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THE SIX DYNASTIES

As Adam and Eve were fleeing the Garden of Eden, one version goes, Adam turned to comfort his sobbing mate. "Don't cry, dear," he reassured her. "We're just living in an age of transition."

The Six Dynasties period, third century to late sixth century, an age of disunion and widespread disorder, falls between the Han 漢 and Tang 唐 dynasties, which ruled over the whole of China and which were marked by magnificent achievements in the cultural arts. Drawing a parallel with European history, some have called the period of the Six Dynasties the Dark Ages in China, but the negative associations inherent in that term are misleading, for this was a time of innovation and accomplishment in many areas, cultural, political, social, artistic, and technological.[1]

Because this is a period generally not well known, it may be useful to provide an outline of its history. The name Six Dynasties is derived from the number of states during this period that located their capitals in what is now modern Nanjing 南京. Capitals heretofore had been in the north, primarily at modern Xi'an 西安 or Luoyang 洛陽, but the movement of northern non-Han peoples into north China and their establishment of their own states on Chinese territory forced the surviving Chinese entities to seek a refuge in the south, creating a situation aptly encapsulated by another label for this age, the Nanbeichao 南北朝, or Northern and Southern Dynasties. This political division between

the alien non-Han regimes of the north and the émigré-led southern courts dominates the stage, but one should not as a consequence make the assumption that all integrative systems had fragmented; rather, polities with regional bases were struggling to survive and to expand, and it is the resulting conflicts that give this period its image of widespread disorder. In Europe a division into regional states is taken for granted, but in China the lack of a centralized state is considered abnormal and transitional, testimony to the success of the Han dynasty, which established the political norm in the Chinese mind by enduring for almost four hundred years.

During the last years of the Han, factional disputes involving various consort families and powerful groups of eunuchs at the court permitted some military leaders to establish themselves as independent warlords, and the emperor became a pawn in this new contest for control of the state. In the north, Cao Cao 曹操 emerged as victor after he defeated Yuan Shao 袁紹 at the battle of Guandu 官渡 in 200, but his attempts to carry his triumph further were frustrated by regional military leaders in the southeast and southwest. There then followed some years of maneuvering and consolidation. In 220, after Cao Cao's death, the Han finally was ended in name as well as in fact, and Cao Cao's son, Cao Pei 丕, ascended the throne of a new dynasty, the Wei 魏, which ruled north China. Liu Bei 劉備, in Sichuan, then presumed upon his surname, the same as that of the imperial family of the Han, to declare himself the legitimate successor of the Han, but his state is generally referred to as Shu 蜀, after the traditional name for that region. Not long after, Sun Quan 孫權, in the southeast, declared himself emperor of the Wu 吳. Thus there emerged the three states, Wei, Shu, and Wu, of the Three Kingdoms period (map 1).

The process of internal consolidation of the north under Cao Cao and his successors did not proceed very far. The weakness of the central government during the declining years of the Han and the need for the local populations to provide for their own stability and security had led to the emergence of large, fortified estates with their own security forces and serflike dependents who had abandoned their own lands to seek the safety of numbers. It was to take centuries to reestablish confidence in the police powers of the central state and to restore the free small landholder as the typical householder. Toward that end, Cao Cao attempted to strengthen the central government by building up a corps of officials to replace the old Han bureaucracy that might have harbored loyalties to the ancien régime. To do this, he established a system of local recommendations by which candidates were to be rated on a scale of one to nine, such ranking to determine the career they would have in official service. As a safeguard for the reliability of the successful applicants to office, an evaluator in each locale was appointed by the central government. In time, this system became ossified, with families, rather than individuals, carrying the ratings and access

Map 1. The three kingdoms, 220–265

to office tending to be monopolized by local elites. Meritocracy then suffered, and a system of entrenched privilege took on a life of its own.[2]

Among the powerful figures at the Wei court in the north were those of the Sima family, and in 265 Sima Yan 司馬炎 forced the abdication of the Cao emperor and declared himself emperor of the Jin 晉 dynasty. The Jin was successful in restoring unity to China for a short period. The state of Shu had been absorbed shortly before the establishment of the Jin, and the conquest of Wu followed in 280. The attempt by the Wei to reimpose a more highly centralized state was relaxed under the new Jin rule and a general disarmament declared. However, the various Sima princes retained their personal armies, and, in a

short time, serious internecine wars, the notorious Yongjia 永嘉 Disorders (307–12), broke out, leading directly to the collapse of the state.

