China's Northern Wei Dynasty, 386–535: The Struggle for Legitimacy. By Puning Liu. Asian States and Empires. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021. Pp. x + 184. £120.00.

The parameters of this study are stated in its very title: "China's Northern Wei Dynasty." An outgrowth of Liu's 2018 Leiden thesis, it is a workmanlike effort to examine the place of the Northern Wei—a dynasty of Inner Asian origin—within the Chinese historiographical tradition, both in that dynasty's own time and in later eras. It is important, however, that the reader understand this is not a history of the Northern Wei itself, which, particularly in its early stages, stood quite apart from the literary traditions of the Chinese world.

As with all historiographical traditions, judgement plays a prominent part in that of the Chinese world. In this book's subtitle we see the particular form of judgement addressed, which is "legitimacy." As conceptualized in the traditional Chinese world, legitimacy was deeply connected with the idea of a "sage king" able to translate into the human world the perfection of the natural order ("Heaven"). Thinkers for centuries debated who was and who was not a sagely king. In some sense, legitimacy is the topic of this book, with Northern Wei as a case study; the title of the Leiden thesis was, in fact, "Political Legitimacy in Chinese History: The Case of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–535)."

Liu examines Northern Wei's legitimacy in two distinct ways. In Chapters 1 through 3 he describes how the Northern Wei—as well as its main rivals, the successive dynasties of the Jiankang empire (fourth–sixth century)—drew on symbols of the classical tradition to compete for claims of legitimate rule over what had been parts of the long-defunct Han empire. Taking a different tack, Chapters 4 through 6 go on to examine later thinkers' judgement on Northern Wei, and where the regime fits in their evolving and frequently contrasting flow charts of legitimate rule.

Rulership is, of course, a quite new phenomenon in the history of our species, and rulers everywhere have had to come up with various ways to justify their presence to the ruled. Different societies have used different concepts and different vocabularies to describe these processes. For Liu, the key term in the traditional Chinese world has been *zhengtong* 正統, which means both "proper," or "legitimate" rule, and "rightful succession [of rule]" (p. 4). This

term, however, did not take on its full intellectual significance until the early modern Song dynasty. Prior to that, other terms were also used to suggest accepted and acceptable rule. A particularly interesting set of such terms were those that linked the "proper" monarch to establishment of the ("proper") calendar, such as *zhengshuo* 正朔, "first day of the first month," or *zhengrun* 正閏, "common year and leap year" (which could also signify legitimate as opposed to illegitimate rule) (p. 4). There was clearly an evolution of the idea of "legitimacy" in the Chinese world; since these calendrical terms were used in the age in which the Northern Wei emerged, it would have helped to explain them in more detail.

Northern Wei represented a new form of empire in East Asia. Emerging in the late fourth century C.E., in the aftermath of collapse of the last heir of the Han, Western Jin (265–316), the Northern Wei dynasty based its strength on armies recruited from Inner Asian populations in the northern highlands. These then went on to take control of the richly productive and densely populated lowlands to the south—the Yellow River plains—which had been a central portion of the territories of Western Jin, and, before that, Han. Most, at least of these populations, were "Chinese," though there is continuing discussion as to what exactly that name means in this early period.[1] Here it will suffice to point out four clearly seen features of the lowland populations that came under the Northern Wei control: they continued to think of themselves as descendants of the people of Western Jin, and Han before that; they organized themselves on the basis of the old empire's system of local administration, even if that system now existed only in vestigial form; they spoke a tongue that was part of the Chinese language family; and—to some extent at least—they were guided by a literate elite, by "text masters" (*Ru*, or "Confucians"), who preserved, read, and taught the old classics and histories, and continued that tradition with the production of their own new commentary and chronicles. (See also Liu's definition of "Han Chinese" on p. 14.)

