THE HAN CHINESE LEARNING THE XIANBEI LANGUAGE

The Northern Wei (386-534) was divided into the Western Wei (which became the Northern Zhou), and the Eastern Wei (which became the Northern Qi). The frontier Han Chinese usually attached themselves to the dominant steppe or forest people. There are Chinese sources confirming their typical behavior. An example: “One day an official of Qi court told me, ‘I have a son who is already 17 years old. He is quite good in composing letters and memorials. I am having him taught the Xianbei language and playing the lute. I want him to learn these things so that he can become useful to the highest officials of the state and may gain their favor as well.’”

The Western Wei, in which the Xianbei elements remained strongest, became the Northern Zhou in 557 that could briefly reunify northern China by conquering the Northern Qi in 577 and occupying the northern territory of Chen in 579. The Sui dynasty (581-618) came to unify the mainland China as the successor of Xianbei Northern Zhou.

HEIRS OF TUOBA XIANBEI UNIFYING THE MAINLAND CHINA

The Mongols established a centralized state in 402 under the leadership of the Jou-jan Khagan, but the Northern Wei not only maintained huge garrisons along the frontier but also invaded Mongolia, capturing as many people and animals as possible. Only when the Touba Xianbei court became fully
sinicized, moving its capital to Luo-yang in 494, did it begin to adopt the appeasement policies, paying bribes to the Mongol rulers and later the Turks, who were initially Jou-jan’s vassals.2

The Jou-jan Mongols were eventually crushed and superseded by the Turks in 552. Turkish tribes, which originally came from the Altai Mountain region, established two vast empires by the late sixth century. The seat of the eastern Turkic rulers with the imperial title of Khagan remained on the upper Orkhon, near the future Karakorum, while the western Turkic rulers with the lower title Yabghu stretched their empire from the great Altai to Persia and the Caspian Sea. As mainland China was pulling itself together under the Sui dynasty, there arose the Turkish confederacy along the northern frontier, reminiscent of the situation of the Han dynasty confronting the Xiong-nu.3

YANG JIAN, SERVING XIANBEI AND HAVING A XIANBEI WIFE

The founder of Sui dynasty, Yang Jian, was from the aristocratic clan that had served, successively, the Xianbei dynasties of Northern Wei, Western Wei (535-56) and Northern Zhou (556-81). Yang Jian’s wife, the Empress Wen-xian, was a daughter of Du-gu Xin who was from a Xianbei clan that had intermarried for centuries with the great families of Northern Wei. Du-gu Xin had gone to the west with Yuwen Tai and helped him establish the Western Wei (backing Wen-di), later the Northern Zhou. The eldest daughter of Du-gu Xin was married to the first Northern Zhou emperor (Yuwen Tai’s son, Ming-di, r.557-60), the seventh to Yang Jian (Sui Wen-di, r.581-604), and the fourth to the father of Li Yuan (the Gao-zu of Tang, 618-26).4

When Yang Jian took over the Northern Zhou in 581, the real power was held by members of military aristocratic clans, mostly of Xianbei or mixed descent. According to Twitchett (1979: 81), “about 65 percent of top-ranking Northern Zhou officials were of non-Chinese origin. Wen-di had himself grown up within this system, and most of his friends and chief advisors came from this group.”

Sui Wen-di unified the entire mainland China in 589, and then stopped the Wei practice of making huge silk payments to the Turkish khagan, encouraging instead rivalry as公卿們效力了沒有不受寵的道理這也是一件很重要的事情

The Jou-jan rulers introduced the Mongol titles of “Khan” and “Khagan” in place of the old Xiong-nu title of “Shan-yu” that may be regarded as Turkic. See Barfield (1989: 120-3).

3 See Ledyard (1983: 320). The Xiong-nu seem to have been the ancestors of the mediaeval Turks, and spoken an early form of Turkic. The existence of numerous Turkic loanwords in Mongolic, however, suggests that there was a period when the linguistic ancestors of the Mongols were dominated by a Turkic population with massive cultural and political power. In contrast to Mongolic languages, the Tungusic in Manchuria shows very few lexical parallels with Turkic. See Janhunen (1996: 172, 183, 186) and Ostler (2005: 140).

4 See Twitchett (1979: 63-4, 151).
和 division on the steppe. At the time when China was uniting, the Turks were disintegrating from internal strife. Wen-di, by simply manipulating intrigues, could split Turkic power, eliminate refractory khans, and bring the remaining khans to suzerainty.