When those who hold power fall out among themselves, the ineluctable consequence is that power then passes from them to others. In this instance, the internal conflicts of the quarreling Jin princes led to decentralized military control of the provinces by semi-independent generals, to famine, large-scale unrest, and messianic peasant movements: a perfect example of what Arnold Toynbee termed a time of trouble. The external threat called for in his paradigm was the various non-Han peoples, both within and without the borders, who overwhelmed the Jin state and took control of north China. This forced a prince of the Jin who was governor of the Nanjing area to declare himself, in 317, as successor to that line; the dynasties in the years before 317 are known to us as the Western Jin and those that follow as the Eastern Jin. The move of the Jin court to the south underlies the term Northern and Southern Dynasties for this period of disunion.

The south was a much different place from the north. It was wet and marshy, with many lakes and a warmer climate. The basic crop was rice rather than such grains as the wheat and millet more commonly grown in the north. The population at that time was composed of three strata:

1. The original indigines, such as the Thai, Yao, and Yue.
2. The Chinese immigrants who had been coming into the area from very early times and whose numbers would have included assimilated indigines.
3. Émigrés who came south in large numbers at this time. There has been much discussion of the numbers involved, which are difficult to establish.[3]

From 317 to 420 the history of the south is one of weak rulers, intrigues at court, and shifting alliances among the émigré families who had moved from the north. The majority of the northern émigrés were landless and without a power base in the south; their area of influence was in the court and the army. The southerners accepted the northerners, who provided a defense against the attacks by the northern "barbarians," as long as their own interests were maintained. For example, attempts at enforced recruitment of the serfs of the southern landlords into the army led to rebellions on the part of those landlords, some of which took the form of Taoist uprisings.[4] Therefore, one tampered with this modus vivendi only at great risk.

The crucial element of power at this time was control of the northern garrison army, an army raised in Shandong and moved south when the court was shifted to Nanjing. The soldiers were given land just north of the capital and became military households; that is, they farmed the land and were subject to call to military service. Their chief duty was to defend the south against any northern

incursions. The army was the bulwark of the state, at the service of the aristocratic émigrés, but when the émigrés fell out in a struggle over power at court in the early 400s, the junior officers rebelled, and one of them, Liu Yu 劉裕, took charge and, in 420, declared himself emperor of a new dynasty, the Song 宋. His rise signaled the end of the military significance of the émigrés, who were separated from military power and became completely dependent on the court. Liu Yu's concern was to maintain control by his family, and his dying testament stated that no separate or independent garrisons were to be maintained. Those who led armies on campaigns were to relinquish that command on returning, and the most important governorships were to be held only by imperial princes. Governors could not even mobilize local troops without written permission from the court.[5] This arrangement did not guarantee stability; of the twenty-six rulers of the four southern dynasties who ruled from 420 to 589, thirteen came to violent ends, four were deposed, and only nine died from natural causes. But it did preserve the power structure largely as Liu Yu had envisaged it.[6]

After the émigrés lost any real power in the transition from Eastern Jin to Song, they were left with no recourse but to serve the emperor. In this, they were most useful, for they had to identify their interests with those of the imperial family; there were no conflicting interests that might cause them to be unreliable. It may be for this reason that eunuchs never appeared as a power at the court, for the emperor had his own creatures. As power left and status identity became crucial, the interest in genealogies, in purity of descent, in making the family classifications more rigid, increased. But without real responsibility or power, decadence set in. A sixth-century critic describes it thus: "As officials, they could achieve nothing; at home they could manage nothing. All these are faults of idleness and leisure. . . . When seeking to pass the examination for the degree of 'Clearly Understanding the Classics,' they hired others to answer the questions and compose essays. When attending public feasts for high state officials, they hired others . . . to compose poems for them."[7]

For all its stress on excesses, the passage suggests the importance of literary accomplishment expected of those in the elite. Perhaps the most notable example was the royal family of the Liang 梁: the father, Emperor Wu 武, maintained a splendid salon; one son compiled the *Wenxuan* 文選, still the standard literary anthology of that time; and another, Emperor Yuan 元, followed his interests in Taoism, literature, and poetry. With such rulers, it was no wonder that the elegance and brilliance of the salons of this age set the standards for ages to come, and the influence of their image extended even to Japan.

