




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cosmopolitanism and imperial women in the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern Dynasties (304–581)

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Abstract

This article explores the roles imperial women played in the practices and systems of the northern states during the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) and Northern Dynasties periods (386–581), two of the most politically turbulent periods in Chinese history. The article will focus particularly on the absence of crown princesses and intermarriage practice in Northern Wei, and the appearance of coterminous empresses in Former Zhao and Northern Zhou. While a vast scholarship has viewed the rulership strategies and policies of the Northern Dynasties as a process of Sinicization, or one-sided acculturation, this article considers the perspective of the northern rulers who were aware of a multicultural populace. In an effort to shore up their power in court and rule effectively over a dispersed, heterogeneous population, these northern rulers enforced agendas employing imperial women as the medium through which to engage elites of diverse backgrounds and tie these groups to their imperial families. Imperial women served in critical roles that brought to the court a delicate balance among various powerful factions, lending stability to the reigns of emperors and promoting cosmopolitanism in a period prior to Tang (618–907).

Keywords: Northern Dynasties; elites; intermarriage; crown princess; empress

Introduction

The Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) and Northern Dynasties (386–581) periods are considered to have been two of the most politically chaotic periods in Chinese history, awash in intense social and cultural change.¹ The so-called ‘Five Barbarians’ 五胡, a collection of five Inner Asian groups consisting of the Xianbei 鮮卑, Xiongnu 匈奴, Jie 羯, Di 氐, and Qiang 羌, established the ‘Sixteen Kingdoms’ 十六國 and vied for supremacy over North China. Studies of the northern states and their rulers have

¹The period between Han and Tang has often been considered ‘the Dark Age of Chinese history’. See Albert E. Dien and Keith N. Knapp, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 2: The Six Dynasties, 220–589*, (eds) Albert E. Dien and Keith N. Knapp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–24.

generally been considered through the lens of acculturation.² Take, for example, the Northern Wei (386–534) dynasty, whose Xianbei rulers unified North China in 439. Emperor Xiaowen's 孝文帝 (r. 471–499) 'Sinicization policies' are hailed as the centrepiece of state adherence to 'Chinese' customs and institutions. Scholars have pointed to his 'Sinicization policies', which include the reformation of costumes, alteration of surnames, changes to family registrations, and ban of the Xianbei language.³ One of the most deliberated-upon debates of this period has concerned their acceptance of Han institutions and cultures, and thus their gradual Sinicization.

Instead of focusing on a narrative of one-sided acculturation, this article approaches this period from the perspective of the northern rulers who had to quickly adapt their rulership over diverse groups of peoples. 'Cosmopolitanism' has generally been associated with the succeeding Sui-Tang dynasties (581–907).⁴ The study of Sui-Tang cosmopolitanism, pioneered by Xiang Da 向達 in his collection of 23 papers on the history of cultural exchange between the Tang dynasty and foreign states, has come to describe an inclusive society with an elite class readily consuming and engaging with foreign cultural imports such as religion, art forms, and material culture.⁵ Much of this scholarship, best exemplified by Edward Schafer's book, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, predominantly cites literary sources depicting the exotic tastes of the elites.⁶ Departing from this literature, there has been an increase in studies that demonstrate Sui-Tang cosmopolitanism from the perspectives of pluralistic society and institutions. The important work of Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 brought attention to the non-Han ancestry of the Northern Dynasties' rulers and local elites, tying their origins to Sui-Tang institutions.⁷ Charles Holcombe argued for cosmopolitanism in the first half of Tang based on the active participation of non-Han peoples in

²Take, for example, the 'Sinicization' of the rulers of Former Zhao. See Dong Gang 董剛, 'Xiongnu Hanguo hanhua wenti bianxi' 匈奴漢國漢化問題辨析, *Gansu shehui kexue* 甘肅社會科學, no. 4, 2018, pp. 213–221.

