissistic ego—traits shared with a long line of transformational figures in Chinese history, including Mao Zedong, a secret admirer. Ironically, these two very different founding fathers shared another thing in common: they allowed poor choices in their personal lives to impact negatively upon governance, to the detriment of their historical legacies in the end. Despite the popular appeal of the two leaders, they proved poor judges of people, in the end.

In my previous incarnation as a Song dynasty historian, I studied the evolution of the hereditary elite of early imperial China into a class of bureaucratic professionals after the eleventh century, which scholars have long attributed to "the endemic chaos of the Five Dynasties." To be sure, the tenth century did witness a pervasive downward mobility for the old elite and a similarly sweeping upward mobility for socially marginal groups, resulting in the entire overhaul of the social system. At the court of Zhuangzong, we can find vestiges of the old elite juxtaposed against icons of the new: Chief councilor Doulu Ge, scion of a great family, with little to offer besides family name, and the rising star of commoner background, Feng Dao, debunking class bias by outsmarting his peers. We also witness pressure from successive Later Tang monarchs to place competence before pedigree in recruiting and promoting civilian officials, despite strong resistance from the bureaucratic establishment. And finally, we witness military families forming a third prestige group, one of the most exclusive in fact, as reflected in the social life and marriage alliances of Zhuangzong and his successors. Rather than a time of chaos, the Five Dynasties should rightfully be seen as a time of significant progress on the social front, due precisely to the intrusion of military men

into the realm of governing. The Five Dynasties was also a time of remarkably colorful characters, akin to another period of division, the Three Kingdoms.

The reader should note that Chinese children are considered one year old at birth, the consequence of historically having no concept of zero, and a year is added after the Lunar New Year. Chinese age counted in *sui* thus tends to be one to two years older than the same age in the West.

In Western scholarship, historical figures are referred to either by full name or simply surname for purposes of brevity. When Chinese historians wish to abbreviate a name, they instead employ the individual's personal name. Below, I have followed Chinese convention by abbreviating "Li Cunxu" as "Cunxu." Relating the narrative below to the relevant chapters of my *Historical Records* translation should prove much easier.

My translation of most technical terms pertaining to military technology is based on *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 5, Part 6* by Robin D. S. Yates.

Our title draws inspiration from the poem by Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice," on the biblical end of the world: "Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice." But here, "fire" is a metaphor for war and "ice" an allusion to rejection.



Map of Later Tang

Ancestry of Li Cunxu



1

The Prodigal Son

Footing in two cultures proved a mixed blessing for Li Cunxu (885–926), the object of much envy in his day. Through paternal ties to the Shatuo-Turks of Inner Asia, he projected the martial panache reminiscent of his father, Li Keyong (856–908). Equally impressive was Cunxu’s comfort with the culture of his Chinese mother, Woman Cao, who drew upon a dedicated group of local mentors to prepare the youth for his destiny with history. Cunxu made frequent boast of his facility in the literary language and classical traditions of China. He also made much of his creativity as poet and musician, having composed by his own hand the marching songs for his armies. Conscious of his role as model for future Shatuo emperors, Cunxu needed to strike the right balance in negotiating his two identities. But sadly, fifteen years of almost ceaseless warfare in search of realizing other people’s dreams left little time for second thoughts about the cost of dynasty to own individuality. Would he force change upon the institution of monarchy or would the institution humble him? Tragically, so much constructive energy in his short yet historic reign was consumed by this epic contest of wills.

The entire trajectory of Cunxu’s life had been set since conception, the expectations of family swelling faster than the years could pass. There were rumors of the usual auguries at birth, including purple vapors emanating from the windows of his mother’s bedroom.¹ Another legend years later depicts Cunxu at five *sui* joining father Keyong at a banquet for officers on the heels of a major military victory in 889. After a long and endearing gaze at the youth, the thirty-something Keyong turned to his men to predict with supreme confidence, “I can avow through personal experience that the boy is a true prodigy, someone destined in coming decades to replace me on a battlefield like this!” The child had barely outgrown the split-back britches of toddlers, but Keyong’s early prediction and lifelong devotion to realizing it would elevate Cunxu above potential rivals in the mindset of many. Sources characterize Keyong as severe

1. JWDS 27.365. For the key to the abbreviation of titles, see “Sources Cited” section.

I have read, but not cited below a biography of Li Cunxu published in 1997 by Yang Jun and Fang Zhengyi, which is organized around Mao Zedong’s ramblings on emperors in Chinese history. Mao especially admired Cunxu’s warrior craft

in disciplining his underlings in the military, but the son seemed to enjoy a special dispensation.

The faith of a single family began to spread beyond the Shatuo base when Cunxu, then eleven *sui*, represented his father at an imperial reception at Changan, the Tang capital, during the eighth month of 895. “Since youth, the boy had accompanied his father on military missions,” chroniclers write, to provide early exposure to the warrior traditions of his people. Markings of martial greatness instantly impressed Emperor Zhaozong (r. 888–904), who predicted upon concluding the audience, “I have no doubt that a boy so exquisitely endowed will achieve fame and fortune.” And he finished the audience with a wish: “I sincerely hope that you stay forever pious in serving Our Family!” The monarch proceeded to compare Cunxu to Keyong, “The youth somehow manages to *eclipse* his own father.”² Thus began the nickname Yazi, the child capable of eclipsing the best of peers. The compliment further impelled Keyong to maximize Cunxu’s exposure, placing the world on notice that spectacular feats would emanate from the Jin kingdom under his stewardship. Keyong produced a sizable progeny, but none came close to rivaling the inimitable Cunxu.

Additional factors served to inflate Cunxu’s sense of self-importance, much the handiwork of devoted parents, who spared little in acculturating the youth. By thirteen *sui*, he had acquired some facility in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the Confucian classics intended to moderate Cunxu’s irrepressible passion for the arts.³ Early education certainly included China’s rich tradition of writings on warfare as well, literature designed to impose reason upon the more intuitive approaches to armed conflict then prevalent in the steppe. The weight of expectations could never allow Cunxu to settle for simple satrapy in the manner of his father and grandfather. Empire was his destiny, and obstacles would evaporate before the might of his armies and the strength of his will. But faster than the people embraced him as their Son of Heaven, they turned a cold shoulder when the egotistical excesses of Cunxu eclipsed his appealing image as martial hero. The game of expectations, which paved the way to monarchy in his twenties and thirties, would work discernibly against him by forty.

Contemporaries bearing witness to the rising tide of imperial detractors in the span of so many years commonly look to specific policies for answers. Historians centuries later focused on changes in the living environment and mental outlook of the former prince, the driven warrior losing his discipline amidst the all-consuming distractions of imperial life. Confucian dogmatists invoked ethical arguments, the lethal combination of decadent living and diffident rule. Too many commentators have grievances against the man, agendas to advance at the expense of the historic figure, with the exception

2. For both stories, see XWDS 5.41; HR p. 40; JWDS 26.352, 27.365–66; ZZTJ 260.8474–75; *Beimeng suoyan*, 17.326; *Nanbu xinshu*, 10.176; CFYG 1.13. Italics added.

3. *Beimeng suoyan*, 17.326; *Xu Tang shu*, 1.7.

of literary chroniclers. More interested in the human saga than the ethical messages behind it, they plumbed this remarkable story to amuse audiences. Ironically, the consummate actor in life became grist of entertainment in death.

Roots

Origins of a People

Pastoral ways played a critical role in shaping Li Cunxu's identity as a descendant of the Shatuo-Turks, people who had lived along the nomadic diaspora of northern China for centuries. The name Shatuo, people of the "Gravel Sands," might represent the Chinese rendering of a foreign sound, but more likely it alludes to Shatuoji, an early desert homeland in northern Xinjiang.⁴ Historical references to the Shatuo come rather late, beginning with the Tang dynasty (617–907). They may have gone by other names, but more likely, Shatuo tribes were conflated with larger border groups by indiscriminating chroniclers. Increasingly over the course of the Tang, they willfully colluded with the court as part of an ongoing policy of "pitting barbarian against barbarian" as a check on foreign aggression.⁵ The Tujue-Turks dominated much of Inner Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Shatuo likely constituting one ethnic community beneath the broad multicultural umbrella of the Tujue, and especially the Western Tujue, with whom the Shatuo elite often struck strategic marriages in Tang times and earlier.⁶ Their search for marriage pacts with the Chinese population came much later, in the ninth century.

Descendants of the Turks or "Türgish" people of Inner Asia, the Shatuo moved largely within the ambit of China's "inner zone."⁷ Prior to the Tang, they may have splintered off from groups like the Chuyue Turks, but more likely, they were an amalgam of various ethnic communities, including the Hu, Huihe, Tuyuhun, and Tartars, the source of their own tribal divisions, some scholars believe.⁸ The Shatuo likely knew the language of the Tujue Turks, the lingua franca of the western borderlands in Tang times, their own language likely a derivative thereof.⁹ They subsequently evolved into a distinct ethnic group after their move to the south and east, referred to centuries later by the Mongols as the "White Tartars" to reflect their fair complexions.¹⁰ The Shatuo moved across a vast area in central and northern Xinjiang, their presence extending as

4. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 19–20; Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 373–403; Tan, *Zhongguo lishi dituji*, pp. 63–64.

5. JWDS 91.1200; XWDS 46.514; CFYG 956.11076.

6. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 9–10.

7. CHC, Vol. 6, p. 8; Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 152; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 3–5, 8.

8. Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, pp. 132–72, esp. 132; ZZTJ 251.8140; Eberhard, *A History of China*, pp. 199–204; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 6, 12.

9. Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, p. 168.

10. Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, p. 55.

far west as Mount Yin, the Lake Alaköl region bordering Kazakhstan.¹¹ Their settlement of China's borderlands over the course of the Tang did not involve a direct progression north-to-south, but more of a back-and-forth in response to a mix of internal and external pressures, which proved especially pronounced in the ninth century.

Nomadic Religious Influences

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 preceding Tang rule.¹² The sacrifice of animals upon the death of relatives has its roots in Manichaeism. In addition, Shamanism left an indelible mark upon the Shatuo as reflected in the plethora of rites to appease the gods and their near phobia of nature.¹³ The notion of a "Heavenly God" or "Sky God" (*Tianshen*), in particular, traced to the Turks of Inner Asia, similarly appears in the Shatuo pantheon. The Turks bequeathed their distinct form of Buddhism to the Shatuo as well.¹⁴ Admittedly, many Chinese spiritual leaders divined to nature, but by the tenth century, most Confucian literati regarded anomalies of nature as predictable, whereas the Shatuo viewed nature as considerably more capricious and in need of perennial assuagement. As for aesthetics with roots in the north, the Shatuo had acquired a high regard for sculpture as craft, as reflected in the popularity of the Longmen Caves to successive Later Tang dynasts.¹⁵

Initially dubbed in historical sources as the Turks of Shatuo circuit (*Shatuo Tujue*), occasional references to the "three tribes" of Shatuo—the Shatuo, Anqing, and Yingge—suggest the existence of multiple confederations, the Shatuo ascent coinciding with the decline of the Eastern Turks in the eighth century.¹⁶ Their armies were surprisingly small relative to other minority rulers of China over the past millennium, but Shatuo warriors seemed uniquely "brave and aggressive," courage in battle buttressed by an enviable expertise in siege warfare and archery. Indeed, the arrows of a skilled bowman could pierce the shield of any foe.¹⁷

The Shatuo had served with some distinction in the campaigns against Korea in the 640s, during the reign of Tang Taizong, despite the ultimate failure of those missions.¹⁸

11. In my biography of Mingzong, I placed Yinshan in southern Mongolia and northern Ningxia; see Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 8–9. I have since become aware of a second Yinshan near Lake Alaköl (Alahu), in eastern Kazakhstan, due west of Xinjiang's Dzungarian Gate. Northern Xinjiang is an alternative place of origin for the Shatuo, but we can never speak with certainty; see Tan, *Zhongguo lishi dituji*, pp. 63–64; Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 398–403.

12. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 158; *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 92, 173.

13. Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, pp. 171–72.

14. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 146–47; Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, p. 115.

15. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 147.

16. XTS 218.6153; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 22.

17. XWDS 4.33.

18. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 19.

But they also found themselves at odds with other ethnic groups in the north and west at intervals during the early eighth century, prompting them to turn increasingly to the Middle Kingdom to serve as a shield, as reflected in the initiation of tribute to the Tang court by Shatuo Jinshan, which occurred in 702.¹⁹ In this way, Shatuo autonomy from the steppe evolved in concert with their expanding activities in the borderland, a development that took two centuries.

Resettlement in Hedong

After 809, with the blessings of the Tang court, several clusters of Shatuo tribes resettled in northern Shanxi, then known as Hedong, although “Jin” was a more popular appellation in referencing the region’s ancient name.²⁰ The arid terrain and sparse vegetation of Shanxi were ideally suited to the herding and hunting traditions of the settlers, making for a permanent Shatuo presence. They began as traders in horses, sheep, and cattle, but evolved into semi-pastoralists.²¹ Relocation to the Chinese heartland would facilitate regular contact with the Tang government, as local commanders rallied the scrappy Inner Asians to repulse insurgents in the empire’s interior, including an action against the Chengde governor, Wang Chengzong, in 821, led by the great grandfather of Cunxu.²² Such policies served to integrate the Shatuo into a “patrimonial patron-client” relationship, in the words of one historian, a relationship cynically designed to advance the interests of the Middle Kingdom.²³

Numbers

Augmenting the tactical value of the Shatuo to the Tang government was significant growth in numbers. Based on highly credible reports of 6,000 to 7,000 “tents” during the early ninth century, some scholars estimate the Shatuo population at just over thirty thousand people, including women and children.²⁴ The estimate appears overly conservative: the frequent inclusion of other Inner Asians and Chinese mercenaries in major military actions militates against the isolation of Shatuo numbers, the basis for any estimate of total population. Moreover, Shatuo armies realized a surge in numbers

19. XTS 218.6154–58; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 8; Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 384–96; Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 5–29.

20. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 141; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 27–31.

21. JWDS 91.1200; XWDS 46.514, 51.577; Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, pp. 132–36; Fu, “Shatuo zhi hanhua,” pp. 319–20; Wang, “Shatuo hanhua zhi guocheng”; Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 168.

22. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 21–22.

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

24. JTS 196.5257. Eberhard’s estimate of 100,000 for the population of Shatuo men at the peak of their power is clearly overstated; see *A History of China*, p. 200; *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 142. A recent scholar argues that Shatuo numbers may have declined to as low as ten thousand on the eve of Keyong’s reign, another serious exaggeration; see Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 22–23.

over the course of the ninth century, partly by absorbing other border peoples and partly by intermarrying with the Chinese.

An estimate of fifty to sixty thousand male warriors at the time of Cunxu's succession as prince seems more probable. By then, the Shatuo had evolved into a group less Turkic in blood and more tied to the land. Their growing strategic clout would transform them into a pivotal force in the politics of a waning Tang, as the imperial line veered toward extinction. At the same time, a heightened presence south of the Great Wall facilitated changes in cultural practices, including the transmission of a written language to a people without their own writing system, nor even a simple surname.