The first monarch of Northern Wei began to take control of such populations in 396, when he led his army of horsemen south onto the plains (to seize those territories from a rival Inner Asian regime, the last of Han's successor regimes being long gone). Having thus seized a part of the Chinese world, he soon after took a Chinese title: *huangdi* 皇帝, or "emperor." To

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[1] Vide Andrew Chittick, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

fully understand the nature of his regime, however, one has to bear in mind that he also continued to hold his own people's title, the Inner Asian “khan.” Furthermore, the name by which he would have referred to his own dynasty was not the term used in this book, “Tuoba,” the modern Mandarin pronunciation of an ancient Chinese transcription, but a name of Inner Asian origin something like “*Taghbach” (to use the reconstruction offered by the linguist Andrew Shimunek). Something quite new had appeared in the East Asian world. Not just *huangdi*, nor were the early Wei monarchs simply “khans”; they were both in a new sort of combination that would take shape in a variety of ways in various East Asian empires over the next 1500 years. This complexity is also seen in the organization of the Northern Wei state. Its lords used a new system of dual administration, by which from their capital up in the highlands (Pingcheng 平城, mod. Datong 大同)—basically a huge military base—they could, in quite different ways, rule and use the nomads in the northern grasslands—the source of their soldiery—and the farmers on the lowlands below.

To mediate with the Chinese on the plains below and attempt at least to carry on the systems of taxation and administration that had existed there, the Taghbach khans brought text masters to their court in the northern highlands, often against their wills. There, following precedent from within their tradition, they established offices and rituals. On and off they wrote chronicles, in literary Chinese, the only written language that existed in East Asia at this time. A government thus began to take shape. But, like the regime itself, it was a complex mixture of symbols and practices and institutions from the Chinese world and from the steppe, not at all like the formal institutional systems of the Han or Western Jin. Visitors from the Jiankang empire were bemused, and amused. And as the modern scholar, Yan Yaozhong 嚴耀中, has made clear, for the next century by far the most important part of the government was an Inner Council (*nei chao* 內朝), composed of princes of the house and generals of Inner Asian origin.

Playing a secondary role in this early Wei state were the text masters, who, drawing on classical tradition, would argue for the legitimacy of the state they now served and whose spiritual heirs would in later ages go on to discuss the dynasty's *zhengtong*, or lack thereof. To understand Wei, one does need to understand that in the historical accounts they composed for the Wei monarch (perhaps for their own interests as well) they concealed as much as they revealed. The final compilation, *Documents of Wei* (*Wei shu* 魏書)—completed

in the mid-sixth century, under a Northern Wei successor state—never uses the title "khan." Mention is barely given of the Inner Council. It wrongly portrays the princes and generals of early Wei as having Chinese-style names. Perhaps the text masters did not entirely understand the world they had been brought into. Perhaps they simply preferred to offer a vision of order as they thought it should be, instead of as it actually was, and so incorporated the Other—the real rulers of the empire—into their own "empire of the text."[2]

This, of course, ended dramatically during the reign of the seventh Wei monarch, Xiaowen 孝文 (r. 471–499; it needs noted that Xiaowen did not ascend the throne in 490, as is stated on p. 101). Though their mother tongue was Inner Asian, and this was the language they used to direct their cavalry troops, Wei monarchs had, for generations, also been learning to speak Chinese, and to read literary Chinese, with growing interest in the cultural richness of the Chinese world. This culminated with Xiaowen, who wished to completely reorganize his regime along the lines of what he at least saw as an ideal Chinese state. As Liu discusses at length, late in his reign he moved his capital from Pingcheng to the plains below, to a city with deep significance in the Chinese tradition, Luoyang. No longer wishing to refer to his dynasty as "Taghbach," or even "Tuoba," Xiaowen renamed it with the Chinese "Yuan" 元, "the paramount." Though no clear mention is made in *Wei shu*, the title "khan" seems to have been abandoned, as was the khan's Inner Council, in favour of a bureaucracy organized on the basis of the neat charts of Han and Jin government. At court, those under thirty were ordered to speak only Chinese. Such changes led to a growing separation of the court from its army, much of which remained in the northern highlands. Within a generation, the troops would mutiny and the Northern Wei collapse.

The real complexity of the Northern Wei needs to be kept in mind when reading in this book of efforts by Wei to use Chinese tradition to legitimize their regime. These efforts were, of course, directed for the most part towards Wei's Chinese subjects, and not at soldiers of Inner Asian origin, who still spoke their original language and were perhaps not much interested in the ideas of Confucius or the Duke of Zhou.