In the north, the conflict with the northern nomads had always been a problem of major proportions. At the end of the Han, the struggle with the Xiongnu 匈奴 had tapered off, but then another group, the Xianbei 鮮卑, began

to move out of Manchuria and, from the second century A.D., put pressure on the Xiongnu from the rear. As the Xiongnu were forced southward, they were settled by the Chinese within the borders to serve as a buffer against the newcomers to the north and used as a source for recruiting troops, serving both on the frontier to the north and internally, much as the Germans served in the Roman empire. By 291 a complaint was voiced that in Guanzhong 關中 (modern Shaanxi and Gansu), half of the population of one million were non-Han.[8] The borders were increasingly abandoned, and the nomads kept moving south.

As long as the state was in order, these nomads were loyal subjects who fought against the outside barbarians, but when the state became unsettled, they themselves became a great danger. In 311 Luoyang was sacked by the Xiongnu, an event as important as the sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410, for it marks the point at which the whole north fell to a succession of foreign states, what is called in Chinese *wu hu luan hua* 五胡亂華, "the Five Barbarians bringing disorder to China." The five included the Xiongnu, Tibetans, and Turks. These peoples established a series of sixteen ephemeral states in the north, ushering in this so-called Dark Age of Chinese history.

What were conditions like in the period of the early fourth century as the Jin began to fall apart? There is a report from a newly appointed governor going to his post in northern Shansi in 307, who said that he had "to fight his way in, raised [an additional] thousand men, the population was in flight or else starving, even selling their children in order to survive, and the nomads were raiding and robbing. The land was like a wilderness, not even 20 percent remaining, the roads were blocked, bandits everywhere. Inside the city the government offices were burned, corpses were everywhere, the survivors starving, there were constant battles at the city gates, the people had to wear armor to till the fields."[9] These conditions affected Chinese and non-Chinese alike, and the yearly droughts and famine added to the general misery.

One recourse was to flee, and there were no doubt major population movements at this time. We know generally of the well-to-do who fled south, but less about the peasants who may have followed. There were also influxes of refugees into the northeast and far northwest, where conditions were comparatively more peaceful. For those who remained, the way to survival was to group together for mutual defense and safety. Guanzhong and Guandong 關東 (modern Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong) were especially hard-hit by the wars, and wide areas were deserted as many displaced persons and bandits roamed about. The local elite who remained then established fortresses for defense; these had already begun to appear at the end of the Han in the form of fortified estates, but now they increased enormously in size and number. They were staffed chiefly by dependents, clients, slaves, clansmen, and local groups. The

single individual had no way to survive and had to throw in his lot with the nearby fortress. In Guanzhong alone it is said there were over three thousand such establishments.[10]

The fortresses were usually built in a place easily defensible against attacks on foot and horse, such as a bend of a river or on a hill; some groups even fled to the mountains to seek out impregnable sites. One was described as being several miles in length and breadth, with rivers to all sides, encompassing an area that could hold a hundred thousand men and yet, it was claimed, could be defended by one person. There had to be arable land and water. The heads of these fortresses were not only military leaders but also political and economic figures, and they came to play the part of the former governors, with commissions from one court or another, or they could be self-declared governors.[11]

These fortresses were primarily defensive units and could not withstand attacks over too long a period of time, so they had to have other techniques of survival. One important way was to establish allegiances, as many as two or three, with powerful figures in the area—that is, with the leaders of nomad statelets that sprang up after the Jin lost control of the north—and to place hostages with them and to pay them tribute.