Names

“The northern barbarians have no surnames,” Ouyang Xiu asserts in the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*.²⁵ The claim is surely overstated, as the writer 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 and presumably in imitation of Chinese practice. The earliest ancestor for whom historical documentation exists, Shatuo Jinshan, who flourished in the early eighth century, clearly took Shatuo as surname and Jinshan as personal name.²⁶ Similarly, for the great grandfather of Keyong, Zhuye Jinzhong, Zhuye was a tribal name, which later writers misconstrued as surname. In reality, Shatuo and Zhuye both began as place names before evolving into tribal names.²⁷

The grandson of Zhuye Jinzhong, Zhuye Chixin (d. 888), subsequently abandoned his Turkish name after Tang emperors bestowed the name Li Guochang in recognition of services rendered in the suppression of Wang Hongli in 869.²⁸ Guochang had acquired some celebrity decades earlier by leading raids against the Huihu Uighurs at the behest of the court.²⁹ As shown by the ancestral chart (see front matter), the Zhuye clan appears to have shared power with another clan bearing the surname Shatuo—Jinshan, Fuguo, and Guduozhi—although one scholar argues that Zhuye was an ancillary tribe of the Shatuo.³⁰ Shatuo Jinshan was famed for getting relations with the Middle Kingdom on a positive footing by initiating tribute, which culminated in an invitation to Changan in 714, where Emperor Xuanzong personally hosted him in banquet.³¹

25. XWDS 4.39.

26. Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 132; Fan, “Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi,” pp. 71–73; Li, *Tang Xizhou*, p. 377.

27. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 7–8; Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 377–78.

28. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 759, 786; JTS 19.674–75; XTS 218.6156–58.

29. ZZTJ 246.7942; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 25–26.

30. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 7, 16–17. As for the proposition that Zhuye was an ancillary tribe, see Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 391–93.

31. Li, *Tang Xizhou*, pp. 384, 395–96.

The conferral of the imperial surname Li and Chinese personal name, accompanied by registry as Tang subject, constituted the highest form of patronage for the court, which employed the practice of fictive kinship 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. The patronage reflected in such policies were welcomed by many borderland peoples, including Li Guochang and his son Keyong, who employed their Chinese names so exclusively that their original Shatuo names are forever lost to history. The same applies to Keyong's sons and grandsons, known solely by their Chinese names. Taboos soon evolved around citing the names of Shatuo royalty, the breaking of which might prove deadly.³² A parallel case occurred with the proto-Tibetan Tangut peoples (Dangxiang), founders of the Xixia dynasty (982–1227), whose leaders were known by their imperially conferred surname, Li.³³

For generations, the Shatuo took immense pride in their multiplicity of bonds with the Tang. But the embrace of Chinese names and titles does not necessarily infer spineless subservience to the Middle Kingdom, as the word “patrimony” implies. The beauty of the Tang approach to 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. In the case of Guochang, he chose to be buried at Yanmen, near his political base in northern Shanxi, precisely where his son, Keyong, was interred decades later (see Plates 2–4).³⁴ For Shatuo leaders, much like their Chinese counterparts, the choice of burial sites was rich with symbolism, but with one notable difference: Shatuo leaders preferred interment at places associated with their political base in life, not the ancestral home in the fashion of the Chinese upper classes.

Doting Father

Early Trials

Despite their eagerness to serve, and occasionally due to misplaced zeal, the Shatuo collaboration with Tang monarchs evolved unevenly, as parochial suspicions sometimes erupted into armed conflict. Li Guochang, Cunxu's grandfather, seemed “too aggressive and arbitrary in seeking validation from the throne,” the dynastic history reports. His slaying in 872 of regional governor Duan Wenchu, reportedly at the instigation of son Keyong, would further incite the government.³⁵ Years earlier, Guochang had come into conflict with the Tang over prefectural postings for him and his son in northern

32. XWDS 32.350; HR p. 268.

33. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, p. 158.

34. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 28.

35. XWDS 4.31; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 42–43; ZZTJ 252.8165.

Shanxi.³⁶ Frictions appear to have peaked in the summer of 880, when Jin armies suffered a bruising loss in the vicinity of Jinyang by mercenaries of the Tang court and lost a reputed seventeen thousand men, a sizable part of Guochang's standing army, forcing the Shatuo to turn to their "Tartar" friends in Mongolia for sanctuary.³⁷

The Huang Chao Suppression

A fresh wave of rebel activity a year later led by Huang Chao, 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. Under the determined leadership of Keyong, Shatuo armies proved decisive in expelling insurgents from the capital in 883, compelling Huang Chao to retreat as splinter groups disintegrated. The feat would elevate the stature of father and son, Guochang and Keyong. And the legitimacy earned by sparing the Tang an early death allowed the Shatuo to attract new recruits for their armies.³⁸ During the same year, Guochang was succeeded by Keyong, his eldest surviving son, then twenty-eight *sui*.³⁹ The young man wisely enlisted the Tartars along with other borderland ethnics in the last assault against the remnant rebel groups in China's northwest, which a year later permitted him to celebrate final victory within the hallowed walls of Changan.

"Keyong's contribution to the suppression of Huang Chao was arguably second to none," reports Sima Guang in the *Comprehensive Mirror*.⁴⁰ Without the determined intervention of the Shatuo, the rebellion might have proceeded for some years and wreaked considerably more havoc. The Tang government responded positively by assigning Keyong as prefect of Daizhou and governor of Yanmen, an area already containing many nomadic settlers.⁴¹ In the years following Huang Chao's demise, Keyong moved methodically to expand his base, starting with the strategic prefectures of Jinyang, Zezhou, and Liaozhou in central Hedong, and culminating in 890 in the acquisition of five prefectures in the Zhaoyi command, effectively extending Shatuo influence into large pockets of southern Hedong for the first time.⁴² Under his leadership, the Jin had begun to reverse some of the losses of recent years, although progress proved uneven.

36. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 40–41.

37. XWDS 4.32–38; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 45–46, 156–62.

38. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 27–28, 50–58; Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, p. 171; Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 58–60; Rossabi, *A History of China*, pp. 165–66.

39. The younger brothers of Keyong are by order of age: Kejin, Kerang, Kegong, Kerou, Kezhang, Kening; only one older brother is known by name, Kejian; see Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 32.

40. ZZTJ 255.8295.

41. Chen, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, pp. 142–43; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 37; Sekigen Seiyū, "Tōmi Shata Ri Koyō Riyō Boshi Yukuchū Kōsatsu," p. 21.

42. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 106–7.

Father's Legacy

Keyong's mother, Woman Qin, was likely a Chinese ethnic based on her surname, but the ways of her son were solidly rooted in the steppe, where he spent most of his formative years. 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*), as he had one eye perceptibly larger than the other. But the deformity appears to have had little impact on the accuracy of his arrows.⁴³ As early as fifteen *sui*, Keyong joined his father in battle to develop a special knack for assessing enemy strengths.⁴⁴ He was already a known quantity in the community long before his installation as prince. The fact that Keyong succeeded Guochang without incident suggests that father-to-son successions had become routine among the Shatuo. Their last fraternal succession involved Sige Apo, the brother of Zhuye Jinzhong, great grandfather of Keyong.⁴⁵

The stewardship of Keyong 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. Still, relations with the south soured during Keyong's initial decade of power: Changan's enfeebled monarchs were often forced to spurn his council while coddling rival governors like Zhu Wen. Meanwhile, the Shatuo took frequent recourse to plunder, sometimes for self-preservation, but often in a cry for validation, as in the sacking of Changan in 885. Only later did the alliance stabilize, Keyong proving more committed to the dynasty than most Chinese governors in his day.⁴⁶ In the process, the Shatuo came to be perceived as fundamentally "southern" in orientation, their future increasingly divorced from the steppe and intertwined with Tang dynastic politics.⁴⁷

Relocation to Shanxi

The base of operations for the Shatuo started in northern Shanxi after 809, then shifted to central Shanxi after 882, with the acquisition of the circuit's capital city, Jinyang.⁴⁸ Jinyang held historic import as the homeland of the Tuoba (Tabgach), a proto-Turkish group that founded the Wei dynasty in the early fifth century.⁴⁹ Generations later, the city doubled as the summer resort for Sui emperors. The Sui ruling family also

43. XWDS 4.32; JWDS 25.332, 25.337; ZZTJ 255.8295; *Wudai shibu* 2; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 34–35.

44. JTS 19.681.

45. XTS 218.6154; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 8–10.

46. ZZTJ 260.8481.

47. Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, p. 32.

48. XWDS 4.31; HR p. 29; JWDS 25.336.

49. Hansen, *The Open Empire*, pp. 175–85.

intermarried with the Jinyang elite and assigned a succession of imperial sons to senior posts in the area, including the dynasty's second monarch, the brilliant but ill-fated Yangdi.⁵⁰ In addition, central Shanxi was the region from which founders of the Tang, in 617, launched their armies against the Sui capital.⁵¹

After the Tang unification, Jinyang was elevated to "northern capital," even though its rulers never governed from its precincts.⁵² The Tang imperial family often married women from the city's illustrious families, including Gaozong, whose first spouse, Woman Wang, hailed from the area. And Empress Wang's successor, the iconic Wu Zetian, could claim ancestral roots in central Shanxi.⁵³ The region's repute as the land of kings and queens continued into the Five Dynasties era, when founders of three of the five houses to unify the north emanated from bases there. 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.

Jinyang prefecture, located on the southern edge of present-day Taiyuan, is nestled between two patches of hills that can rise to mountains as high as a thousand meters. Depicted in the day as "the northern door to the empire," securing the area was vital to the security of the Chinese heartland, although military intervention by central authorities was no mean chore.⁵⁴ The mountains combined with craters formed from dry rivers made intervention either from the southeast or the northwest highly hazardous. Further shielding Hedong circuit was the Yellow River, which extended north-to-south along its western border before flowing eastward. Any advance from the west required crossing the river at some point, maneuvers costly in time and materiel.

And outsiders successful at penetrating the provincial borders of Hedong faced a formidably fortified Jinyang, a fortress whose outer wall spanned forty *li* (nearly twenty kilometers).⁵⁵ A populous city encircled by marginally fertile lands and difficult-to-manoeuvre roadways had been forced by history to accumulate sufficient stores of arms and provisions to fend off besiegers for as long as one year, which presented yet another obstacle for potential besiegers.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the region's scarce resources and rugged terrain had long molded a sturdy populace, an ideal base to recruit some of the country's scippiest warriors. In this way, Jin upstarts, Guochang and Keyong, turned a panoply of conditions regarded as negatives in most contexts into positive factors for their future development.

50. Yuan, *Sui Yangdi zhuan*, pp. 43–44, 62–63, 157.

51. Wright, *The Sui Dynasty*, pp. 194–96.

52. Benn, *China's Golden Age*, p. 46.

53. *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3*, pp. 153, 156, 201, 243, 245.

54. XWDS 57.654; HR p. 460; JTS 2.25.

55. XWDS 70.866; HR p. 597.

56. Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, pp. 13, 38.

The Liang Challenge

Several hundred kilometers would separate Keyong from his nemesis at the time, Zhu Wen (852–912), the Prince of Liang, whose seat at Kaifeng sat along the Grand Canal as it progressed westward to Changan and northward to Beijing.⁵⁷ The canal represented a critical lifeline for foodstuffs and taxes headed for the Tang capital, which gave Wen a decisive advantage. In the waning years of Tang rule, Kaifeng, Jinyang, and Changan formed a triangle of intrigue that persisted for two decades, generating fabulous fodder for rumormongers and secret agents in the process.

During a rare moment of non-belligerency, in the early summer of 884, Zhu Wen hosted Keyong in banquet near Kaifeng as his armies passed through the area, and plied the twenty-nine-year-old with wine and food in feigned friendship. The two men came to exchange heated words over the course of the evening, at the apparent instigation of the host. Once inebriation had overtaken Keyong, ambushers were unleashed from a concealed lair, proof that the event had been staged from the start as cover for an assassination. Keyong somehow succeeded in slipping away, but he lost several hundred cherished bodyguards, some escaping as others perished.⁵⁸ And despite appeals to the Tang court for sanctions against Wen, an emperor inclined to empathy with Keyong proved powerless to intervene under pressure from the stronger rival.

This was no isolated incident, but part of a pattern of knavery that typified Wen's relations with rivals. He even engineered the slaying of Li Kegong, a brother of Keyong, further inciting the Shatuo satrap.⁵⁹ A dying Keyong thus secured a solemn pledge from Cunxu to exact precisely the revenge that had eluded him for two decades, without which he could not rest in peace: "You should never forget the indignities that I have endured."⁶⁰ Yet the father's dying wish would set his son on a collision course with one of the most diabolical figures of their time.

Discipline and Humanity

Keyong's obsession with settling scores emanated from a deeply ingrained sense of duty, fidelity, and honor, values rooted in the warrior culture of the steppe. Family and friends remembered him in death for endearing personal qualities, but his lieutenants in life often saw a severe side as pertains to discipline in the ranks. For example, Keyong frequently applied the full force of the law for the minor infractions of subordinates.⁶¹

57. On the belligerency between Keyong and Wen, see Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 118–24.

58. JTS 19b.718–19; XTS 218.6159; JWDS 25.338–39, 49.672–73; ZZTJ 255.8306–7; XWDS 1.5, 4.34, 14.141; HR pp. 6–7, 32–33, 130–31; *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, p. 783; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 123–24; Fang, "Power Structures," pp. 52–53.

59. XTS 218.6161; *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, p. 784.

60. XWDS 37.397; HR p. 309; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 169–74.

61. JWDS 91.1207.

Severity of the sort may have seemed needed in light of the ethnic and social diversity of Jin armies, but no such justification existed for the testy temper and stinging tongue for which the Shatuo was similarly famed. One officer subjected to Keyong's heavy hand, An Yuanxin, eventually defected to Dingzhou, a rival power, in frustration.⁶² A case closer to home involved Li Kexiu, a sibling, who was once cursed and flogged for "excessive parsimony" in rewarding troops. The humiliation of thrashing by his own brother so mortified Kexiu that he inexplicably dropped dead.⁶³ Stories of the sort demonstrate that Keyong kept surrogates on a tight leash, including his own kin, although his catholic spirit may have compensated somewhat for his volatility.

Navigating the temperament of Keyong required sensitivities that few appear to have possessed, with the exception of Ge Yu.⁶⁴ An occasional diplomat for the Jin, Yu had evinced similar finesse in managing his personal relationship with Keyong.⁶⁵ He learned to sway the Prince through reasoned arguments and historic precedent, stirring contrition in a man generally receptive to criticism once momentary passions had passed. The other endearing aspect of their relationship was an abiding faith grounded in mutual respect, such that Liang spies could malign the character of Yu without shaking Keyong's confidence in the least. Frequent visits at one another's homes served to strengthen their friendship while cementing bonds between the two families. So, when the lieutenant took ill in 906, Keyong held vigil at his bedside and administered medicines by his own hand, while the subsequent death of the aide devastated Keyong like the loss of a relative, a sign of sentimental charm.⁶⁶ To his credit, Keyong created an inner circle of male and female companions who could balance and even benefit him by dint of their differences. He seems not given to histrionics like many pretenders in his day, his confidence reflected instead in his capacity to trust.