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[2] To use the provocative title of Christopher Leigh Connery's book, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

According to Liu, in Chapter 2, the text masters used seven significant methods to put forth to their audience claims of legitimacy for the Wei dynasty: 1) adoption for the state of the Chinese name, Wei, borrowed from several states that had held that name earlier in Chinese history; 2) use and then new uses of the practice of placing the dynasty in the cycle of the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行); 3) relocation of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang; 4) auspicious omens, in forms systematized under the Han; 5) introduction of "various Chinese cultural conventions," most prominently in the time of Xiaowen; 6) sponsoring the writing of histories, which again would be composed in literary Chinese and modelled on the firmly established Chinese historiographical tradition; and 7) establishment of supremacy in diplomacy, on the basis of the so-called tribute system (pp. 38–73).

These ideas are put forth in a rather abstract way; it might have helped to tie them more clearly to the actual flow of events in Northern Wei. The writing of history for the crown, for instance, could have deadly results, as it did for Cui Hao 崔浩 in 450, after the display of his work carved on stone outside Pingcheng led to complaints from the "northern men," and his execution shortly thereafter (in the book, a brief mention of these events is buried in note 150, on p. 71).

As for the discussion of the phases: Liu suggests that early on in the Wei history, the court adopted Wood in order to associate itself with the Wei dynasty of the Cao 曹 family (220–266) (p. 43). This reader would suggest it more likely that the text masters serving the Taghbach lords were not trying to identify the regime with the Cao Wei 曹魏 but to displace it: this is the reason why in recording the reign of the first Taghbach khan, the third-century Liwei 力微 (long before establishment of Northern Wei), they concocted the story that he was "enthroned" in a *gengzi* 庚子 year, which, in connection with other dates given to him, could only have been the year 220, the year Han gave up the throne to Cao Wei. The Wei of the Taghbach, thus, took the place of the Wei of the Cao. It is hopefully obvious, however, that the 220 date is very implausible. Since we do know Liwei died in the year 277, if we accept 220 as the year of accession, this would mean that he ruled through fifty-eight years (and, with the date given for his birth, lived through 104; see *Wei shu* 1.5). Much more likely, this is an interesting early effort to give the regime legitimacy by tinkering with the historical records. One would then need to wonder if the

early Taghbach monarchs deeply cared about the doings of their text masters, or even entirely understood them.

In Chapter 3, Liu goes on to describe how the monarchs of the Jiankang Empire also drew upon the classical tradition to "preserve legitimacy" (in contrast to Northern Wei, which is said to have been attempting to "establish legitimacy"). They were no doubt doing history tinkering of their own. Six categories are assigned the Yangtze lords: 1) the use of (no doubt forced) abdication, by which the last lord of one of these short-lived dynasties would supposedly pass the "mandate of Heaven" on to the first lord of the next; 2) auspicious omens, again drawing on the Han prototype (this category seems, however, to have dropped out of the main text); 3) asserting the suitability of the city of Jiankang, on the Yangtze, as an imperial capital, through the use, among other things, of omens and prophecies; 4) in an interesting version of the "(re-)invention of tradition," appropriating large numbers of the names of Yellow River administrative districts for newly created units in the Yangtze region; 5) sponsorship, like Northern Wei, of histories (both sides using their books to trade insults and efforts at belittlement); and 6) again like Wei, attempting to build their state's prestige through diplomacy (pp. 74–95).

These are interesting arrays of techniques by which the new states emerging from out of the Han collapse attempted to establish legitimacy by drawing on the classical tradition, and attempted to draw on the apparently ongoing nostalgia for Han held by a significant part of the populations under their control. In both north and south, however, other quite different techniques were used as well. In his new book on *The Jiankang Empire*, Andrew Chittick makes clear that, though ruled by men who (probably) spoke a Chinese tongue, the Yangtze regime did not at all draw only on the Chinese classics, but also on local cults and traditions, and perhaps most of all on Buddhism.