While some of the nomad groups lacked the skills to establish administrative structures to govern the areas won by force of arms, the number of states established during this period testifies, to some degree at least, of the intention to rule over the subject agrarian population. To do so effectively, the nomad leader needed the support of the Chinese elites to govern, and thus these nomads would usually leave the local structure as they found it. The relationship between these local leaders and the nomad leaders was one of mutual support, and it was not considered to be a case of occupation by a foreign power.[12] When Huan Wen 桓溫, a southern leader, attacked the north to restore Jin rule, the Chinese taken prisoner by Huan Wen were said to have wept and looked north as they were led south.

The north was finally united in 386 under the Tuoba 拓跋, a tribe within the Xianbei confederation. Their dynasty, the Northern Wei, built a wall and established garrisons of tribesmen in the north to stop the drift of other nomads into China, and gave the north a century and a half of stability. The Tuoba cooperated closely with the Chinese elite. The record is filled with evidence of strong support given to hereditary status among the Chinese elite; of state schools being established for the young sons of families of prestige and status; and of rules promulgated against marriage between the upper and lower classes. Chinese gentry and commoners were forbidden even to live in the same area of the capital. Yet the Chinese leaders had to be careful, for if any group became too assertive and the nomads perceived a threat to their rule, they would act swiftly and cruelly to end it. But with the Tuoba state, a comparatively more

stable and longer-lasting arrangement was reached than had obtained under other non-Chinese rulers.

In general, when a central government is weak and proves unable to provide for the common peace, those at the local level seek ways to provide for that safety, as we have seen, and the larger the unit the better. There then occurs a shift from the exclusive lineage, the fewer the better (the fewer to share the wealth), to the inclusive clan, for there is safety in numbers.[13] But as peace returns, the opposite trend sets in; there is no advantage to the serf nor to the government for the local leaders to have large landholdings. The government then acts to encourage the reduction in size of these local units, both to lessen the dangers of potential threat to their suzerainty and to increase their tax collections. As for the serfs, given the high rate of rents that they paid to landlords, it was better by far for them to pay taxes to the government. With that stability provided in the north by the Northern Wei, the pendulum began to swing away from the large, local fortresses, and these formations began to break up into smaller units. At this point in the Tuoba state there appears the "equal fields system," the *juntian* 均田 system, first in 477, and more regularly from 485. This was a system of allocating land to individual families, a sort of homesteading, the amount of land depending upon the size of the household. Some see this as a method to repopulate empty land, but it makes more sense to consider it as a way of drawing off manpower from the local elites and providing land to those who needed it and limiting the holdings of the local gentry. Such an effort indicated a higher degree of peace and stability, but it was that very return to a less-turbulent order that put the traditional Xianbei system under severe strain and, in the end, led to the downfall of the Tuoba state.

By the end of the fifth century the Tuoba state was well on its way to becoming a Chinese state. Growing numbers of Chinese now held the important civilian posts at the court. In 493 the capital was moved from Pingcheng 平城, near the northern frontier, to Luoyang, which had been destroyed in 311 and was only at this time being rebuilt. The reason given for the move was to allow the emperor a better opportunity to supervise preparations for a conquest of the south. However, in view of other factors, it is more likely that the move was stimulated by a desire to move to more congenial surroundings, to free the court of the restraints posed by the Xianbei hierarchy, who traditionally had an important say in the running of the tribal confederation, and to make the state more closely resemble a Chinese one, with the emperor having a freer hand, surrounded by courtiers who could advise and reprimand but who could not veto imperial decisions. The emperor, Xiaowendi 孝文帝, may also have felt a court perceived as a Chinese one had a better chance of surviving in a Chinese state, and so he may not have been entirely self-serving. With the move came rules to give up the traditional Xianbei clothing, customs, and even language of the Tuoba. Tuoba

names were to be changed to Chinese ones. This process of sinification continued under the next emperor as well, but all this increasingly alienated the tribesmen, who shared in little of the benefits of the state. As the Chinese strengthened their positions economically and socially, the tribesmen increasingly became frustrated, and finally came to rebel.