Koguryeo, just like the Han-time Chosun, had occupied Manchuria east of the Liao River as well as the northern part of the Korean peninsula, with its capital located at Pyung-yang. Koguryeo was the first to open hostilities against the Sui dynasty, with an assault across the Liao River. According to the Sui-shu, King Young-yang of Koguryeo, leading ten thousand strong Mohe cavalymen, invaded Ying-zhou (Zhao-yang) in 598.6

Wen-di mobilized army and navy, appointed his youngest son, Prince Liang, as the Chief Commander, and then launched a full-scale expedition against Koguryeo in 598. Fewer than 20 percent of the (300,000 strong) Sui army returned from this expedition. In 605, Yang-di (604-18), the second Sui emperor, dispatched 20,000 Turks to destroy the Qidans, and threatened the Koguryeo with an attack by the Turks if they did not submit to his rule. When Yang-di visited the Turkish headquarters in 607, however, the Khaghan was found negotiating with envoys from Koguryeo.7 Yang-di hastened the extension of the Grand Canal from Hang-zhou to the region of Beijing. The largest force in history (said to number over one million men) with massive logistic support was assembled, and Yang-di launched his ill-fated attack on Liao-dong in 611.

The Kogureyo fortresses along the east bank of the Liao River held out against Yang-di until the late summer rains made military operations impossible. When the Sui armies failed to take Liao-dong Fortress (modern Liao-yang), Yang-di let a third of his forces, some 300,000 strong, strike directly at Pyung-yang. But the Sui army was lured into a trap by General Ulchi Mun-deok, and suffered a calamitous defeat at the Sal-su (Cheong-cheon River). It is recorded that only 2,700 of the 300,000 Sui soldiers who had crossed the Yalu River survived to find their way back. Yang-di had to lift the siege of Liao-dong Fortress and return to Luo-yang.8

In 613, the Sui army again crossed the Liao River, but in the midst of the campaign word reached Yang-di of the
revolt by Yang Xuan-gan, and he had to return with his army. Yang-di’s army crossed the Liao River a third time in 614, but again the fortresses along the river held. He ordered the armies to stand by for a fourth expedition, but by this time the country was seething with rebellion.

After each defeat, the conquest of Koguryeo became a greater obsession of Yang-di. Every campaign, however, ended so disastrously that before long the war-exhausted empire crumbled. The powerful but short-lived Sui dynasty (581-618) was succeeded by the Tang dynasty (618-906).

LI YUAN, NEPHEW TO SUI WEN-DI AND COUSIN TO YANG-DI

Li Yuan (Tang Gao-zu: 618-26) was a scion of the Li family that had, according to Wechsler (Twitchett, 1979: 150-1), Xianbei ethnic background. Li Yuan was one of the most powerful Sui generals; a special favorite of Wen-di; and a first cousin of Sui Yang-di, their mothers being sisters. His grandfather, Li Hu, descended from prominent Northern Wei generals, became one of the Eight Pillars of State (the chief commanders associated with the Yu-wen Tai’s seizing the throne for his son before his death in 556) in the foundation of Northern Zhou in 557, and was ennobled as the Duke of Tang in 558. The title was inherited by Li Yuan. At that time, the Li clan was centered on a garrison established by the Northern Wei near modern Da-tong, which was also the home of Yu-wen Tai.

Li Yuan’s close relationship with the Empress Wen-xian assured him of a distinguished career. As commander of the Tai-yuan garrison, however, he did strike a deal with the Turkish Khaghan, led troops out of Tai-yuan with his eldest son, Jian-zheng (who was later appointed heir apparent), and the second son, Shi-min (who later murdered his elder bother), and occupied the Sui capital city.

According to the Jiu Tang-shu, Li Yuan sought the support of Shih-pi, the great khan of the Eastern Turks, by declaring that “the population and the territory belong to the Duke of Tang; the treasures, cloth, goods, and precious things belong to the Turks.” Hence Jagchid and Symons (1989: 69) note: “put it simply, Shih-pi Khan extracted a promise from the Tang founder that he would receive all movable wealth in...
China.” The Khan’s purpose in joining Li Yuan was not to occupy the lands of China but to seize its riches. Later, Tai-zong blurted: “Formerly, when the kingdom was about to be created, the Retired Emperor [Gao-zu] entered into vassalage to the Turks for the sake of the people. How can we not hate this both in heart and mind? We wish to exterminate the Xiong-nu (see ibid., p.70).”

**ETHNIC ORIGIN OF THE NORTHERN ARISTOCRATIC CLANS**

The ethnic origin of the northern aristocratic clans was a mix of Xianbei, Turks and old frontier Chinese. They placed strong emphasis on martial virtues, and personal participation in warfare and hunting was highly valued. The ruling families of the southern dynasties, mostly those who had fled from the north, considered themselves to be the true heirs of old Han Chinese culture.