Through force of personality, Keyong somehow held the Jin kingdom together, despite worsening conditions along his borders, especially in the years directly preceding his death. A daring siege of Jinyang by Liang armies in 902 might well have toppled the city, if not for the outbreak of disease within enemy camps on the heels of prolonged rain, due in part to the germ-infested elephant grass surrounding city walls.⁶⁷ The impotence of the Tang court to harness domestic infidels compelled Keyong to strengthen his hand by allying with the Kitan (Qidan), an emerging nomadic power to the north. The Kitan soon betrayed the alliance to evolve into a rival in his own

62. CFYG 438.4948.

63. XWDS 14.148; HR p. 138.

64. JWDS 55.744–46; CFYG 99.1087–88, 405.4597; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 93. For a parallel case, see JWDS 96.1282.

65. XWDS 39.423; HR p. 337.

66. JWDS 55.746.

67. XWDS 4.38; HR pp. 37–38; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 137–39.

backyard, occasionally pillaging Jin lands and eventually aligning with Keyong's arch-rival, the Liang.⁶⁸

When death came in early 908 at fifty-three *sui*, Keyong felt no closure on his two premier missions in life, namely, insulating his Hedong base from the depredations of rivals and shielding Tang emperors from the existential threats posed by rival governors. Worse yet, the kingdom bequeathed to his eldest son remained highly precarious. The year before, Zhu Wen had assumed sovereignty over much of the Central Plains to eradicate the Tang imperium and inaugurate the Liang as the first of the so-called Five Dynasties. The seasoned Emperor Taizu seemed favored by destiny, while the Jin was confined to a single circuit and ruled by a prince with a seriously fractured base.

Succession as Prince

His personal name, Cunxu, alludes to a leader's ability "to rally his people out of endearment," a notion originating with the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*). He presumably had no formal name in his native tongue, his family having already adopted Chinese names at the time of his birth. Cunxu was twenty-four *sui*, shy of twenty-two years old by Western reckoning, upon becoming prince, four years younger than his father at the time of accession.⁶⁹ But he was several years older than Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) at a similar turn in his life, another martial genius destined to redraw the maps of his day by force of personality.⁷⁰

By now, the Shatuo of Hedong had moved toward the Chinese practice of succession from father to son, his elevation the fourth such event for the Jin kingdom.⁷¹ Prior to this time, they appear to have practiced a mixture of the two succession traditions. For nomadic peoples, the succession of either siblings or same-generation cousins placed priority on maturity and experience in elevating leaders, due preeminently to higher death rates.⁷² For example, Keyong fathered over twenty sons, but only nine are known by name; the rest presumably died as children before receiving formal names.⁷³ Thus, an age perceived as mature for sedentary empires, might seem too young for

68. ZZTJ 266.8679–80; XTS 218.6165; JWDS 26.360; *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6*, pp. 57–61.

69. The birth date for Cunxu, first year of Guangqi [885 ACE], twenty-second day of the tenth month (885.10.22), is based on the Annals in the *Old History* (JWDS 27.365). The same source later cites his age at forty-three *sui* upon death in 926, which should make for a birth date of 884 (JWDS 34.477). *The Historical Records* of Ouyang Xiu provides no year of birth, but gives forty-three *sui* as his age at death (HR p. 50; XWDS 5.51). For a critical treatment of the matter, see Chen, *Jiu Wudai shi*, 34.998.

70. On the parallels between Cunxu and Alexander the Great, see Norman Cantor, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 1–33, 37–39. Interestingly, both men had exceptionally strong ties to their mothers, although Cunxu appears considerably less conflicted in relations with his father.

71. JWDS 25.331; XWDS 4.39; HR pp. 38–39.

72. Successions among brothers or same-generation cousins was practiced by the Kitan prior to Abaoji; see Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 55; *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6*, pp. 60–62.

73. Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 69.

steppe communities with poorer hygiene, greater geographic mobility, and frequently recurring military conflict.

Further evidence of fraternal succession in the not-too-distant past is implicit in an incident involving Li Kening, the only brother to survive Keyong. Believed by key insiders as cheated of his rightful inheritance when his nephew was installed, Kening became swept up in a conspiracy against Cunxu, the details of which appear in the next chapter. The attempted coup attests to lingering affinity for sibling succession within key segments of the Shatuo community.⁷⁴ When news of his uncle's actions reached Cunxu, he exclaimed, "Flesh-and-blood kin should not treat each other like so much fodder." He worried that ensuing frictions among kinsmen might further fracture the leadership, where loyalties were preeminently personal. This placed greater pressure on him to validate his father's choice of successor and prove that his youth might be turned to an asset. The audacity of his martial agenda in the coming decade may well spring from insecurities about suitability to lead. The heir to Jin power, without the benefit of a political honeymoon at home, had to hold his vigilance against the enemy within even as he advanced against rivals without.

Maternities

Physical and Cultural Markings

The standard historical sources reveal little of Cunxu's physical traits, nor do they contain references to the exceptional markers that have long fascinated fortunetellers, like his father's asymmetrical eyes. But contemporaries describe certain Shatuo men as having "deep eyes and whiskers," traits common among the Uighurs of present-day Xinjiang, with their lithe bodies and light complexion.⁷⁵ Clearly, intermarriage between the Shatuo and the Han peoples over generations likely produced a people neither distinctively Chinese nor Turkish, in the end.

The official portrait of Zhuangzong as a man of forty, in Taiwan's National Palace Museum, reveals a tall and stout physique, a well-groomed beard of resilient black, plus broad cheeks and prominent nose—his features handsome in the sense of being easy on the eye, but far from strapping (Plate 5). And remarkably, Cunxu's skin appears free from the usual scars of war, despite two decades on the battlefield and innumerable close encounters with the enemy.⁷⁶ As for non-physical qualities, the *Historical Records* describes the future emperor as highly charismatic, "a man endowed with an

74. JWDS 50.68587; XWDS 14.149–50; HR pp. 139–40; ZZTJ 266.8689–91; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 163–69.

75. XWDS 43.467; HR p. 363.

76. Guoli Gugong bowuyuan, *Gugong tuxiang xuancui*, Figure 16.

extraordinary physical as well as personal presence.⁷⁷ Seductive qualities of the sort are never attributed to his father.

Born and raised at Jinyang, Cunxu's mannerisms surely suited the tastes of China's northwest as well. He presumably spoke the Shanxi local dialect, the tongue of his mother with its lilting consonants.⁷⁸ But the influx of the Shatuo into northern and central Hedong over the course of the past century would have begun working its cultural influence on the region.⁷⁹ Hunting, horsemanship, and other athletic activities would have reinserted themselves into local customs while the cuisine came to contain more bread, mutton, and milk products like yogurt and cheese. Relaxation surely involved vigorous dancing to the accompaniment of song, plus regular binges in wine and gambling, activities where people intermingled with casual indifference to Chinese practices of segregation based on class and gender. Lifestyles and values of the sort were rooted in the nomadic north, although the upper classes across North China had also assimilated them in Sui and Tang times.⁸⁰ The boundaries between Han and Hu had been blurred many centuries before Cunxu's birth.

Stepmother Liu

For his entire life, and especially after his father's death, Cunxu could draw upon two strong maternal influences, his father's formal wife and his own biological mother. Woman Liu (d. 925), Keyong's lifelong spouse, was without male issue, according to her husband's tomb inscription, whereas Consort Cao gave birth to four males, including Cunxu.⁸¹ The two women were presumably Chinese in ancestry, but the meaning of "Chinese" may have differed from today, as the two surnames had been widely adopted by nomadic families for centuries.⁸² And it appears that marriage occurred in both directions, with a growing number of Jinyang's elite families electing to marry the newcomers to create a multicultural mix. The most prominent case involved Meng Zhixiang, the future founder of the Later Shu, who took the niece of Keyong as his wife.⁸³

Historically, interracial marriage often coincided with periods of minority rule, the means by which illustrious Han families insulated their social standing from the winds of political change; for precisely this reason, intermarriage usually came *after* the consolidation of dynastic power. The Later Tang experience in the early tenth century

77. JWDS 27.365.

78. XWDS 37.398; HR p. 310.

79. *Xu Tang shu*, 1.6.

80. Benn, *China's Golden Age*, pp. 149–75 ff.

81. Sekigen Seiyū, "Tōmi Shata Ri Koyō Riyō Boshi Yukuchū Kōsatsu," Plate 7; XWDS 14.141–42, 150; HR pp. 130–31.

82. Deng, "Lun Wudai Songchu," pp. 57–64.

83. Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 39, 75, 125, 166–68, 175–76, 180.

differs by a considerable measure, inasmuch as the bonds between Shatuo ethnics and the Hedong elite were forged in the preceding century, at least two generations before their political power peaked. Such cross-fertilization of cultures so early on in the regime's ascent goes far to explain the independent spirit and political savvy of the leading women in Keyong's life, women who molded their son in a multiplicity of ways.⁸⁴

Sources are silent on the social background of Woman Liu, but they do confirm ancestral origins in Daibei, the early Shatuo base in northern Shanxi, where the Liu surname had long been adopted by Inner Asian settlers, including the future founder of the Later Han, Liu Zhiyuan (895–948).⁸⁵ Multiracial roots goes far to explain Woman Liu's martial competencies. She became a regular presence in combat during Keyong's ascent, where she advised him on a combination of military and political matters in the manner of a younger contemporary, the Lady Shulü, spouse of the Kitan leader Abaoji.⁸⁶ Woman Liu even coached women in the Jin household in archery and horseback riding, activities that harken back to the seventh century, when a daughter of the Tang founder once commanded a brigade composed mostly of men.⁸⁷ Royal women had a long history of serving in support missions of the sort in Inner Asia and to a lesser extent the Chinese heartland, although the practice most likely originated abroad.

Sources further reveal nerves of steel for Woman Liu as military advisor to her husband. On the heels of the banquet in 884 where Keyong suddenly disappeared, several aides had managed to escape and return to Jinyang to apprise her of events. Having deemed their flight an act of cowardice, "Woman Liu evinced not the faintest emotion as she summarily beheaded the cowardly men, then summoned senior officers for consultations."⁸⁸ Hers was a chilling statement on martial discipline consistent with the exacting standards of her husband, not an act of intemperance.

Keyong returned a day later, smarting over the ambush and intent on retaliating against Zhu Wen. But his wife, diffusing the passions of the moment, calmly dissuaded him: "If you act preemptively in resorting to arms, then the Tang court will surely ascribe culpability to us."⁸⁹ In effect, political solutions through Changan should be exhausted to fully discredit the enemy before prosecuting a vendetta that risked alienating neutral parties. Woman Liu evinced special sensitivity to the wider ramifications of armed conflict and placed her kingdom's interests in the long-term before the self-aggrandizing impulses of her husband in the short. Such political savvy suggests the life experiences of an educated, if not necessarily elite woman.

84. XWDS 64.797; HR p. 521.

85. XWDS 14.141; Deng, "Lun Wudai Songchu," pp. 57–64.

86. Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 50; LS, 71.1199–1200.

87. Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, p. 24.

88. JWDS 25.339; XWDS 14.141; ZZTJ 255.8307.

89. *Beimeng suoyan*, 17.322.

Keyong's wife exhibited a similar pugnacity on another occasion, in 902, as the capital of Jinyang came under siege by Liang forces. The assault had come on the heels of serious territorial losses, which had shaken her husband to the point that he contemplated flight to the northern frontier. A foster son of Uighur extraction, Li Cunxin, further endorsed the evacuation. Woman Liu first impugned the competence of Cunxin, "a stupid shepherd with no standing to counsel on critical matters of strategy," then pressured Keyong to stand firm. "Our troops have mostly absconded after the recent spate of setbacks," she noted glibly. "Who will follow, if you lose this city? Even reaching the northern border is no certainty!"⁹⁰ Her reasoning eventually convinced other officers, including the savvy Li Sizhao, who enjoined Keyong to persevere. Keyong's new determination ultimately inspired warriors who had once abandoned him to rejoin his ranks, the rally of a unified Jinyang forcing invaders to retreat. In this way, Woman Liu came to rival Ge Yu as one of the most influential advisors to the senior Prince of Jin, especially in his initial decade in power.

Woman Liu on occasion revealed a compassionate side in family affairs that diverged appreciably from her harsh public persona. The battle-hardened foster son, Li Cunxiao, after colluding with the enemy in 894, was soon compelled by the turn of events to reverse course.⁹¹ He approached Keyong about reconciliation and Keyong, in turn, dispatched his wife to console Cunxiao. Woman Liu was also present through the fiery exchange between the two men, where Cunxiao cited a laundry list of excuses for the betrayal, including the maligning of another foster son. Despite skepticism about motivations for the defection, Keyong and Woman Liu initially preferred to set aside the dictates of martial law by pardoning Cunxiao, but they faced a wall of resistance among senior commanders and only then conceded to imposing the death sentence. The sense of loss left Keyong, "unable to conduct affairs for over ten days," raw emotions surely shared by his wife, in light of her empathy with Cunxiao from the outset. Reflecting the couple's special affinity for the foster son, they insisted on burying Cunxiao in a mausoleum near the father's future burial place, a tomb in northern Shanxi that has survived to this day (Plate 4).

Sources divulge little of Cunxu's feelings for his stepmother as a young man. The heralded friendship between the two leading women in his father's life, Woman Liu and Consort Cao, likely helped to contain the worst of open conflict, but tensions are hard to avoid. As a rule in traditional China, the offspring of concubines often bear some resentment toward the legal wife, due to ambiguities about social obligations in life and ritual obligations in death—filial duties that form the foundation of personal morality.⁹² In addition, the superior pedigree of the legal wife and her dominance of

90. XWDS 4.38, 14.142, 36.386; HR pp. 37–38, 131, 299; XTS 218.6165; *Beimeng suoyan*, 17.323; Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 185.

91. XWDS 36.393; HR p. 305.

92. For comments on the complex ritual obligations for adopted children, see XWDS 17.187–88; HR pp. 174–75.

the “main household” usually positioned lesser women and their offspring for frictions with her. But in this particular case, Woman Liu’s early regard for Cunxu as an “esteemed son” and his mother as her “bosom friend” infer at least proper relations during the father’s lifetime.⁹³ Any change would come later, after Cunxu’s accession as emperor.

Mother Cao

Extant sources are far more revealing about Cunxu’s relationship with his biological mother, Consort Cao (d. 925), a Jinyang native. The eldest of her four surviving sons, Cunxu was likely her favorite, younger son Li Cunwo running a close second.⁹⁴ She was the sole person able to surpass his father in influence, partly by outliving Keyong by nearly two decades and partly by force of personality. Although born to a “commoner household” (*liangjiazi*)—a family of neither aristocrats nor military professionals—she somehow managed to acquire the spirited independence that appealed to Keyong, a man likely a decade older than her.⁹⁵ Sources do not divulge the circumstances by which Keyong came to acquire her as consort, but perhaps her family contained friends of the Prince who pitied him as a man approaching thirty with a barren wife and no potential heirs.