³See Sun Tongxun 孫同勛, *Tuoba shi de hanhua ji qita: Bei Wei shilun wenji* 拓拔氏的漢化及其他: 北魏史論文集 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 2005), pp. 7–176. Sun covers the backgrounds and processes of Xiaowen's Sinicization policy. Also see Hu Axiang 胡阿祥 et al., *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi shiwu jiang* 魏晉南北朝史十五講 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2010); Ch'oe Jinyöl 최진열, *Hyomunje üi Hanhwa chöngch'aek kwa Nakyang hoin sahoe: Puk Wi hugi hosok yuji hyönsang gwa kü paegyöng* 효문제의 '한화'정책과 낙양호인사회: 북위 후기 호족 유지 현상과 그 배경 (Söul: Hanul ak'ademi, 2016), pp. 25–177. Ch'oe's own translation of his book title is 'Emperor Xiaowen's Sinicization policy and Xianbei people in the capital city of Luoyang in later period Bei Wei dynasty: The maintenance of Xianbei-style nomadic custom and culture'.

⁴Mark Lewis mentioned that the majority of Chinese consider Tang a cultural and political pinnacle in history, in Mark Edward Lewis, *China's cosmopolitan empire: The Tang dynasty* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 1. Also, Marc Abramson introduced the results of a survey of a group of Shanghainese students conducted in 1997 after the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. When asked which Chinese period they would want to live in, their answer was the Tang dynasty as they considered it to be 'Great China'. See Marc Abramson, *Ethnic identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. vii.

⁵Xiang Da 向達, *Tangdai Chang'an yu Xiyu wenming* 唐代長安與西域文明 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001).

⁶Edward Schafer, *The golden peaches of Samarkand: A study of T'ang exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

⁷Chen Yinke has written many articles on the mixed ancestry of the rulers of the Northern Dynasties and Sui-Tang.

politics, administration, and economic activities.⁸ Expanding on these works, Jonathan Skaff highlighted the contributions that ecological and ethnographical diversity made to cosmopolitanism in the Sui-Tang empires by exploring the integration of Turko-Mongol peoples into Sui-Tang imperial institutions. His book meticulously delineates the mutually beneficial relationship between the Turko-Mongol elites and the Sui-Tang emperors and government officials.⁹

Recent studies have pointed to the manifestations of cosmopolitanism prior to Tang. Chen Sanping analysed the Central Asian influence of the Tuoba, a branch of the Xianbei Inner Asian group, on Chinese culture, language, governance, and politics.¹⁰ He argued that the Tuoba were major contributors to a chain of events culminating in the cosmopolitanism of the Tang dynasty. Ch'oe Jinyŏl, in his article on Luoyang, the capital city of Northern Wei, characterized it as a 'salad bowl'.¹¹ Underscoring the diversity of non-Han peoples living in the capital and examining the markets where 'foreign' goods were traded, he presented a cosmopolitan city in which peoples of many different cultures coexisted. Most recently, Scott Pearce noted how Luoyang at the time of Northern Wei was rich with and full of foreign goods, and should be considered a predecessor to Chang'an of Tang.¹² Pak Han-je's theory of 'Sino-Barbarian Synthesis' (*hohan cheje*, 胡漢體制), first introduced in 1988, provides a framework for understanding ethnic integration during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420–589).¹³ Pak's theory refuted the one-sided process of assimilation and argued that multiple cultures of 'Han and *hu* 胡' during this period contributed to the making of an integrated Sui-Tang empire.¹⁴

My approach to cosmopolitanism during this period builds on these prior studies which viewed cosmopolitanism through the lenses of a pluralistic society and institutions. In particular, I adopt tenets of 'cosmopolitan politics' put forward by Mylas

⁸Charles Holcombe, 'Immigrants and strangers: From cosmopolitanism to Confucian universalism in Tang China', *T'ang Studies*, vol. 20–21, 2002–2003, pp. 71–72.

⁹Jonathan Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol neighbors: Culture, power, and connections, 580–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). He reviewed Sui-Tang cosmopolitanism in the same book on pp. 9–11.

¹⁰Sanping Chen, *Multicultural China in the early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹¹Ch'oe Jinyŏl 최진열, 'Puk Wi hugi ūi kukche doshi Nakyang: chongjok pump'o wa tamunhwa kongjon ūi chungshim ūro 북위 후기의 국제도시 낙양: 종족 분포와 다문화 공존을 중심으로', *Toshi inmunhak yŏngu* 도시인문학 연구, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 135–178.

¹²He mentioned that 'a combination of commerce and cosmopolitanism that, if not the equal of Tang's Chang'an, was certainly a predecessor'. Scott Pearce, *Northern Wei (386–534): A new form of empire in East Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 288.