The Xianbei tribesmen, left in the garrisons in the north, felt themselves badly used. In time their status had become little better than that of slaves, for they were unable to transfer to other posts, they could not intermarry with other social groups, and their numbers were supplemented by imported criminals (a traditional Chinese use of the frontier area), with whom they became indistinguishable. Their officers did not have the same opportunities for advancement as did those posted in the court in the south. The rumble of discontent became audible, and in the 520s rebellion broke out. Some one million disinherited Xianbei, it is said, turned south and overwhelmed the state. When the dust cleared in 534–35 there were two states, Eastern and Western Wei, which in turn became the Northern Qi 齊 (550–77) and Northern Zhou 周 (557–81), respectively, as warring dynasties vying for power.

All during this period there is much evidence of friction between the Chinese and the tribesmen. Gao Huan 高歡, the ruler of the Eastern Wei, tried to make peace between the two. It is reported that he would say to the soldiers in the Xianbei language, "The Chinese are your slaves, they farm for you, the women make your clothing, they bring you your supplies and clothing, keeping you warm and full, why do you want to oppress them?" To the Chinese he would say, "The Xianbei are your clients, you give them a measure of grain and a bolt of cloth, and they fight for you and enable you to have peace and order, why do you hate them?"[14] At another time Gao Huan said that his generals were tempted to go west, where many of them had family, while his civil officers wanted to go south, where they thought the true legitimacy was.[15] There was no doubt that he had to rule very carefully.

Warfare between the two northern states was continuous, each claiming to be the rightful heir of the previous state. Increasing losses and the difficulty of replacing the Xianbei tribesmen led the Western Wei/Northern Zhou to seek other sources of manpower. The solution was to tribalize the Chinese; that is, to accept those Chinese of means into the military who could provide their own arms, in return for exemptions from taxes, giving them Tuoba names, enrolling them in the central military organization, and pretending that they were all Xianbei. This centralized military system, called the *fubing* 府兵 at a later date, gave the northwestern state an enormous advantage, which they soon utilized.

The southern state was clearly in trouble. In emergencies, large-scale mobilizations could be undertaken, but the central hereditary military establishment,

the basis of rule by the émigré northerners, was weakening and aging after two hundred years. How weak it was became obvious in 547, when a northern adventurer, Hou Jing 侯景, crossed the Yangzi with only a thousand men, took the palace by stealth and treachery, and captured Emperor Wu of the Liang, the aged monarch, and enlisted almost immediately an army of a hundred thousand men. The various imperial princes, stationed as governors upriver, were able to move only very slowly, for they were now dependent on the private troops of local southern leaders who were emerging to take up the slack of the weakening central government. Emperor Wu, after a glorious reign of fifty years, starved to death before rescue came. In 554, the Western Wei sent their columns south to take over much of the southern state's territory. The remnant state, now ruled by one of the Liang generals, who in 557 established the Chen 陳 dynasty, managed to survive for a few more decades. There was no unity, subordinates obeyed only if it was in their interest, and the troops had to be recruited from among landless peasants.

The Northern Qi could not long survive in the face of the superb military machine created by the Western Wei/Northern Zhou, and it fell in 577; the Sui 隋 inherited this army and, in 589, brought to an end the Chen in the south. China was once more united. But while the Tuoba leadership had created this military force, they could not hold on to it, for it was now largely Chinese, and the tribal organizational rubric had merely provided a smooth means of transition from Xianbei to Chinese rule. Their military organization, however, persisted and provided, first for the Sui and then for the Tang, the military means of expansion and glory.

Disunity such as existed during the Northern and Southern Dynasties would seem to be the exception in Chinese history, and such periods were only an interim one before unity was reestablished. However, this may be misleading. A survey of the years between 220 and 1912 finds 950 years in which China was united as opposed to 742 of disunion. Even this is somewhat misleading, for a good part of the time when China was nominally ruled by one dynasty, the country was in fact not under central control. And yet, for China, the natural equilibrium seems to be that of unity, at least from the Qin-Han on. Certainly, in comparison with a place like India, unity seems to be the preponderant tendency. India is similarly a large, enclosed area, yet the natural equilibrium there is regional, and overall unity is an imposition that in the past was maintained only for short periods. Much of India was united during the Maurya dynasty 322–185 B.C. and the Gupta A.D. 320–535, but there is the sense that these empires were periods of tension, that they were not meant to last, whereas in China, it is periods of disunion that produce that sense of unease and transition. What is it in the society that lends itself to this sense of unity as a natural state of equilibrium?