Consort Cao came to counsel Keyong in the fashion of his formal wife, her “soberly worded admonitions” sparing the lives of many male associates to cross her spouse during moments of foul temper. She was equally “deft at deliberating matters,” that is, a woman of sound reasoning, according to the dynastic histories.⁹⁶ Another source, Keyong’s tomb inscription, characterizes Woman Cao as, “pure and wise,” suggesting moral girth and a strong sense of self.⁹⁷ She came to acquire such qualities by virtue of hard work, as well as sound instincts. Cunxu inherited the impulsiveness of his father, which required the heightened vigilance of his mother.⁹⁸

The affections shared by mother and son was the stuff of legends. Even though his base of operations shifted to Weizhou after 915, Cunxu still visited Jinyang several times a year, his stays commonly exceeding a month and sometimes several months. Subjects near and far marveled at the genuineness of his filial devotion, especially for a man with his own consorts and children. The passionate Cunxu would fancy many in life, but like Alexander the Great, he loved no one like his mother by birth, which

93. XWDS 14.142; HR p. 131.

94. XWDS 14.150–51; HR pp. 140–41; WDHY 1.19.

95. JWDS 49.671.

96. XWDS 14.142; HR p. 131; JWDS 49.671–72.

97. Sekigen Seiyū, “Tōmi Shata Ri Koyō Riyō Boshi Yukuchū Kōsatsu,” Plate 8.

98. XWDS 14.142; HR p. 131; JWDS 72.950; CFYG 27.277–78.

probably produced ambivalence toward any rival for his affections, including his stepmother, Woman Liu.⁹⁹

The depth of their attachment, and ease with which they acknowledged it, emerges in an exchange in 911, after Cunxu consented to intervene at the Zhao satrapy at the behest of its potentate, a historic move for the Shatuo regime. Consort Cao had opposed his command of armies mostly due to the separation of mother and son, the perils of combat relegated to secondary status in her pleas to the twenty-seven-year-old:

As age takes its toll, I would be satisfied with the simple retention of the kingdom bequeathed by the Former Prince. Nothing else can justify your exposure to the elements and our inability to meet for our daily greetings at dusk and dawn!

Her words reveal separation pangs for the moment as well as anxieties that higher ambitions were certain to produce separations of greater distance and duration in the future. She would gladly trade the promise of future glory for the pleasure of companionship today, which by her own admission, involved visits at least twice a day. Cunxu would respond by invoking the memory of his father, “The Last Will and Testament of the Former Prince commands me to eradicate an old rival, while conditions east of the mountains are too opportune to ignore.”¹⁰⁰ After failing to change his mind, Mother Cao insisted on accompanying Cunxu as he set off for the eastern front. At the same time, this deeply sentimental woman could be severe in chastising Cunxu, especially once her husband died and responsibilities of the sort fell solely upon her shoulders.

Cunxu could do little at Jinyang that missed her alert ears, and Mother Cao never ceased to worry over the self-indulgent side of her son, which threatened to undermine the family’s carefully crafted image. Just as his entourage swelled as prince, so did Cunxu’s fondness for gambling. Sometime around 917, after indulging with friends, he pressed fiscal overseer Zhang Chengye to replenish the pot by tapping into the local treasury. “Our kingdom’s public funds cannot be put to personal use,” the eunuch insisted. An unseemly confrontation ensued as the Prince, either drunk or offended by the eunuch’s language, drew his sword in a threatening manner. Chengye crafted an astute response, his tenor shifting from defiant to sober as he diffused tensions by stirring feelings of filial guilt: “When the dying prince, [Keyong], entrusted you to my care, I swore an oath to avenge the wrong against our royal house and principality. Should I die today because My Prince desires things from the treasury, at least I will bring no shame to the Former Prince.”¹⁰¹ And true to principle, he released nothing else.

Mother Cao instantly learned of her son’s confrontation with Chengye and summoned him for a verbal thrashing followed by flogging with a light rod. She also

99. On the parallels with Alexander the Great, see footnote 70.

100. JWDS 49.672.

101. XWDS 38.404; HR p. 317; JWDS 72.950.

dispatched an aide to apologize to the eunuch, referring to Cunxu, then in his thirties, as “the boy.”¹⁰² Petrified at the prospect of displeasing his mother, Cunxu had apologized to Chengye a day earlier, a gesture that the eunuch initially spurned. And he proceeded to Chengye’s residence in the company of Mother Cao to render a second apology in as many days, again at her insistence.¹⁰³ The mother’s diligent monitoring lends evidence to a reckless streak in Cunxu familiar to intimates, a tendency to test boundaries, especially for authority figures. The fact that he endured the thrashing without the slightest diminution of affection for Mother Cao suggests that corporal punishment of the sort was not unexpected of her, despite the son’s advanced age. The prolonged adolescence of Cunxu and the delayed weaning of his mother may also help to explain the juvenile outbursts that continued well into middle age, including Cunxu’s years as Son of Heaven. It may also help to explain his proclivity to bend to the will of his wife in marriage. Cunxu has all the markings of a henpecked husband.

Lady Chen

Keyong had another consort, and Cunxu another stepmother, in the person of Lady Chen. Native to south central China, the city of Xiangzhou, she was once a ranking consort of a Tang emperor, who in a special act of favor conferred her upon Keyong in 895 along with four female palace singers.¹⁰⁴ She was surely an attractive woman by dint of credentials as imperial consort, while origin in the heartland infers Chinese ancestry. She appears to have been a decade younger than Consort Cao and two decades younger than Woman Liu. Keyong and Consort Chen came to share such intimacy that she was the only female companion afforded access to him during a bout of depression on the heels of a precipitous dip in fortunes. And in the last days of Keyong’s life, she alone was permitted to administer his medicine.

Consort Chen had no known children and left the royal household upon Keyong’s death to become a Buddhist nun.¹⁰⁵ Sources divulge little about the Consort’s relations with Woman Liu, formal wife and head of the household, but her bonds with Mother Cao and Cunxu proved deep and abiding. Soon after his accession as Prince of Jin in 908, Cunxu honored Consort Chen with a religious title in recognition of her devotion to Buddhism. And in 924, upon relocating the capital to Luoyang, he conferred another title upon Woman Chen and arranged her relocation to a nearby nunnery to facilitate access to Mother Cao, a sign of continued amity between these two former consorts of Keyong.

102. XWDS, 38.404; ZZTJ 270.8820.

103. XWDS 38.404; HR pp. 317–18; JWDS 72.951–52; CFYG 660.7683.

104. JWDS 49.673–74.

105. Sekigen Seiyū, “Tōmi Shata Ri Koyō Riyō Boshi Yukuchū Kōsatsu,” Plate 8.

Interestingly, the several leading women in Keyong's life, surviving him by nearly two decades, never lost their affections for him nor their affinity for one another. However powerful his passion for feminine beauty, diminished only slightly by the passage of time, Keyong clearly possessed exceptional personal qualities that compensated for the roving eye.¹⁰⁶ By all indications, each woman provided a different kind of companionship at different stages in his life, the three as dissimilar from one another as they differed from him. Sources portray neither Woman Liu nor Consort Cao as physically beautiful, a sign that Keyong placed other considerations before beauty in choosing spouses, factors ranging from intellect and integrity to martial competence. His son, to the contrary, tended to be drawn to the superficial in not just female companions, but male friends.

Empress Liu

The fourth woman to assume prominence in Cunxu's life, eclipsing the others in time, was his second wife, Consort Liu (891?–926). The senior Prince of Jin, Keyong, had been in combat to the east at Weizhou, probably in 896, when he came upon the Chinese girl, granddaughter of a fortuneteller and medicine man, and brought her back to Jinyang to be reared in his household at six *sui*.¹⁰⁷ For the next decade, she served Mother Cao as maid, someone never intended to rise higher.

By fifteen *sui*, the girl with the coif of a maiden instantly impressed Cunxu, then just over twenty and without a son. He must have come across the girl through visits to his mother's residence, but he now saw Consort Liu for the first time as an object of desire. A shared affinity for song and dance served to further solidify their bond. She quickly gave birth to a boy, Jiji, her sole son to reach adulthood. Further advancement for her thus came to rest upon his survival and success. A second source of insecurity for the Consort relates to the other women in Cunxu's harem, several of whom continued to enjoy favor. Her position in the palace never secure, Consort Liu acquired emotional scars that shaped a radically different personality from the previous generation of female companions, women with decades of exposure to public life.

Cunxu had taken a formal wife sometime in his mid-teens, Lady Han, the offspring of a distinguished clan from Jinyang, the sort of pedigree lacking in his father's spouses.¹⁰⁸ She was the woman selected by his parents as partner, so their relations were conventionally proper but not particularly passionate, based on Cunxu's numerous extramarital dalliances and the absence of children for the couple. For companionship, he turned initially to Woman Hou, the former wife of a vanquished Liang officer. Like

106. On the romantic impulses of Keyong, see *Xu Tang shu*, 35.323.

107. XWDS 14.143–46; HR pp. 132–37; JWDS 49.674; *Beimeng suoyan*, 17.332–33; *Xu Tang shu*, 35.324–27, 37.342.

108. XWDS 14.143, 14.146–47; HR pp. 132, 136–37; JWDS 92.1223.

the previous generation of royal women, Woman Hou regularly attended Cunxu in battle, her intelligence about the enemy as a former Liang subject likely a major asset. Sometime around 915, as Cunxu turned thirty, Woman Hou found herself replaced on the front lines by Woman Liu, who by then possessed martial skills of her own.¹⁰⁹ For a former maid distinguished as a teenager for her sensual gifts, the acquisition of martial competencies in her twenties must have entailed conscious effort. Still, retaining the devotion of her spouse and overcoming the reservations of the powerful remained ongoing challenges before this daughter of a fortuneteller could rise to empress.

Inner Circle

Among the unrelated members of Cunxu's inner circle, several figures emerged as pillars of the administration: Zhang Chengye (845–922), acclaimed eunuch at the Jinyang palace, Guo Chongtao (d. 926), the cocky military commissioner, and Li Siyuan (867–933), his father's most revered adopted son. Chengye dominated decision-making at Jinyang during Cunxu's reign as prince, while Chongtao presided over affairs after his accession as emperor. Siyuan's relationship with Cunxu was the most enduring, having spanned his entire life as comrade-in-arms, but it also proved the most troubled. The three men were important assets bequeathed by Keyong, individuals with a strong ethical core and independent spirit that promised to contain the worst impulses in his imperfect son.

Eunuch Zhang

Unlike the stereotype of eunuchs as reflected in the dynastic histories for Han and Tang times, Zhang Chengye personified the opposite as a man of scrupulous ethics and political vision. His original surname, Kang, was popular among Inner Asians at the time, but nothing in the background of Chengye suggests unorthodox ethnic roots. The surname Zhang was conferred upon entering the palace, presumably through adoption by the senior eunuch. Born near the western capital of Changan, he came to know Keyong as court-appointed coordinator for bandit suppression, in the early-to-mid 890s, and later as military inspector on assignment at Jinyang.

Chengye conducted secret negotiations between the Tang emperor and the Prince of Jin at different times, then remained at the Jin capital after 904, when the court exterminated seven hundred eunuchs in Changan at the instigation of Zhu Wen, the future Liang emperor. Imperial mandates to governors across the country to conduct similar liquidations in the locales were ignored by Keyong, who extended sanctuary

109. XWDS 14.143; HR pp. 132–33.

to Chengye instead.¹¹⁰ The near-death experience left Chengye deeply indebted to Keyong in life and devoted to his memory in death. It also caused him to be decisive, even aggressive, in neutralizing potential threats either to himself or his Shatuo patrons, a surprising trait for a castrate raised amidst the palatial comforts of Changan. He exceeded expectations in other regards as well.

As chief administrator for the Jinyang palace, Chengye emerged as its daily manager as well as senior strategist. He neutralized challengers to Cunxu's succession as prince in 908, as shown in Chapter 2, by rallying sympathizers across the domain, including key foster brothers.¹¹¹ Chengye thereby quickly cemented his political relationship with the young prince. Cunxu liked to acknowledge Chengye as Qige, "Seventh Brother," implying an affinity akin to siblings.¹¹² Still, Chengye shunned the role conventionally associated with eunuchs as spoiling nanny.¹¹³ Someone senior to Cunxu by forty years, he evolved instead into the principal male authority after the father's passing, or perhaps more accurately, a surrogate uncle.

Chengye and Mother Cao were kindred spirits, individuals with shared experiences and similar values. Emanating from this cooperative spirit was a royal principality better run than most dynasties of the era: efficient and incorruptible. "Chengye consistently applied the rule of law to rein in everyone at Jinyang . . . the rich and powerful all recoiling their hands in response to his intimidating presence."¹¹⁴ By demanding sacrifice of ruler and subject alike, the eunuch engineered the miracle of turning a small kingdom with few resources and many enemies into a powerhouse for the entire north in the short span of a generation.

Chengye's proven loyalty to the Jin royal house made him the principal check on Cunxu, after his mother. In the confrontation cited earlier over monies to wager, the eunuch assumes the moral high ground by resisting pressure from Cunxu: "As eunuch commissioner of long standing, Your Subject acts not on behalf of my own posterity. Rather, I treasure the money, quite simply, because it will advance Your Highness's mission of world dominance." He goes on to reiterate the solemn promise made at the deathbed of Cunxu's father, "to avenge the wrong against the Jin royal family and the kingdom behind it."¹¹⁵ Here, filial duty resonates with the young prince where civic duty does not, which Chengye exploits with maximum effect. In navigating the headstrong characters of father and son, no figure at Jinyang could rival Chengye, a feat attributable to his unassailable ethics.

110. XWDS 1.8, 38.403–04; HR pp. 11, 316–19; *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3*, p. 780; JWDS 26.351, 72.949–53; ZZTJ 266.8675–76; CFYG 660.7683, 668.7698.

111. JWDS 27.367–68.

112. ZZTJ 270.8820.

113. Ma, *Shiren, huangdi, huanguan*, pp. 146–56.

114. XWDS 38.404; HR p. 317.

115. XWDS 38.404; HR p. 317; CFYG 668.7701.

Chengye possessed credentials in both the civil and military worlds. He could also boast credentials in fiscal management, important duties assumed by eunuchs in the last century of Tang rule.¹¹⁶ His service as military inspector provided entry into military affairs in the broadest sense, from commanding armies to managing operations. He figured prominently in procuring horses for a region with limited supplies, a key factor in the Jin kingdom's final victory.¹¹⁷ As the regime's chief civilian administrator, Chengye recruited talent at a time of unique need at home and rising opportunity abroad. Feng Dao had drifted to Jinyang in 911, having served as a minor aide at the rapidly dissolving Yan kingdom.¹¹⁸ His exceptional literary skills and engaging personality so impressed Chengye that he offered a prominent post, despite objections from colleagues concerned about his limited experience and peasant mannerisms. Decades later, Dao's spectacular achievements in the political realm would validate the intuition of his earliest patron, the chief eunuch of Jinyang.¹¹⁹

The independent spirit of Chengye extended to military affairs. Personal experience at organizing and leading armies had sensitized him to the ruler's need to avoid micro-managing commanders in the field, the natural tendency in difficult times. To the contrary, he reasoned, tenuous conditions should present precisely the occasion to convey confidence through continuity in leadership and policy. During a major offensive against Liang positions at Baixiang in 911, to cite one example, Cunxu, just three years into his reign as prince, had censured senior commander Zhou Dewei for excessive dallying in deploying his men. Equating caution with cravenness, he demanded immediate action. The eunuch calmly interceded to commend Dewei's exemplary record, while citing the negative consequences of overruling one's own surrogates. Dewei did eventually take action once conditions turned favorable, his rout of the enemy validating the foresight of Chengye.¹²⁰ The value of Dewei to the Jin would surge in coming years, a man likely lost much sooner had Cunxu ignored the eunuch's council.