¹³Pak translated '*hohan cheje*' 胡漢體制 as 'Sino-Barbarian Synthesis'. The most recent version of his theory on the politics of the early medieval period was published in 2019. Pak Han-je 박한제, *Chungguk chungse hohan ch'eje ūi chŏngch'ijŏk chŏn'gae* 중국중세 호한체제의 정치적 전개 (Sŏul: Ilchogak, 2019).

¹⁴*Hu* was used in the original title of Pak's book. During the Tang dynasty, *hu* was a designation for the Sogdians. *Hu* during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period can be translated as either 'foreigner' or 'barbarian'. Pak's use of the term *hu* should be understood as a generalized term to refer to non-Han people during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. Also see Shao-yun Yang, 'Fan and Han: The origins and uses of a conceptual dichotomy in mid-imperial China, ca. 500–1200', in *Political strategies of identity-building in non-Han empires in China*, (eds) Francesca Fiaschetti and Julia Schneider (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), pp. 9–35.

Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler in their edited volume *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*. In their observation of ancient empires from the early first millennium BCE to the first millennium CE, they argued that ‘cosmopolitanism—a complex of practices and ideals that enabled certain individuals not only to cross cultural boundaries, but to establish an enduring normative framework across them—was an indispensable instrument of imperial rule’.¹⁵ They contended that rulers of vast empires were prudent in managing differences in their rule over large, heterogeneous populations, predominantly with regard to relations between imperial elites and ‘pre-existing concentrations of power’ or local elites.

Similarly, this article views cosmopolitanism within the scope of the elite class and explores practices that helped bridge divisions between imperial and local elites. The multicultural society of the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Dynasties periods posed a unique challenge from a rulership standpoint as non-Han rulers struggled to survive in a rapidly changing environment, while having to devise various strategies to rule over Han and non-Han peoples.¹⁶ The northern rulers enforced practices to integrate the local elites in their attempt to rule over dispersed, heterogeneous populations, especially after the unification of the northern states by Northern Wei. Central to this article are practices pertaining to imperial women which were observed by the Northern Dynasties. The use of women as the medium through which to connect groups of people was an ancient practice that had been used by many societies. One of the simplest, yet most effective, methods of tying groups together was through marriage. Take, for example, the *heqin* 和親 policy first practised under the rule of Emperor Gaozu of Han (r. 202–195 BCE). Wary of an invasion by his northern neighbours, the Xiongnu, Emperor Gaozu’s adviser Liu Jing 劉敬 suggested that he send his daughter to be married to the Xiongnu ruler in the hope that an offspring would contribute to an alliance between the two states.¹⁷ Emperor Gaozu eventually sent an imperial princess to the Xiongnu and cemented an era of peace between Han and the Xiongnu that lasted centuries. The practice of *heqin* intermarriage demonstrated the efficacy of women mediating in the establishment of friendly relations with neighbouring states. However, practices concerning imperial women were crucial tools in the policy portfolio of rulers, not only for diplomacy, but also political stability and state-building in pluralistic societies.

¹⁵Mylas Lavan, Richard E. Payne and John Weisweiler, ‘Cosmopolitan politics: The assimilation and subordination of elite cultures’, in *Cosmopolitanism and empire: Universal rulers, local elites, and cultural integration in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, (eds) Mylas Lavan, Richard E. Payne and John Weisweiler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

¹⁶I use ‘non-Han’ as an umbrella identity term to designate different Inner Asian ethnic groups who were not Han. Han in this period refers to those who spoke the Chinese language, defined themselves (directly or indirectly) based on the classics of literary Chinese, and claimed descent from the old empire.

¹⁷Liu Jing initially suggested that Emperor Gaozu sent his own daughter to the Xiongnu. However, Empress Lü did not want to marry her daughter to the Xiongnu ruler and thus compelled Emperor Gaozu to send an imperial princess to the Xiongnu in her stead. See Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 99, p. 2719. For details on *heqin* princesses, see Pan Yihong, ‘Marriage alliances and Chinese princesses in international politics from Han through Tang’, *Asia Major*, vol. 10, no. 1/2, 1997, pp. 95–131. For more on tributary relations of the Northern Wei intermarriages, see Armin Selbitschka, ‘Tribute, hostages, and marriage alliances: A close reading of diplomatic strategies in the Northern Wei period’, *Early Medieval China*, no. 25, 2019, pp. 64–84.