Tai-zong was adept at the game of steppe politics, displaying a profound knowledge of steppe culture and tradition. He was an expert on nomad battle tactics. Li Shi-min was, according to Barfield (1989: 141), a “master of strategic retreat, letting larger armies exhaust themselves before he attacked. He personally led troops in battle and had four mounts shot from under him. He enshrined these horses in stone, with an accurate rendering of each horse’s physical traits, including the number of arrow wounds. Such concern with detail about horses and battles was characteristic of steppe leaders.”

The Sui as well as the early Tang courts organized their empires by means of tried institutions that had been employed under the Northern Wei dynasty. The Tang administration initially featured the nomadic dual military/civilian organization. Barfield (1989: 140, 142) states that the “barbarization” of North China under foreign rule was so thoroughgoing by that time that Tai-zong (626-49) was able to rule both the steppe and mainland China.

**TURKISH TRIBES UNDER THE TANG BANNER**

Turkish tribes either went over to the Tang or fled west. The combination of a Chinese-style administration backed by a Turkish army expanded Tang’s power to new
heights. Turkish military specialists under the Tang banner expanded China’s border deep into Central Asia. Li Shi-min became the Chinese khagan and the Lord of Central Asia, extending Tang’s direct authority to the Pamirs by 648. As far as the Eastern Barbarians were concerned, however, it was an entirely different story. Tai-zong experienced humiliating defeats in the battles against Koguryeo.

THE DISASTROUS TANG CAMPAIGNS AGAINST KOGURYEO

The army led by Tai-zong and general Li Shi-chi (the general who was sent over the Gobi in 629 by Tai-zong to conquer the Eastern Turks) marched on Liao-dong in 645. According to the Old Tang-shu, the emperor personally carried the heaviest earth bag to fill up the moat under the Liao-dong Fortress, and sucked the blood from an arrow wound suffered by one of his generals. The invasion force, however, was halted before the An-shi Fortress. Tai-zong had personally commanded the generals and led the attacks. The Tang army threw all its strength into as many as six or seven assaults in a single day. After two months of futile attempts to take the fortress, and facing the imminent onset of the bitter winter, Li Shi-min ordered a withdrawal. 12

Early in 647, Tai-zong once again attacked Koguryeo, but the results were inconclusive. In 648 Tai-zong announced that in the next year he was going to raise an army of 300,000 men to crush Koguryeo completely. Chagrined at his only major defeat, Tai-zong died in the following year.

The chronicler of Old Tang-shu commented: “The avarice of Sui Yang-di caused the expeditions across the Liao River that had ruined the dynasty. The expeditions by Tai-zong gained some but lost more. He himself regretted of having made such campaigns. The barbarian land covered with gravel is useless even when conquered, and there is nothing to lose when abandoned. Futile hardships for vanity! It is better to communicate with them through interpreters, and induce them to pay homage and tributes.” 13

Li Shi-min was succeeded by Gao-zong (649-683) who was sickly and weak minded. Empress Wu ruled China, first through Gao-zong (660-683), then through her young sons for a period of time (684-690) after Gao-zong’s death,
and finally as empress of a new dynasty, Zhou (690-705).

The aristocratic clans of North China had been mainly non-Chinese in origin, and they used to be the major source of officials for the central government. Although the examination system got started in Sui times, it did not really dominate the process whereby officials were recruited. Under Gao-zong’s reign, however, the Tang began the transition from rule by hereditary aristocratic clans to rule by a bureaucracy selected by examination.

GLORY OF TANG: A MYTH NURTURED BY HISTORIANS

Even the disastrous Tang campaigns against Koguryeo, for all the shadow they cast on Tai-zong himself, did little to reduce the glory of the Tang dynasty in the minds of historians. Yet, after Li Shi-min’s death, and especially after the reign of Empress Wu (661-705), one can plainly see the decaying might of the Tang’s military forces. The rule by martial aristocratic clans changed into the rule by bureaucrats.

The successors to Empress Wu were apparently anxious to avoid Turkish attacks, offering marriage proposals, gifts and subsidies. The Tang’s rule became nominal after a series of rebellions beginning with An Lu-shan (755-63). According to Fairbank (1992: 86), “the actual interregnum in central power lasted all the way from the rebellion of 755 to 979.” Contrary to the myth carefully nurtured by modern-day historians, the glory and political power of the Tang dynasty was rather short-lived, in addition to its reputation being tarnished (?) by the rule of a Woman.