The Strategic Genius of Guo Chongtao

After the death of Chengye in 922, his successor as Cunxu's alter ego was the equally brash and independent Guo Chongtao.¹²¹ He was native to Daizhou, northern Shanxi, where the Shatuo had become a sizable presence in the course of his lifetime.¹²² He worked initially for a brother of Keyong in various advisory capacities, and when

116. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 600–601; Ma, *Shiren, huangdi, huangguan*, pp. 275–80.

117. CFYG 668.7698.

118. JWDS 72.950; XWDS 25.260–61, 54.612; HR p. 439; ZZTJ 268.8747.

119. JWDS 72.950; *Wudai shibua*, pp. 45–47; Wang, "Feng Tao: An Essay on Confucian Loyalty," pp. 123–45; Lu, "Lun Feng Dao de shengya," pp. 287–330.

120. JWDS 27.371, 56.751–53, 72.950; CFYG 688.7701.

121. XWDS 24.245–51; HR pp. 212–19; Wang, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 109–15; JWDS 57.762–72; CFYG 331.3734–35, 406.4604.

122. XWDS 24.245–51; HR pp. 212–19.

the brother died in 890, entered Keyong's service for nearly two decades. By 917, then likely in his fifties, he became senior military advisor to Cunxu through the recommendation of outgoing advisor Meng Zhixiang. By then, Chongtao's service to Jin satraps had spanned much of his lifetime.¹²³ At princely domains, the purview of the senior military advisor (*zhongmenshi*) extended from military affairs to finances and policy, much like military commissioners under the Later Tang. Cunxu had a reputation for managing his senior staff with a heavy hand, causing several of Chongtao's predecessors to be executed for abuses of power or poor judgment.¹²⁴ Despite the well-known perils of service, Chongtao refused to be deterred.

Only occasionally did Chongtao lead armies, but he possessed a veritable sixth-sense when it came to exploiting changing conditions and fleeting opportunities to accomplish the grandest of feats, his intuition surpassing the best of field commanders. Despite limited literacy, he held the literature on warfare at his fingertips. Chongtao also had the courage of his convictions, so in the summer of 923, he concocted a seemingly suicidal scheme to flush out enemy commander Wang Yanzhang at Yunzhou, then personally volunteered to lead the advance guard. As fate would have it, the scenario unfolded with the requisite speed and decisiveness that enabled Chongtao to prevail.¹²⁵ In his willingness to embrace high risk for dramatic gain, Chongtao differed demonstrably from the conservative Zhang Chengye, his predecessor. Strong yet informed convictions also explain Chongtao's stubborn rejection of compromise in war, audacity well suited to the adventurous Prince of Jin.

Chongtao's historic moment came in the late summer of 923, after a newly converted Liang commander divulged plans for a blitzkrieg against the Jin. Most officers preferred to relinquish the single Jin holding south of the Yellow River to buttress defenses in the north. Chongtao countered that the act of retreat would surely demoralize troops and trigger other negative repercussions. Instead, he advocated ingeniously aggression for aggression, "Your Majesty should divide armies to defend Weizhou, fortify Yangliu, then deploy forces from Yunzhou to expel the enemy from their nests, thereby delivering the world to us in less than a month!"¹²⁶ His words instantly buoyed the despondent Cunxu, "The deed of a true man," he declared in embracing the plan to attack the Liang capital. The venture permitted the Prince of Jin to cast himself in the image of the iconic Tang Taizong, who defied skeptics centuries earlier in proposing a high-stakes raid on the Sui capital, which ultimately toppled the dynasty.¹²⁷ Similarly for the Later Tang, the final thrust against the enemy would proceed at a breakneck pace, precisely as Chongtao had predicted.

123. XWDS 64.797; HR p. 521.

124. XWDS 24.245, 64.797; HR pp. 212, 521.

125. XWDS 24.246; HR p. 213; JWDS 57.763–64.

126. XWDS 24.246–47; HR pp. 213–14; JWDS 57.765.

127. Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, p. 22.

The relationship between Chongtao and Cunxu was never wholly free of tensions, but ongoing war provided a cohesive that weakened under conditions of peace. The Prince of Jin was always something of an authoritarian, proclivities that seem to have worsened as emperor, the similarities between the two men making for a difficult collaboration.¹²⁸ As military commissioner at the Tongguang court, Chongtao managed affairs with a firm hand but sound policies. He expected circumspection of everyone and lambasted the slightest excess. Much like the eunuch Zhang Chengye, he countenanced little in the way of needless spending for any sector of government, scrutiny that extended to the palace. Chongtao's counsel on governance after the 923 accession would prove as astute as his strategic council beforehand. He proved especially eloquent on decisions reached in moments of passion.

The legendary tempers of the Princes of Jin, Keyong and Cunxu, caused Ouyang Xiu to conclude in the *Historical Records*, "Barbarians are by nature intemperate and their benevolence lacks clarity, often causing courtiers of the day to lose their lives without legitimate cause."¹²⁹ His views seem to mirror the prejudices of many a contemporary as pertains to the nomadic character: the poor temperaments of Shatuo leaders reflected differences in their natural constitution, rather than expressions of culture, environment, or personality. Chongtao knew better as a native of the northern borderlands and could thereby challenge Jin princes without offending them. There was no better choice as court overseer for that critical first reign of the Later Tang, when an ethnically diverse inner circle remained vulnerable to conflicts of every sort. Meanwhile, Cunxu deserves credit for retaining the services of Chongtao through years of bitter differences. His affinity for the senior aide never rose to the level of his father's fondness for Ge Yu, but Cunxu and Chongtao found common ground in grand ambitions for the dynasty.

Adopted Brother Li Siyuan

No man would shadow Cunxu throughout his adult life like adopted brother Li Siyuan, known originally by the name Miaojielie.¹³⁰ His biological father, Ni, hailed from Yanmen, northern Shanxi, had risen to chieftain under Keyong due to his special gifts as horseman and archer. Siyuan inherited his father's warrior skills, while honing his own instincts as strategist. His ethnicity was long presumed to be Shatuo. In reality, the dynastic histories simply identify him as a "northern barbarian" (*yidi*), a term often used for non-Shatuo northerners, so he may well have been a member of a lesser known ethnic group.¹³¹

128. ZZTJ 270.8843.

129. XWDS 6.66–67; HR pp. 63–64.

130. XWDS 6.53–67; HR pp. 51–64. For my biography of Siyuan, see *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*.

131. A recent biographer of Li Keyong argues that Siyuan was not necessarily a Shatuo ethnic, noting that the official histories merely identify him as a "northern barbarian"; see Fan, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, p. 80. In my

It was Keyong's father, Guochang, who initially mentored Siyuan at thirteen *sui*, after the death of his father, but it was Keyong who adopted him as son and conferred a new name containing the generational identifier "Si," consistent with the naming pattern for foster sons. The teenager appears to have lived in the royal compound at Jinyang, allowing close bonds to be formed with members of the royal family, as this outsider became an assimilated Shatuo. Keyong had no biological sons when Siyuan arrived at Jinyang and tended to shower the bulk of his paternal affections upon a growing brood of surrogate sons. Siyuan was the supernova within this cluster of martial stars.

He was widely heralded for leading elite cavalry in "stampedes of fury" that accomplished near miracles in combat. In the course of military actions at Xingzhou and Mingzhou, for example, arrows had punctured his body in four places, yet Siyuan still finished by forcing the enemy into ignominious flight despite serious injury. Such dedication caused Keyong, "to use his own garment to serve as dressing for the younger man's wounds."¹³² Later in life, Siyuan would reminisce on the rare degree of acceptance within his adopted family, and especially bonds with Keyong's father, Guochang, whom he likened to a father.¹³³ Validation of those affections required martial exploits of escalating difficulty long after Keyong's death, each feat of Siyuan a challenge for Cunxu, the son of privilege. Cunxu was unaccustomed to being eclipsed by others, in light of his own legendary exploits, except in the case of Siyuan. Ultimately, the competition between the two men was keen because their martial gifts were similarly stellar.

In a battle near Zhaozhou, in 911, the Liang dynasty had arrayed its crack cavalry on red and white horses. Cunxu intimated his own anxiety at the sight of the horses, in a moment of rare modesty, only for Siyuan to respond with an air of self-assurance that bordered on condescension, "They are a mere mirage, horses that will revert to our corrals by tomorrow!"¹³⁴ It was no bluff, for Siyuan in an instant leaped onto a horse to charge Liang horsemen, apprehending two attending officers before returning. In time, the most critical missions came his way, starting with the campaign against the Yan kingdom in the northeast in 913, which involved standing down its powerful ally to the north, the Kitan. Siyuan was also architect of the drive on Kaifeng in 923, in consultation with Guo Chongtao.¹³⁵ Whether pitted against foreign or domestic foes, he seemed invincible and served, along with Chongtao, as the vision behind the throne. The final conquest of North China was unthinkable without the guidance of Chongtao and Siyuan. And fittingly, its retention would prove impossible in their absence.

biography of Mingzong, I have assumed Shatuo ethnicity, consistent with centuries of historical consensus, but I can offer little direct evidence; see Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 1–31.

132. XWDS 6.53; HR pp. 51–52.

133. JWDS 35.491.

134. XWDS 6.53–54; HR p. 52.

135. Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 37–38.

At the same time, competition between Cunxu and Siyuan would produce frictions that punctuated much of their political lives, reducing the pair of martial geniuses to petty acrimony and Machiavellian intrigue. Historians have conventionally attributed the problem to the superiority of Siyuan and the jealousy of Cunxu as a lesser man. A sharp eye for talent had caused Siyuan to recruit the scrappiest fighters for his own armies, making them nearly invincible. In battle against the Yan satrapy in 913, Siyuan captured a militia leader of imposing valor, Yuan Xingqin, and cemented bonds by adopting him as foster son. Cunxu soon learned of the man's abilities and arranged a transfer to his own army while conferring another name.¹³⁶

The contest over Yuan Xingqin, a short five years into Cunxu's reign as prince, became an early sign of competition with Siyuan over human resources, the Prince seeming to target the older man's armies for the greatest siphoning of talent. Anxious to deflate suspicions apparent even to the rank-and-file, Gao Xingzhou, a deputy of Siyuan, would remind Cunxu sometime around 915, "It is solely in the service of Your Highness that we cultivate a cohort of stalwart soldiers."¹³⁷ The reassurance helped little, and Cunxu began expanding his own cohort of foster sons, after shunning the practice during his initial years as prince. Competition with Siyuan was surely the leading factor in this change of heart.

Tensions surfaced again in late 923, at a banquet for decorated Liang commanders on the heels of victory over the dynasty. The dead emperor's hall for formal audience, the Chongyuan Palace, had been selected as venue, a stage that automatically placed the assemblage of high-profile deserters on edge. In the course of the banquet, Cunxu mused in a toast to the men, his eyes fixed provocatively on Siyuan, "My most intimidating foes of yesterday joining us in drink today—*who but you could have done so?*" Those final words horrified the commanders, who sensed a combination of jealousy toward the brother and mistrust toward them. Virtually everyone fell flat on the floor in obeisance, only for Cunxu's numinous tone to turn suddenly jocular, "I am merely poking fun at my chief officer, Siyuan. Your fears are hardly necessary!"¹³⁸ The levity of Cunxu had fallen flat for everyone, although the even-tempered Siyuan stood erect throughout the episode. Moreover, the passage suggests that a dangerous rivalry had evolved whose repercussions might well extend to men even marginally associated with some perceived rival, a net that extended well beyond Siyuan's immediate circle. It did not take long before differences between the adopted brothers became grist for rumormongers and soothsayers.

136. XWDS 25.270; HR p. 227; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, p. 35.

137. ZZTJ 269.8794.

138. XWDS 46.505; HR p. 386; JWDS 30.412, 30.417; CFYG 111.1207; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, p. 25. For a slightly different version, see JWDS 64.852.

Sometime before 922, a fortuneteller renowned for reading faces, Zhou Xuanbao, was invited by an aide to Siyuan to identify him in a test of the man's talents.¹³⁹ After deftly distinguishing Siyuan from an imposter, he proceeded to characterize him as "a commander of precious promise" (*guijiang*). It was widely known that the phrase, "man of precious promise" (*guiren*), had been employed by a fortuneteller centuries earlier with reference to Taizong of Tang on the eve of purging his own father.¹⁴⁰ Siyuan tried to recruit Xuanbao for his staff, relenting only under pressure from aides more sensitive to appearances. Gossip about imperial ambitions somehow rose to high places all the same. After acceding as emperor, Cunxu insisted on planting informants in the entourage of his adopted brother for purposes of spying, his actions serving to further poison relations instead.¹⁴¹

A marginally literate Siyuan knew less of Chinese history relative to Cunxu, yet he needed no classical education to have learned of the "Xuanwu Gate Affair," at the outset of the Tang. In 626, nine years into the dynasty, founder Li Yuan (Gaozu, r. 618–26) was purged by second son Li Shimin (Taizong, r. 626–49) in the wake of ongoing tensions between Shimin and Li Jiancheng, Shimin's eldest brother and the designated heir to the throne.¹⁴² In a classic instance of sibling rivalry, the heir-apparent brooded endlessly over the martial feats of the second son, especially a string of victories against the Tujue-Turks. The brothers initially tried to outmaneuver one another over financial resources and palace networks, and later mobilized assassins and armies. In the end, the highly appealing Shimin murdered the son of privilege, Jiancheng, and then compelled Li Yuan to abdicate, the father finishing his days under house arrest. The act of fratricide, and the wider purge of palace enemies in its wake, might well have unraveled the young dynasty. Yet miraculously, Taizong rose to the challenge. Motivated by the need to legitimize the house of Tang, he became a model of conscientious rule for centuries to come, the Zhenguan reign synonymous with dynastic splendor.

Such recent history was certain to leave Tang restorationists in the tenth century anxious to a fault. Cunxu was programmed for paranoia toward closest kin, a group that constituted a bulwark of support for the throne under most dynasties, while Siyuan was reduced to defensiveness about his aspirations. Would he become the Shimin of his day, the anointed hand by which history repeated itself? Movement forward involved a fixed eye on the past. Sadly, the weight of Tang history effectively doomed any long-term collaboration between the illustrious co-founders of the Later Tang, Cunxu and Siyuan.