An important contribution with regard to marriage systems, intermarriages, and women's roles in the medieval period, particularly those of non-Han states, is Jennifer Holmgren's article on the biographies of empresses in the *History of Northern Wei* (*Wei shu* 魏書). She analysed how later historians minimized the role that Tuoba leaders' wives played in the founding of the Northern Wei dynasty. Even though the early Tuoba rulers were dependent on intermarriages with Han and non-Han groups, she conjectured that Chapter 13 of *Wei shu*, which emphasized a male-dominant, militant Tuoba leadership, was most likely added later by Tang historians. By giving prominence to a Tuoba leadership that emerged from a male-dominant military, the Tang historians implied limited latitude for female participation.¹⁸ Her 1983 article on the Northern Wei harem system dealt with the Tuoba's adaptation of the institutions of concubine, empress, and empress dowager. She observed that the Tuoba leadership's fear of female and distaff participation in politics can be attributed to their position as a minority group whose power was rooted in their ties to the emperor and their military prowess. Maternal kin power constituted a potential threat to the traditional powers allotted to the emperor's paternal relatives and hence Northern Wei enforced practices pertaining to the appointment of heirs-apparent and consorts.¹⁹ In her 1991 article on marriage practices in Han and non-Han states, Holmgren highlighted differences in strategies that non-Han states adopted for imperial marriages as well as the political role of the emperor's wife. She touched on the Northern Wei marriage system, arguing that it was designed in the common interest of the ruling and collateral families to deny both Han and non-Han outsiders' access to the throne through marriage. She specified that the Northern Wei rulers employed three strategies to separate the wives' biological capacity to produce an heir from their political role. First, mothers of eldest sons were never appointed to the rank of empress. Second, not every emperor appointed empresses and, if they did, those empresses were childless and purely symbolic, mostly coming from recently conquered states. Third, imperial princesses were married off to members of refugee groups or non-Han peoples.²⁰ Alongside Holmgren, Keith McMahon offered a sweeping study of imperial women in his book *Women Shall Not Rule*, demonstrating the nomadic influence on imperial practices such as successor selection and polygamy.²¹ More recently, Zheng Yaru 鄭雅如 examined the Northern Wei's adoption of the concepts of legitimate and non-legitimate 嫡庶 wife and offspring, giving particular attention to Emperor Xiaowen's reign.²²

¹⁸See Jennifer Holmgren, 'Women and political power in the traditional T'o-pa elite: A preliminary study of the biographies of empresses in the Wei-shu', *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 35, 1981–1983, pp. 33–74.

¹⁹I use 'maternal kin power' to refer to power derived from the mother and the mother's family. Other scholars have used terms such as women, distaff, and distaff kin or relative power. For more on Holmgren's article on the early Northern Wei harem system, see Jennifer Holmgren, 'The harem in Northern Wei politics—398–498 A.D.: A study of T'o-pa attitudes towards the institution of empress, empress-dowager, and regency governments in the Chinese dynastic system during the early Northern Wei', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 26, no. 1–2, 1983, pp. 71–96.

²⁰See Jennifer Holmgren, 'Imperial marriage in the native Chinese and non-Han state, Han to Ming', in *Marriage and inequality in Chinese society*, (eds) Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 58–96.

²¹See Keith McMahon, *Women shall not rule: Imperial wives and concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), pp. 131–132.

²²Zheng explored how the acceptance of Han culture changed the institution of empress and empress dowager through the adoption of the Han concept of legitimate and non-legitimate wives.

Building on these previous works, this article uncovers and examines three practices concerning imperial women and marriage systems during the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Dynasties periods. First, the Northern Wei court forwent the appointment of crown princesses (*huang taizi fei* 皇太子妃 or *taizi fei* 太子妃), namely the legitimate wives of crown princes (*huang taizi* 皇太子 or *taizi* 太子). Unlike its counterparts such as Liu-Song 劉宋, Qi 齊, Liang 梁, and Chen 陳 to the south, Northern Wei did not install any crown princesses during its approximately 150-year span.²³ Second, Northern Wei implemented an intermarriage system that took a structured approach to the selection of spouses from certain ethnic backgrounds for members of the imperial family. The Northern Wei court actively used the practice of intermarriage to realize sociopolitical integration among Han and non-Han peoples. Third, Former Zhao and Northern Zhou chose to install coterminous empresses, that is, empresses who served in their roles concurrently. These northern states used this system to gain powerful Han and non-Han allies, while also keeping them in check.