Buddhism, of course, also played an important role in the development of the Wei state (brief mentions of this are made in the Introduction and in the first note of Chapter 2, though no such acknowledgement is made for Jiankang). Other techniques show up as well, particularly in the early Taghbach regime. One example raised by Liu was the use by the Wei Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 (r. 426–451) of the so-called Gaxian Cave 嘎仙洞. In 443 Taiwu was told of the existence in the eastern foothills of the Khingan Mountains 大興安嶺 of a cave where his ancestors had worshipped. The claim was made by

representatives of a people far to the north (who, though very distant from the Chinese world of that time, lived in what is now part of the Inner Mongolia province of the PRC). The cave is not, it must be said, "tangible evidence concerning the origin of the Tuoba tribe" (p. 23). Hundreds of bands were active in the northern forests and grasslands at this time. Still, Taiwu does seem to have accepted the embassy's claim and used it for propaganda, directed not to Chinese subjects but to the men of Inner Asian origin who filled the ranks of his army. This claim of "rediscovery" of the dynasty's origins in the far-off north was made at the same time when Taiwu was preparing to send that army against his rivals in the grasslands of Mongolia, the nomad empire of the Rouran 柔然. In its travels of more than a thousand miles to Gaxian cave (in the Khingans and so a bit to the east of the Rouran lands), Taiwu's mission was no doubt engaged in pronouncement to and negotiation with the many different peoples who lived along the way, speaking in many different languages. At the cave, the mission would engrave on stone a statement from the Wei emperor (again, in the only available script, literary Chinese). Rediscovered some forty years ago, the inscription in the cave is at least in one way very different from the version recorded at court, which eventually was included in *Wei shu*: whereas the version in received text refers to the imperial ancestors with purely Chinese titles, the inscription in the cave refers to them (in transcription) as "khan" and "khatun," the newly emergent terms for monarchy in Inner Asia. (Liu is incorrect in stating that the two versions of the inscription "are identical," p. 24).

The Northern Wei, thus, did not fit neatly into the world conceived by the text masters, though in their writings that eventually coalesced as *Wei shu*, they did the best they could to depict it as a "common Han Chinese-style dynasty" (p. 59). Liu seems, to some extent at least, to accept their arguments, stating that in Northern Wei, "alien rulers wholly followed Han Chinese culture and strove to become Han Chinese people" (p. 52). This is perhaps too simplified a picture of the situation, as is wryly suggested in a quote by Charles Holcombe, who, again referring to *Wei shu*, states that, "the non-Han Chinese Xianbei were made to appear essentially Chinese—on paper" (p. 59).

Despite the efforts of Emperor Xiaowen, the Northern Wei was never fully digested into the Chinese imagination, which is perhaps what makes it an interesting case study for the examination of the evolution of traditional

Chinese ideas of legitimacy. There never was one dominant view on the "Northern Wei legitimacy dispute." Different text masters held different positions, depending on their own intellectual leanings, as well as, of course, the particular circumstances of the age in which they lived (p. 155). In the second half of the book, Liu leads us through these winding corridors of Chinese intellectual history, taking us from the Sui all the way into the early twentieth century.

The journey begins in Chapter 4 with the Sui (581–618) writer, Wang Tong 王通 (584–617). Little is known of the man, but Liu makes the good point that serving Sui, a successor state of the Northern Wei, Wang argued for Wei's legitimacy to establish the legitimacy of Sui. Though barbarians, said Wang, the lords of Wei had occupied what he considered to be the core "central realm" (Jiankang, of course, would have had counterarguments) and, from the time of Xiaowen, took up the "way of the [proper] king" (*wangdao* 王道), and so were legitimate (p. 99). But since the empire of Sui and its successor Tang were brought into being by the invasion of the Yangtze region, Wang Tong's position would have been rejected by some, at least in the "patchwork empire" of Sui.[3] Such counterarguments apparently persisted for centuries, as we see in the ninth century with Huangfu Shi 皇甫湜 (777–835), who said, "The central realms are what they are because of ritual and righteousness; the barbarians are what they are because of lack of ritual and righteousness. How could (their distinctions) be tied to the land? 所以為中國者，以禮義也；所謂夷狄者，無禮義也。豈繫於地哉？" (p. 107) Even if they had managed to camp out on the lands of the "central realm," the "barbarians"—i.e., the Northern Wei—were not worthy to rule them and were not legitimate.