139. XWDS 48.309; HR pp. 234–35; JWDS 71.945–46; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 25–26.

140. JTS 2.21; XWDS 28.309.

141. XWDS 38.408, 51.573; HR pp. 321, 411.

142. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 182–89; Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, pp. 62–83; ZZTJ 191.6004–14; XTS 79.3540–45.

The Lord of Nanping

For the short-term, historical memory as pertains to high Tang did not humble so much as embolden the men and women in Cunxu's inner circle. Despite differences in profession, race, and temperament, they were zealous in faith in the potential of their sovereign to surpass nomadic conquerors of the past in uniting the Four Corners. This partly explains the decision in 925 to invade Shu, modern Sichuan, so soon after consolidating control over the Central Plains. Even the illustrious leaders of the Tuoba Wei (Tabgach), who preceded the Shatuo in occupying the Chinese heartland from bases in Shanxi, could hardly have imagined conquering that vast and resource rich region to the southwest. The elevated passes of the Qinling Mountains along Shu's northern border presented the first hurdle to horse-bound conquerors, a tradition of local autonomy presented a second hurdle, and the high humidity of the summer presented a third. Such obstacles of history and nature entailed wholly different challenges relative to conquering the fairly level Central Plains. The official histories attribute the timing to external factors like the advice of diplomats recently returned from the region.¹⁴³ But Cunxu's sense of mission also fueled his ambitions.

The overlord of Nanping, a small kingdom in central China, Gao Jixing, appeared at the Tongguang court in the eleventh month of 923, intent on discerning fact from fiction, separating Cunxu the legend from the man. The two men exchanged confidences during the long audience, where the emperor divulged his determination to pacify belligerent states to the south. He then solicited input from Jixing on which belligerent, Wu to the east and Shu to the west, to target for the first of several offensives and the best approach for his armies. The conversation had occurred scarcely one month after overtaking Kaifeng and Jixing surely found talk of another major mobilization highly premature, although he chose to humor the throne. Later reflections on the audience are invaluable as a mirror on Zhuangzong's extraordinary personal traits, a combination of magnetic allure and appalling narcissism.

The comments of the Nanping governor about the Son of Heaven appear disparaging at first glance:

His Majesty is given to bombast in the presence of senior courtiers, writing passages from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and commenting, "On the tips of these fingers I managed to conquer the world!" He boasts and brags in this way, wasting time on hunting jaunts as affairs of state commonly get cast aside. I see little in him to cause worry.¹⁴⁴

Despite his negativism, Jixing bears unintended witness to the monarch's disarming charisma. He had been patted on the back as their meeting drew to a close, an act

143. XWDS 63.792–93; HR pp. 516–17.

144. XWDS 69.856–57; HR p. 587; JWDS 133.1752; SGCQ, 100.1433; ZZTJ 272.8910.

so humbling that Jixing directed craftsmen back home to embroider a likeness of the handprint on his robe as a permanent memento. For a man almost twice the age of Zhuangzong, the response of Jixing to a clap on the back reflects the sort of seductive charm that had won converts in the past. But, with the seduction over, how long would the marriage last?

5

The Hand of History

Subjects treated as their ruler's hands and feet will deem him a friend;
Subjects treated as their ruler's horses and hounds will deem him a stranger;
But people for long oppressed by their sovereign will reckon him a foe.

The Mencius, Book IV, Part B

Within hours of the Tongguang emperor's death, his Luoyang palaces were ransacked by Zhu Shouyin, who had held back the metropolitan police despite multiple summons from the palace. The policeman staked personal claim to over thirty harem ladies in addition to objects that included a priceless cache of musical instruments.¹ He even allowed soldiers and other marauders to plunder the capital for a full day before inviting the forces of adopted brother Li Siyuan to restore order. Any undue delay by the caretaker government ran the risk of inviting intervention from powerful adversaries to the south like Chu and Wu, each with standing armies of up to eighty thousand, or the Kitan to the north, whose military machine was even more formidable. Neighbors of every stripe were on constant alert to any vacuum in the Central Plains that they might exploit for strategic gain.

Sources portray Siyuan, a man given to a fairly free expression of emotion, as “overcome with irrepressible grief” upon learning of the former emperor's demise. He had departed for the west in advance of the mutiny and accelerated his progress in its wake, reaching Luoyang on the third day of the fourth month (926.04.03), two days after the monarch expired.² And in a tone of neutrality, Siyuan directed the metropolitan police, “to secure the capital in anticipation of the impending return of Jiji, the Prince of Wei.”³ For now, the country had no emperor, and Siyuan, sensitive to appearances, chose to lodge at his private residence in the capital, not imperial palaces. Zhuangzong still had sons and younger siblings at large, by one account eleven, a handful of determined eunuchs overseeing key armies, and clusters of dedicated officials in the Hedong

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1. XWDS 51.574; HR p. 411; JWDS 74.971; ZZTJ 275.8975.
 2. JWDS 35.490, 91.1196; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 49–50.
 3. ZZTJ 275.8976.

homeland.⁴ There were many possible outcomes to this scenario, only one of which involved the older man's accession as Son of Heaven.

Zhuangzong's eldest son, Li Jiji, had learned of his death some days after the event, as he approached the western suburbs of Changan. Someone with remarkably good instincts for his years, he clearly envisioned potential hazards to his person and expressed a preference to return to Sichuan, thereby placing him beyond the reach of conspirators backing his uncle. Jiji might well have created an independent satrapy in that case, like Liu Bei in the third century, who installed a fledgling successor regime to the Han dynasty in the southwest in opposition to the Wei dynasty in the north.⁵ But the eunuch Li Congxi, companion throughout the Shu campaign, invoked the familiar idiom that, "advance is always better than retreat," and pressed Jiji to accelerate progress toward Luoyang in the hope of resolving the political crisis in person. Congxi likely also deduced that suppression armies were homesick after an absence spanning a half-year. Early movement back to the Shu border suggests that Jiji initially acted on his own impulses for nearly a week, only to resume movement eastward by the middle of the fourth month, as aides advised. The same eunuch had shaped the decision months earlier to slay Guo Chongtao at Chengdu, defying Jiji's own reservations and creating the current backlash.⁶ He was likely homesick as well.

The well-being of his mother was likely the determining factor in Jiji's calculus to return to the capital. Empress Liu had fled Luoyang for Jinyang after her husband's death.⁷ Mother and son must have been uncommonly close, having spent little time apart since his birth, the spanking episode cited earlier hardly representative of their broader relationship. Empress Liu's deeds, including high-profile missteps, were always done in the perceived interests of her first-born. Escorts for her trip of roughly five days to Jinyang included hundreds of bodyguards, plus Cunwo, the deceased emperor's youngest sibling. Partly for her own safety, the Empress rushed to a nunnery upon reaching Jinyang, her horse bearing treasures from the Middle Palace, perhaps to induce reluctant hosts to extend sanctuary. The practice of a dying ruler's consorts retiring to nunneries had been well established by Tang times, as reflected in the retirement of Wu Zetian after the death of Taizong. More recently at Jinyang, Consort Chen similarly entered a monastery upon the death of Li Keyong. In addition, the extraordinary religious piety of Empress Liu over the course of her two-year reign made retirement as nun wholly fitting.

Roughly coinciding with Empress Liu's arrival at Jinyang, on the ninth day of the fourth month (926.04.09), a directive of some symbolism emanated from Luoyang in the name of the "interim overseer" (*jianguo*), Siyuan's informal title, and the equivalent

4. *Xu Tang shu* 37.344.

5. XWDS 14.154; HR p. 144; ZZTJ 60.2159; 275.8977, 8981.

6. XWDS 14.153–54; HR p. 143.

7. XWDS 14.146, 151; HR p. 136, 141; ZZTJ 275.8979; *Xu Tang shu* 35.326.

of regent. It instructed officials near and far to arrange safe passage to the capital for the biological brothers of Zhuangzong.⁸ “The principle of a surviving brother succeeding the deceased presents no problem for me,” Siyuan subsequently declared. The statement infers a preference for fraternal succession and recognition that the former emperor’s brothers were preferable to Jiji, in light of his youth.⁹ The search for survivors and related statements implied a commitment to continuity in the succession by retaining the line of Keyong. Four younger siblings of Cunxu were either still alive or believed to be alive when the directive was issued, although not for long.

A string of slayings ensued in coming days, some perhaps by serendipity, but others reflecting a conspiracy at the highest levels to eliminate all potential heirs to Zhuangzong, contravening the principles articulated by Siyuan in letter and spirit. Two biological brothers, Cunji and Cunque, who lived in Luoyang for most of the reign, had absconded for the southwest immediately after the coup headed for the nearby Southern Mountains, where commoners offered refuge.¹⁰ Neither man had been involved in political crimes of any note, yet they fell to assassins sometime during the fourth month. Notably, Cunji shared the same biological mother as Cunxu, Mother Cao, which made him an ideal candidate for fraternal succession. Most accounts attribute the slayings to An Chonghui, the senior military advisor, who used Siyuan’s preoccupation with mourning rites to issue “secret orders” without consulting him. Siyuan learned of the murders only after the fact, sources say.¹¹ To be sure, such independence of action is consistent with the subsequent political style of Chonghui, “who already exerted a firm grip on government affairs,” by every indication.¹² Yet irrespective of the degree of Siyuan’s personal involvement in the affair, the deaths reflected a conspiracy emanating from his inner circle for which he must bear ultimate responsibility.

The two remaining brothers of the Tongguang emperor with the same mother would perish by the middle of the fourth month under questionable circumstances. Here, complicity on the part of the new authorities at Luoyang is possible, but not provable. Cunba, governor of the strategic Hezhong command at the time of the coup, was slain by the armies of Fu Yanchao, as he progressed toward Jinyang, presumably by sympathizers of Siyuan’s interim government. He had reached the city without the usual security. An almost identical fate befell youngest brother Cunwo, murdered west of Jinyang by mutinous soldiers for unspecified reasons.¹³ Perhaps the two men were caught in the crossfire of retribution against their unpopular brother. More importantly, the armies of Cunba surely contained some Hezhong locals who empathized with Zhu Youqian, for Cunba had assumed powers at Hezhong immediately after

8. XWDS 14.152; HR p. 141; JWDS 35.491; ZZTJ 275.8978–80, 275.8982–83.

9. JWDS 35.491.

10. XWDS 14.152; HR pp. 141–42; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 51–52.

11. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.332; *Xu Tang shu* 40.365.

12. JWDS 66.873.

13. XWDS 14.151–52; HR p. 141; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.332; ZZTJ 275.8979.

Youqian's execution in the capital. But the speedy convergence of so many politically symbolic slayings cannot be sheer coincidence.

No source disputes the Interim regent's complicity in the assassination of Empress Liu, who perished by the middle of the fourth month of 926, apparently without her son's knowledge.¹⁴ Contemporaries charged her with "fornicating" with brother-in-law Cunwo during their hurried flight to Jinyang, a dubious allegation. As the youngest royal sibling, Cunwo always enjoyed special access to the women of the palace. At the outset of the reign, Zhuangzong chose him to escort Mother Cao to the capital, and a year later tapped him once again to escort Consort Dowager Liu to the capital, a trip cancelled due to her death. The assignments reflect Cunwo's unique standing in the royal palace of Jinyang and subsequently the imperial inner circle at Luoyang, including that of his sister-in-law during her reign as empress.

Empress Liu was also maligned for displaying cruel indifference to her husband in his dying hours: she allegedly summoned eunuchs to provide final sustenance to the wounded Zhuangzong, then absconded for the north before he had fully expired, highly improper conduct for the mother of the empire.¹⁵ Ultimately, the moral charges against Empress Liu stuck due to her appalling political record, but poor judgment did not rise to a capital offense and her enemies wanted blood. Meanwhile, the elimination of Empress Liu simplified movement against the most vulnerable targets. The four known younger sons of the deceased emperor vanished without evidence of culpability, the time and place of their deaths a mystery as well.¹⁶ In this way, potential heirs biologically linked to Zhuangzong had perished within weeks of his death, save for one.

In the middle of the fourth month of 926, coinciding with his mother's death in the north, Jiji led a contingent of civil and military aides numbering in the thousands toward a river crossing near Changan, the western capital. It was the final leg of the Shu campaign and considerable riches still remained under their control.¹⁷ Members of the entourage knew the path to contain local leaders with ill intent, but they proceeded through Changan all the same. As they passed through the city's eastern suburbs, the hereditary custodian Zhang Jian severed a suspension bridge to separate Jiji from the bulk of his companions. He coursed the river eastward for some days with the eunuch Congxi, bodyguard Li Huan, and senior officer Mao Zhang. Desperation now compelled Jiji to seek a merciful end, as he pleaded with Huan: "Having exhausted all conceivable paths, I beseech you to take my life." The bodyguard initially demurred, then relented under additional pressure. Jiji died by strangulation on the fourteenth day of the fourth month (926.04.14) at Weinan, a site over fifty kilometers east of Changan,

14. XWDS 14.146; HR p. 136; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.333; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, p. 52.

15. XWDS 14.146, 37.402; HR pp. 136, 314.

16. XWDS 6.62, 14.155; HR pp. 59, 145.

17. XWDS 14.154–55, 47.522; HR pp. 59, 144–45, 394–95; JWDS 73.959, 90.1183; *Song shi* 255.8910–11; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 53–55.

nearly far enough to elude the local menace. Huan similarly committed suicide out of fidelity to his prince. Miraculously, commander Mao Zhang not only survived, he made it safely to the capital.¹⁸

Historians find puzzling the motivation of Zhang Jian, who in the process of obstructing returning armies from Shu changed the course of dynastic history. In the words of Ouyang Xiu, “Whether Jiji lived or died had no impact, positive or negative, upon Zhang Jian. Why did Jian offer the resistance that prevented Jiji from proceeding eastward? Did others perhaps *facilitate* Jian’s interception?”¹⁹ Jian’s elder brother, Zhang Yun, did serve under Guo Chongtao during the Shu campaign, so the younger sibling may have retaliated for Jiji’s slaying of Chongtao, assuming that Yun, like many senior officers, held the military commissioner in high regard. Political motivation for the Zhang brothers is further inferred by the allusion to potential “facilitators” in the *Historical Records*, words that cast a suspicious eye on the interim government of Siyuan. Within days of overtaking Luoyang, An Chonghui had been installed as military commissioner and he in turn rushed to appoint trusted lieutenants to prefectures as far west as Huazhou, close enough to Changan to exert sway over the city’s leadership.²⁰

Rather than some complex interplay of local intrigue and external pressure, it was likely baser instincts that motivated the Changan warlords to act against the imperial prince. Zhang Jian’s brother, Zhang Yun, had once committed the sacrilege of plundering the Tang imperial palaces in the heel of the dynasty’s demise, carting off a trove of jade and gold objects. He also gained control over the wealth seized from the Tang imperial tombs in suburban Changan. Yet he miraculously evaded prosecution due to a repete for charity at home in the “Robin Hood” tradition, donating much of his property to the poor. Officials of the western capital could engage in such larceny due to the city’s proximity to the passes of Shu, through which rich merchants and court emissaries passed on a regular basis.²¹ Zhang Jian lacked the redeeming qualities of the brother. “A man given to heavy drink, avarice, and rustic ways,” he frittered away local wealth like so much water. Based on the well-known depravity of the younger sibling, the vast booty seized initially from the deposed potentate of Shu and later the retinue of Jiji must have been sufficiently alluring, the political repercussions of his actions far beyond Jian’s ability to fathom.

The war in Sichuan, a victory in the short term, proved an albatross for Later Tang dynasts over the long haul. Contention over the spoils of war had turned imperial kinsmen into targets of opportunity. By early summer 926, survivors of the royal

18. ZZTJ 275.8981–83.

19. XWDS 47.522; HR p. 395.

20. ZZTJ 275.8980–82.

21. XWDS 47.522; HR p. 394; JWDS 36.498, 90.1182–83.

family were few, with men especially hard hit. The sole male sibling to survive the deceased emperor, stepbrother Cunmei, suffered from a debilitating illness in youth and died as an invalid at Jinyang.²² Rumors were rife that another stepbrother, Cunli, had absconded for the Min kingdom in coastal Fujian—reports lacking serious corroboration.²³ Similarly incredulous are reports of a young imperial son given sanctuary in a remote corner of Sichuan.²⁴ As for the monarch's fictive brothers and sons, many reverted to their original names, severing the last residual bond to him.²⁵

Imperial women tended to fare better. Consort Han, Cunxu's first wife, and the favored Consort Yi, were allowed to be reunited with surviving relatives at Jinyang.²⁶ The fate of an earlier consort of favor, Woman Hou, remains unknown. A woman of more recent favor, Lady Xia, would become a consort years later to the Kitan prince Tuyu, the eldest son of Abaoji, who defected to the Middle Kingdom after losing his inheritance in 930. He assumed a new identity as Li Zanhua and evolved into an aficionado of Chinese culture, but the Kitan proved sadistically abusive and Lady Xia ended her years in a nunnery. Hundreds of lesser consorts were similarly returned to their families as well.²⁷ No purges are reported for the daughters and sisters of the Tongguang emperor. A daughter married to prefect Song Tinghao remained alive a decade after his passing.²⁸ The sole daughter-in-law of record, Woman Wang, the recently betrothed wife of Jiji and daughter of the Dingzhou governor, most likely perished with her husband near Changan. Jiji had been sterilized by a childhood illness, so the couple had no offspring.²⁹

Both dynastic histories portray Siyuan as disinterested in becoming emperor, understandably, in light of criticisms three years earlier of a premature rush to accession by Zhuangzong, who formalized powers a half-year before capturing the Liang capital. For roughly two weeks, Siyuan brushed aside petitions from civil and military officials to formalize powers as monarch, professing resolve to eventually resume duties as Zhenzhou governor.³⁰ However, official historians allude to an agreement reached with courtiers early in the fourth month to act on their petitions in due course. The delay permitted further clarification of conditions out west and especially the status of Jiji.

On the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month (926.04.26), the civil overseer for the Shu expedition, Ren Huan, reached Luoyang with twenty thousand residuals, formally

22. XWDS 14.150–51, 152; HR pp. 140, 142; JWDS 51.690; *Xu Tang shu* 37.341.

23. XWDS 14.152; HR p. 142; *Wudai shiji zuanwu bu* 2.23.

24. *Qing yi lu* 4.360.

25. XWDS 33.357–58; HR p. 275.

26. XWDS 14.146; HR pp. 136–37; ZZTJ 275.8976.

27. ZZTJ 275.8983; *Song shi* 255.8914; XWDS 14.146; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 110–11, 156, 160–61.

28. *Song shi* 255.8905.

29. XWDS 14.154; HR p. 145.

30. JWDS 35.490; Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 45.

concluding the Shu campaign. Siyuan reportedly “extended the visit to console him, then inquired of the fate of the former prince.” Huan had parted with the youth mere days before his suicide, so he provided a full accounting of his death.³¹ The story implies that Siyuan remained uninformed of the details surrounding his nephew’s demise, which in turn infers little direct involvement in events out west, or more likely, an effort to project ignorance for purposes of historical repute.

Another reason for Siyuan’s circumspection as pertains to personal ambitions was concern about potential loyalists away from the capital. On the twelfth day of the fourth month (926.04.12), a fiery exchange is recorded with Yuan Xingqin, the lieutenant who cut his own queue in affirmation of fealty to the deceased emperor. Xingqin had assassinated Siyuan’s eldest son, Li Congjing, in retaliation for the father’s mutiny at Weizhou, ignoring direct instructions from the throne to spare the youth.³² He must have been near Luoyang when Zhuangzong perished, as he initially assisted Empress Liu in fleeing to the north, then headed east in the direction of Shandong.

A journey of several hundred kilometers ended in Xingqin’s capture by a recluse in the countryside. The local prefect later lopped off his feet before spiriting him off to the capital in a cage.³³ “How did my son betray you?” a raging Siyuan asked during his interrogation of Xingqin, a man raised originally by him as foster son. The response of the lieutenant was rhetorical as well, one that highlighted the higher treachery of the Interim regent: “And what caused you to betray the Former Monarch?”³⁴ Xingqin’s beheading at the marketplace drew throngs of tearful spectators, men and women impressed by his ethical backbone, even though his abilities as commander were middling at best.

A serious hotspot for the interim government in the first half of the fourth month of 926 was the Shatuo base at Jinyang, where a man of impeccable integrity presided as custodian: Zhang Xian. Best remembered for lambasting the conversion of Zhuangzong’s accession altar at Weizhou into a polo field, he had been under consideration for chief councilor after the dispatch of Guo Chongtao to Sichuan toward the end of 925. The posting at Jinyang is widely attributed to eunuchs and actors, who resented Xian’s stiff monitoring of court affairs. Yet his presence at Jinyang assumed critical import for the dynasty, for the prefecture became the center of the last showdown between renegades and loyalists of the Tongguang reign.

The family of Zhang Xian was residing at Weizhou when mutineers led by Zhao Zaili seized control of the city, in the third month of 926, and incarcerated his dependents. The rebels dispatched a messenger to Jinyang to coerce Xian to join the rising anti-government tide. He summarily murdered the messenger instead, then

31. XWDS 14.154–55; HR p. 145; JWDS 67.895, Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 54–55.

32. XWDS 25.272; HR pp. 228–29; ZZTJ 275.8980; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 35, 42–50, 56–57.

33. JWDS 70.927.

34. XWDS 25.272; HR p. 229.

forwarded the letter unopened to Luoyang.³⁵ If the letter reached Zhuangzong, it would have been mere days before his death, but the demise of the Son of Heaven did not diminish Xian's devotion to the principle of loyal service in the abstract.

Imperial brother Cunba reached Jinyang on the fifth day of the fourth month (926.04.05), where aides urged Zhang Xian to imprison the brother as a goodwill gesture toward Siyuan's interim government. Placing personal ethics before political expediency, Xian demurred: "I began as a bookworm devoid of military distinction, then happened upon the extraordinary beneficence of Our Sovereign. To exploit events and compromise loyal principle is simply beyond me!"³⁶ Aides further beseeched Xian to join the swell of petitioners urging Siyuan to accede the throne, pressures resisted by him with similar resolve.³⁷ Based on most accounts, the military elite at Jinyang forced Xian to expel Cunba on the day after his arrival, then mutinied upon rumors of eunuchs colluding with Zhuangzong loyalists to turn the city into a base of resistance against the interim government.³⁸ In the chaos, Xian fled for the northeast, only to be apprehended weeks later and forced to commit suicide. The Jinyang crisis ended with Xian's demise.

Back in Luoyang, political housekeeping proceeded at a furious pace. A sweeping purge of eunuchs ensued, a purge that extended from the capital to regional hotspots like Jinyang, focusing initially on individuals guilty of political crimes. The slaying of over seventy eunuchs at administrative offices at Jinyang in the fifth month "would leave the courtyard covered in blood."³⁹ Uprooting an unpopular legacy of the era, Siyuan also managed to eliminate a potential source of resistance to him, much like the Liang founder two decades earlier.⁴⁰

The Tongguang emperor's close friend, Zhang Quanyi, died of natural causes mere weeks before him.⁴¹ He had endorsed Siyuan's deployment at Weizhou and lived long enough to witness his coup against the government, which no doubt heightened the anxieties of his final days. A succession of executions would be mandated in the coming year for unpopular leftovers from the Tongguang reign, including the actor Guo Congqian, who had masterminded defections in the armed forces and metropolitan police.⁴² His actions worked to the benefit of Siyuan in the short-term, but in the long run, he had come to symbolize dereliction of duty, something no responsible government could condone. The interim government soon invoked assorted "misjudg-

35. XWDS 28.313; HR pp. 237–38; JWDS 69.913–14; ZZTJ 275.8977–78, 8983; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 52–53.

36. XWDS 28.313; HR p. 238; JWDS 69.914.

37. *Song shi* 263.9086; ZZTJ 275.8977.

38. JWDS 69.913–14; XWDS 25.265; ZZTJ 275.8977–78; *Xu Tang shu* 40.365.

39. XWDS 38.408; HR p. 322.

40. XWDS 38.408; HR p. 322; JWDS 72.954; ZZTJ 275.8983, 8985; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, p. 55.

41. JWDS 63.843; ZZTJ 274.8968.

42. JWDS 38.520; ZZTJ 275.9002.

ments” to dismiss Doulu Ge, the most blatantly inept of the former emperor’s chief councilors, along with Duan Ning, the turncoat commander given to abusing official powers.⁴³ The purge in the capital extended to the imperial kitchens, where the staff was slashed to fifty, an action suggesting previous excess.⁴⁴ Clearly, the Tongguang emperor’s refined tastes extended to food.

Conscious of public image and anxious for closure, the interim government was quick to extend measured deference for the dead monarch. His charred remains were retrieved, coffined, then afforded a proper wake, the nearly sixty-year-old Siyuan sobbing as he knelt before the coffin to pay his respects to the younger man.⁴⁵ Final burial with full imperial honors ensued three months later in the western suburbs of Luoyang, the Yongling Mausoleum, a few kilometers north of his mother’s crypt: Zhuangzong would share the afterlife with Mother Cao after all, but in isolation from their extended family, as envisioned in the preceding autumn when she was laid to rest. The ancients traditionally preferred the seventh month to inter the Son of Heaven, so the burial’s timing symbolized another act of compassion for the dead.⁴⁶ Siyuan accompanied the funeral cortege as far as the gates of Luoyang, following the precedent of Taizong for his own brother three centuries earlier. He parted with early Tang precedent, however, in forgoing travel to the mausoleum site, where the two chief councilors for the reign, Doulu Ge and Wei Yue, presided over ceremonies, their last official duties.⁴⁷

Through such acts of measured deference, Siyuan avoided alienating sympathizers of the dead sovereign, deflecting some of the raw emotion generated by the dynasty’s enigmatic founding father. He would preside over the next chapter, a far more productive era, it turns out, having acceded the throne as Emperor Mingzong on the twentieth day of the fourth month (926.04.20).⁴⁸ Ironically, the accession of Taizong to the former Tang throne had occurred in 626, exactly three hundred years earlier. History did repeat itself, in part due to the paranoia of the actors involved.

43. XWDS 28.302–3, 45.498; HR p. 232, 383; JWDS 67.884.

44. JWDS 36.495. On the size of kitchen staff in early Tang, see Benn, *China’s Golden Age*, p. 132.

45. ZZTJ 275.8983.

46. ZZTJ 196.6167.

47. JWDS 36.502; ZZTJ 275.8990; Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, pp. 88–90; Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 49, 60.

48. Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares*, pp. 58–60.

Chronology of Events in the Life of Li Cunxu¹

885

10.22 Born at Jinyang (present-day Taiyuan) to Woman Cao and Li Keyong, then governor of Hedong (present-day Shanxi)

887, three *sui*

Third month: Father expands into Zezhou (present-day Danchuan, Shanxi)

888, four *sui*

Third month: Zhaozong succeeds as Tang emperor

889, five *sui*

Fifth month: Joins father in battle at Sanchui Ridge, Luzhou

890, six *sui*

First month: Father overtakes Xingzhou (present-day Xingtai, Hebei) after prolonged siege

891, seven *sui*

Fourth month: Father blockades Yunzhou (present-day Dadong, Shanxi), which ends successfully in the following year; Father relocates permanently from Daibei to Jinyang

Tenth month: Father launches offensive against Wang Rong, Prince of Zhao

892, eight *sui*

Third month: Father suffers rout by Zhao armies

1. Chronology based on “Basic Annals” of the *Old History of the Five Dynasties*, supplemented by *Zizhi tongjian* in the case of discrepancies. Information on Li Keyong based on Fan Wenli, *Li Keyong pingzhuan*, pp. 215–27.