In Chapter 5 the reader is led into the Song period, an age of enormous change when the Chinese world began entry into an early form of modernity, and the classical tradition was transformed in the broad movement frequently called "neo-Confucianism." Of equal importance, the Chinese world now found itself, in a very visible way, alongside equals in East Asia; with this came new, systematic efforts to define "Chinese" as a distinct identity—ethnicity—in contrast to the Other. Mention is made in the book of these monumental

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[3] To borrow the term put so well by Tian Xiaofei, in a paper, "Patchwork Empire: Fragmentation in Sui Poetry," presented on 21 May 2021 to the Harvard-Yale Symposium Series on Middle Period China (first through tenth century CE), "A Symposium on Displacement and Convergence in the Age of Multipolarity (550s–610s)."

changes, but it would have been helpful to the reader to have the chapter begin with a more detailed and organized overview of these developments.

Though some Song scholars continued to argue for the Northern Wei legitimacy, rejection of that view would grow more insistent and show itself in innovative ways. One of these innovations was the dismissal of the view previously held by such as Wang Tong that there is a continuous succession of legitimate dynasties, and that there is always a "sage king." In what might be viewed as a modern, more rationalistic manner, the Northern Song scholar, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072), dismissed this assertion, at the same time abandoning the idea that dynastic succession corresponded to the endless cyclic change of the Five Phases (pp. 122–23). He was followed in this by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086). Though Sima used the Jiankang calendar to organize the chapters of his famous *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive mirror in aid of government) on the early medieval period, he did this only for expediency. For Sima, neither the Northern Wei nor the Jiankang regimes were legitimate. Perhaps with a sophistication of his own, Sima:

> . . . even raises questions about the extent to which these dynasties, given the fact that they vary widely—from Chinese to "barbarian," from virtuous to brutal, from big to small, and from mighty to weak—can be labeled as either legitimate or illegitimate. He stresses that his choices of reign titles merely follow popular conventions and do not reveal his answer to the legitimacy dispute. (p. 125)

Living in the more straitened situation of the Southern Song, with growing pressure from the Mongols, another thinker, Zheng Sixiao 鄭思肖 (1241–1318), followed the lead of Huangfu Shi in arguing that "the central realm is the exclusive domain of the Han Chinese" (p. 126). "It is not a blessing but an aberration," said Zheng, "for barbarians to follow the ways of the central realm" 夷狄行中國事，非夷狄之福，實夷狄之妖孽 (p. 126). A later thinker, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), apparently agreed, stating that the Northern Wei Emperor Xiaowen "adopted Chinese customs, like a monkey wearing a crown to present itself as human" (p. 141). Here we see echoes of the "ethnocentric moralism" discussed by Yang Shao-yun in his *Way of the Barbarians.*[4]

[4] Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019).

Proceeding with examination of views in the Ming period, and then under the Manchu empire, Liu finishes his discussion of *zhengtong* by examining how it was gradually "deconstructed," no doubt as part of a growing tendency toward scepticism among Chinese thinkers and historians. This took centuries but culminated with Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), according to whom, "among the mistakes of Chinese historians, none is graver than the discussion of *zhengtong*" 中國史家之謬，未有過於言正統者也 (p. 142). Rejecting arguments regarding territory, duration and ethnicity, Liang pointed out that efforts such as Wang Tong came from a mixture of flattery for the ruler and the historian's own wish to present the regime he served as acceptable to his sort of people (p. 143). In fact, according to Liang, none of these regimes were legitimate. Paving the way for Linda Colley's much-heralded new study on the role of the constitution in the modern world, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen*,[5] Liang insisted "that a legitimate regime is one that has a constitutional monarchy, as in Britain and Japan" (p. 144).

In this book, Liu raises some interesting issues in the history of the text masters and their tradition of historical evaluation, taking as a case study for ideas on legitimacy the questionable regime of an Inner Asian people. I will simply close by suggesting a few paths along which such study could be further developed. The first of these would be the audience: Who read these essays? And who cared? This would, no doubt, change from age to age. And sources on such issues will be very scanty in the earlier periods. Linked to the audience would be the influence, or perhaps lack thereof: What real effect did these ancient academics have on the practical decisions of those who wielded power? And what were their real relationships with those power-holders, when at one and the same time they were powerful voices within an ancient tradition, and the lord's scribes?

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[5] Linda Colley, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Liveright, 2021).