893, nine sui

Fourth month: Father suffers defeat at the hand of Yan overlord Liu Rengong

894, ten sui

Third month: Father regains control of Xingzhou

Sixth month: Father defeats Tuyuhun at Yunzhou, killing Helianduo and regaining control over Daibei

Twelfth month: Father occupies Youzhou (present-day Beijing) after raids against neighboring cities to its south

895, eleven sui

Sixth month: Father leads armies through the passes in response to aggression against the Tang court by Li Maozhen and allies

Seventh month: Emperor Zhaozong flees his capital

Eighth month: Cunxu receives praise from Emperor Zhaozong at Changan

Imperial Consort Chen is bestowed upon his father

Eleventh month: investiture of his father to Prince of Jin

896, twelve sui

Intercalary first month: Wei/Bo governor Luo Hongxin attacks mercenary Jin armies backing Zhu Xuan

Fourth month: Father retaliates against Luo Hongxin at Wei/Bo, which causes Zhu Wen of Liang to intervene on behalf of Hongxin

Sixth month: Elder brother Luoluo dies in battle at Huanshui

897, thirteen sui

Eighth month: Father fails in retaliatory action against Yan governor Liu Rengong

898, fourteen sui

Fifth month: Father loses the prefectures of Xing, Ming, and Ci on the heels of offensive by Zhu Wen

899, fifteen sui

Eighth month: Father acquires Luzhou after contest with Li Hanzhi, who enjoyed the backing of Zhu Wen

901, seventeen sui

Third month: Zhu Wen of Liang leads offensive against Jin, including a siege of its capital at Jinyang, which fails after two months

902, eighteen *sui*

Third month: Zhu Wen undertakes massive campaign against Hedong; renews siege of Jinyang, which lasts only seven days

903, nineteen *sui*

Eighth month: Emperor Zhaozong perishes at the hands of Zhu Wen; Aidi succeeds the Tang throne

905, twenty-one *sui*

Shatuo enter fraternal alliance with Kitan

906, twenty-two *sui*

Tenth month: Father occupies Luzhou

907, twenty-three *sui*

Fourth month: Zhu Wen purges Tang emperor to establish Liang dynasty with capital at Kaifeng; Kitan armies attack Yunzhou, prompting father to enter alliance, which the Kitan later betray; Liu Rengong purged at Yan

Sixth month: Heightened conflict with Liang over Zezhou and Luzhou

Tenth month: Father's illness causes uncle to preside over Jin kingdom

908, twenty-four *sui*

First month: Father Keyong dies at 53 *sui*; Cunxu succeeds him as Prince of Jin

Second month: Uncle Kening is executed for treachery

Fourth month: Zhou Dewei reaches Jinyang

Fifth month: Launches offensives against Luzhou and Zezhou

Seventh month: Allies with Qi in offensive against Jinzhou

Eleventh month: Short intervention at Yan

909, twenty-five *sui*

First month: Liang shifts capital to Luoyang

Sixth month: The Prince of Jin rejects alliance with Yan

Seventh month: Raid on Xiazhou

Eighth month: Unsuccessful assault against Jinzhou (present-day Linfen)

910, twenty-six *sui*

Seventh month: Unsuccessful assault against Hexi in alliance with Qi and Bin

Eleventh month: Intervention at Zhao led by Zhou Dewei

Twelfth month: Cunxu joins Zhao relief, assisted by Zhang Chengye and Li Siyuan

911, twenty-seven sui

First and second months: Major rout of Liang armies at Zhao

Second month: Personal leadership of intervention at Weizhou, which ends in failure; meets Wang Rong at Zhao en route to Jinyang

Seventh month: Meets Wang Rong at Chengtian; promises daughter in marriage to Wang Rong's younger son, Zhaohui

Twelfth month: Yan ruler Liu Shouguang assaults Dingzhou; dispatch Li Siyuan and Zhou Dewei to lead retaliation against Youzhou (present-day Beijing)

912, twenty-eight sui

Second month: Zaoqiang falls to Liang armies

Sixth month: Liang ruler, Zhu Wen, assassinated by son, Zhu Yougui, who accedes as emperor

Eighth month: Liang intervention at Hezhong prompts Zhu Youqian to seek relief from Jinyang

Tenth month: Prince of Jin meets Zhu Youqian at Hezhong, beginning a strategic alliance

913, twenty-nine sui

Second month: Zhu Yougui is murdered, as the Liang throne passes to Zhu Youzhen (Modi)

Seventh month: Prince of Jin meets Wang Rong at Tianchang

Eleventh month: Prince of Jin joins battle against Yan and secures surrender of Liu Shouguang

Twelfth month: Prince of Jin confers with Wang Rong at Xingtang

914, thirty sui

First month: Executes Yan rulers Liu Rengong and Liu Shouguang; visits Wang Rong and Zhenzhou; elevated to *Shangshuling*

Seventh month: Conferral with Wang Rong and Zhou Dewei at Zhao

Seventh to eight months: After unsuccessful raid against Xing and Ming prefectures, the Jin withdraws armies

915, thirty-one sui

Fifth month: Armies overtake Weizhou after local mutiny

Sixth month: Weizhou and Dezhou (Tianxiong command) surrender to Jin

Seventh month: The Jin briefly occupies Chanzhou (present-day Puyang); the Liang attempts raid on Jin capital, Jinyang, without success

Eighth month: Assault on Beizhou begins

Tenth month: Liang spies attempt to poison Cunxu at Weizhou

916, thirty-two sui

- Second month: Liang attempts an unsuccessful raid against Weizhou; second raid against Jinyang by the Liang
Third month: Dispatches Li Siyuan to Yuancheng, Weizhou due to Liang aggression
Fifth month: Cunxu visits family at Jinyang
Seventh month: Cunxu returns to Weizhou
Eighth month: The Prince conquers Xingzhou (present-day Xingtai, Hebei); dispatches Li Siyuan to thwart Kitan armies at Weizhou (present-day Linqiu, Shanxi)
Ninth month: The Jin conquers Cangzhou and Beizhou (Tiangxiong command), slaying thousands of surrendering men

917, thirty-three sui

- Second month: Li Siyuan and Zhou Dewei succeed in repulsing Kitan armies at Youzhou and Xinzhou (present-day Zhuolu, Hebei)
Eighth month: Li Siyuan routs Kitan armies at Youzhou
Tenth month: Cunxu visits Jinyang
Eleventh month: Cunxu returns to Weizhou
Twelfth month: Cunxu leads armies at Yangliu (present-day Donga, Shandong)

918, thirty-four sui

- First month: Rallies armies at Yunzhou and Puzhou (western Shandong)
Second to sixth months: A succession of raids against Yangliu
Eighth month: Summons armies to Weizhou
Eleventh month: Rescue by Li Cunshen near Yunzhou
Twelfth month: Offensive against Puzhou; senior commander Zhou Dewei perishes in battle

919, thirty-five sui

- Third month: Assumes nominal powers as governor of Youzhou; installs Guo Chongtao as deputy palace gate commissioner (*Chongmenshi*); relocates Meng Zhixiang to Jinyang to serve as inspector-in-chief of the armed forces (*duyuhou*)
Fourth month: Responds to emergency at Desheng
Seventh month: Cunxu visits Jinyang
Tenth month: Returns to Weizhou for offensive in the area
Twelfth month: Rout of Liang armies at Henan

920, thirty-six sui

- Eighth month: Comes to the rescue of Zhu Youqian at Hezhong
Ninth month: Defeats Liang commander Liu Xun at Hezhong

921, thirty-seven *sui*

Second month: Wang Rong dies amidst mutiny at Zhao

Eighth month: Shi Jiantang is dispatched to Zhao, slaying the mutineer Zhang Wenli

Tenth month: Jin routs Liang armies at Desheng; Wang Chuzhi at Dingzhou is sup-
planted by adopted son Wang Du, who enters alliance with the Kitan

Eleventh month: Cunxu leads armies at Zhenzhou

Twelfth month: Kitan intervene at Dingzhou; Cunxu leads retaliation

922, thirty-eight *sui*

First month: Defeats Kitan armies at Xincheng; falls into Kitan ambush at Wangdu
(Dingzhou), then rescued by Li Sizhao

Second month: Reaches Desheng five days after departing Youzhou

Ninth month: Zhenzhou returns to Jin control after half-year of tumult

Eleventh month: Eunuch advisor Zhang Chengye dies

923, thirty-nine *sui*, inaugural year of Tongguang

Third month: Li Jitao of Luzhou defects to the Liang

Fourth month

04.25 Cunxu accedes the throne as Later Tang emperor at Weizhou and adopts reign
name Tongguang; names Doulu Ge and Lu Cheng as chief councilors

Intercalary fourth month: Li Siyuan dispatched to Yunzhou

Sixth month: Defection of Liang commander Kang Yanxiao

Sixth to eighth months: Leads soldiers in defending Yangliu

Seventh month: Dismisses Lu Cheng as chief councilor

Eighth month: The Liang replaces commander Wang Yanzhang with Duan Ning

Ninth month: Offensive against Kaifeng adopted

Tenth month

10.01 Returns family to Weizhou

10.09 Liang Emperor Mo dies after the fall of Kaifeng

10.10 Later Tang armies occupy Kaifeng, elevating it to capital; Zhang Quanyi of
Luoyang surrenders to Later Tang and pays visit to emperor

10.29 Entertains Li Siyuan and other commanders at Chongyuan Palace

Eleventh month: Li Maozhen of Qi surrenders to Later Tang; rebel Li Jitao comes to
capital and receives pardon; elevation of Wei Yue and Zhao Guangyin to chief
councilors

Twelfth month

12.01 Relocates capital to Luoyang

924, forty *sui*, second year of Tongguang

First month

01.22 Welcomes Mother Cao to Luoyang

Second month

02.01 Conducts sacrifices in Southern Suburbs

02.15 Announces elevation of Consort Liu as Empress

Third month: Li Siyuan dispatched to Xingzhou in response to Kitan raid

Fourth month

04.11 Empress Liu receives formal installation

Luzhou commander Yang Li rebels

Fifth month: Li Siyuan regains Luzhou

Sixth month: Siyuan named Xuanwu (Kaifeng) governor; Lady Han invested as Pure Concubine and Empress Yi as Virtuous Concubine

Eighth month: Natural calamities at Caozhou, Shanzhou, Songzhou and Yunzhou

Ninth month: Kitan launch raid against Youzhou

Tenth month: Flooding at Kaifeng and Yunzhou; another Kitan raid against Youzhou

Eleventh month: Hunt at Yique

Twelfth month: Li Siyuan named governor of Kaifeng

925, forty-one *sui*, third year of Tongguang

First month: Kitan incursion at Youzhou results in dispatch of Li Siyuan

01.02 Celebrates mother's birthday in Luoyang

01.07 Departs for Weizhou

Second month: Razing of altar of accession at Weizhou; Li Siyuan reassigned to Zhenzhou

Third month: Return to Luoyang, now renamed the Eastern Capital

Fourth month: Oversees civil service examination

Fifth month

05.06 Consort-Dowager Liu dies at Jinyang

Seventh month

07.11 Empress Dowager Cao dies at Luoyang; natural disasters at Huazhou, Luoyang, Kaifeng, and Xuzhou

Eighth month: Confrontation with Luoyang county official Luo Guan

Ninth month

09.10 Declaration of war against Shu

Tenth month

10.29 Buries mother at Shou'an county, Luoyang

Earthquakes at Xuzhou and Weizhou

Eleventh month

11.28 Later Tang armies capture Chengdu

Twelfth month: Nomination of Meng Zhixiang as governor of Western Chuan; hunt at Baisha

Intercalary twelfth month

12*.01 banquet for Meng Zhixiang in Luoyang

926, forty-two *sui*, fourth year of Tongguang

First month

01.03 Shu royals depart Chengdu

01.07 Guo Chongtao is slain in Chengdu

01.23 Execution of Zhu Youqian and Li Cunyi

Second month

02.06 Beizhou mutiny begins

02.09 Weizhou mutiny begins

02.17 Palace guardsman Wang Wen mutinies

02.27 Dispatch Li Siyuan to Weizhou to suppress Zhao Zaili

Third month

03.08 Armies of Li Siyuan compel him to mutiny; Kang Yanxiao perishes in Shu

03.18 slaying of Shu ruler Wang Yan near Changan

03.24 Kaifeng occupied by Li Siyuan

03.28 Return to Luoyang

Fourth month

04.01 Death at Luoyang

04.03 Armies of Li Siyuan occupy Luoyang, where he becomes interim regent

04.09 Empress Liu arrives at Jinyang

04.14 Imperial son Jiji perishes near Changan

04.26 Zhang Xian perishes in defense of Jinyang

04.28 Li Siyuan succeeds as Emperor Mingzong

Seventh month

07.22 Burial in the suburbs of Luoyang at Yongling Mausoleum

Sources Cited

Unthinkably, three official histories exist for the Five Dynasties period (907–79). The source closest in time, the *Old History of the Five Dynasties*, *Jiu Wudai shi* (JWDS), was compiled by the History Bureau at the outset of the Song dynasty, in the 970s, under the editorship of Xue Juzheng. The popular *New History of the Five Dynasties* (*Xin Wudai shi*), authored individually by Ouyang Xiu, was published posthumously by the Song government in 1077 under the name *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* (*Wudai shiji*). Due to the government's imprint, it is considered an official history as well, even though the author wrote privately with neither the sponsorship nor subvention of the government. I have published roughly two-thirds of the Chinese original in English translation. In the notes, references to “HR” allude to the English translation, while “XWDS” refers to the Chinese original. Another more detailed punctuated annotation of the *Old History* by Chen Shangjun was published in 2005, *Jiu Wudai shi: Xin ji hui zheng*, which I have consulted to correct errors in the original, but it is not used for citation, due to the wider accessibility of the original.

The *Historical Records* is an important supplement to the *Old History*: its author, as senior editor of another official history, the *New History of the Tang* (*Xin Tang shu*), enjoyed unrestricted access to a broad range of sources in the imperial and private libraries of Kaifeng, from the “Veritable Records” (*Shilu*) and “National Histories” (*Guoshi*) to quasi-literary sources like “historical anecdotes” (*biji xiaoshuo*). The *Historical Records* also offers an entertaining and tightly knit narrative of the times. It is an infinitely more fluent version of the *Old History*, but it remains an abridged rendering of the original with less factual detail. Both works were written in the “composite annals and biography format” (*ji zhuan ti*) characteristic of the dynastic history.

The third major source for the Five Dynasties period, Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance*, *Zizhi tongjian*, published a decade after Ouyang Xiu's work, employs the annalistic format throughout, which makes it invaluable for establishing a chronology of political events. The 294-chapter work covers the years 403 BCE to ACE 959, its final thirty chapters devoted to the Five Dynasties. Under the editorial direction of Sima Guang and sponsorship of the Song government, writers of the *Comprehensive Mirror* could consult the two dynastic histories

as well as contemporary works no longer extant. Sima Guang worked out of Luoyang, capital of the Later Tang, which likely facilitated access to some material unavailable to Ouyang Xiu, who worked out of Kaifeng. Due to the range of sources consulted and an impressive staff of historians, the *Comprehensive Mirror* is seen as the most informed and objective source. Inasmuch as each work has unique strengths and weaknesses, and none truly deserves to be deemed authoritative, I have avoided undue reliance on any one text. Even in the case of citations from my published translation of the *Historical Records*, I have compared versions in the several texts when available, and often emended entries to reflect the consensus of the several texts.

Cefu yuangui, in 1,000 chapters (over 13,000 pages), represents an important alternative source, compiled under the auspices of the Song court and the editorial oversight of Wang Qinruo. A product of the late tenth century, *Cefu yuangui* has greater proximity to the period and contains fewer of the biases of eleventh-century writings. I have decided to cite the 2006 punctuated edition published by Fenghuang Publishing House. Some scholars of the period refuse to cite the Fenghuang text, due its numerous technical problems, including missing passages and punctuation errors, which seems something of an overreaction. It remains the easiest text to access information, replete with index. For important passages, I have compared sections of the new edition against earlier editions to address such concerns.

The leading primary source on institutions of the Five Dynasties, *Wudai huiyao*, contains numerous errors, so I have used it cautiously and usually in consultation with other sources, when available. There are also serious technical problems with an important primary source on the Southern States, *Shiguo chunqiu*, a work compiled in the Qing dynasty, so I have used it in consultation with other primary sources, if possible.

List of Abbreviations

The following works are cited by abbreviation:

- CFYG: *Cefu yuangui*, Wang Qinruo, 1013
 HR: *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, Ouyang Xiu
 JTS: *Jiu Tang shu*, 945, Liu Xu
 JWDS: *Jiu Wudai shi*, 974, Xue Juzheng
 LS: *Liao shi*, 1344, Tuo Tuo
 SGCQ: *Shiguo Chunqiu*, ca. 1689, Wu Renchen
 WDHY: *Wudai huiyao*, 963, Wang Pu
 XTS: *Xin Tang shu*, 1060, Ouyang Xiu
 XWDS: *Xin Wudai shi*, 1077, Ouyang Xiu
 ZZTJ: *Zizhi tongjian*, 1084, Sima Guang

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