I argue that these practices centred on imperial women helped northern rulers to consolidate power during a period of turbulence by integrating local elites of diverse backgrounds into their courts. These intergroup interactions were not limited solely to those that took place between Han and non-Han peoples. Political relationships during this period were complex, with northern rulers paying special attention to the balance among non-Han groups as well.²⁴ The resulting cultural diversification in the make-up of the imperial court promoted political harmony in a time of dissonance. Imperial women were critical to the creation of cosmopolitan societies in North China prior to Tang.

See Zheng Yaru 鄭雅如, 'Hanzi yu hufeng: zhongtan Bei Wei de "huanghou", "huangtaihou" zhidu 漢制與胡風: 重探北魏的「皇后」、「皇太后」制度', *Zhong'ang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊, vol. 90, no. 1, March 2019, pp. 1–76. Zheng wrote another article which analysed the intertwined culture of Han and non-Han through the analysis of the marriage system of princes. See Zheng Yaru, 'Hu Han jiaocuo: Bei Wei Xianbei zhu wang hunyin zhidu yu wenhua banxi 胡漢交錯: 北魏鮮卑諸王婚姻制度與文化辨析', in *Zhang Guangda xiansheng jiushi huadan zhushou lunwenji* 張廣達先生九十華誕祝壽論文集, (eds) Zheng A'cai 鄭阿財 and Wang Juanzhu 汪娟主 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 2021), pp. 1107–1154.

²³Many of the empresses in Liu-Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen were appointed as crown princesses when their husbands were crown princes. For example, Empress Sima 司馬皇后 was appointed as crown princess and later became empress when Emperor Shao of Liu-Song (r. 422–424) was enthroned. See Shen Yue 沈約, *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 41, p. 1283. Empress Chu 褚皇后 was appointed as crown princess when her husband, Xiao Baojuan 蕭寶卷 (r. 498–501, Marquess of Donghun 東昏侯), was crown prince and she later became empress. See Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯, *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), vol. 20, p. 394. Empress Jian née Wang 簡皇后王氏 was installed as crown princess when her husband, Emperor Jianwen of Liang 簡文帝 (r. 549–551), was crown prince. As she died before her husband was enthroned, she received the title of empress posthumously. See Yao Silian 姚思廉, *Liang shu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), vol. 7, p. 158. Empress Shen 沈皇后 was installed as crown princess when her husband, Houzhu 後主 of Chen (r. 582–589), was crown prince. She was appointed as empress upon Houzhu's enthronement. See Yao Silian, *Chen shu* 陳書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), vol. 7, p. 130.

²⁴For example, the Xianbei rulers of Northern Wei once jeopardized their rule by ignoring other non-Han elites. The incident, the so-called 'Six Garrison Riots' was due to the sentiment that the *guoren* 國人, apparently 'men of Dai', had been gradually neglected by the Northern Wei court after Emperor Xiaowen's reformation. See Scott Pearce, 'Northern Wei', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 2*, (eds) Dien and Knapp, pp. 178–183.

The absence of crown princesses in Northern Wei

Succinctly articulated by McMahon, each dynasty had their own harem systems and terminologies based on examples in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) as well as those established during the Qin (221 BCE–206 BC), Han (202 BCE–220 CE), and preceding dynasties. These harem systems organized the ranks of the palace ladies to correspond to those of male court officials at an equivalent level.²⁵ Likewise, the emperors of Northern Wei also implemented their own imperial harem system that adopted aspects of these prior rank systems, yet differed in some ways. As Holmgren noted, non-Han states did not completely adopt Chinese models of marriage, but modified, selected, or integrated them.²⁶ While all dynastic harem systems varied from one another, a close look at the Northern Wei harem system reveals a conspicuous difference that set Northern Wei apart.

Northern Wei abstained from appointing the principal wives of the crown princes as crown princesses. While records describing the titles and origins of empresses and concubines are dispersed throughout the *History of Northern Wei*, the *History of Northern Dynasties* (*Bei shi* 北史), and the epitaphs of the period, not a single record of a crown princess being appointed can be found. When viewed in conjunction with other Northern Wei practices, this seems connected to the court's focus on preventing the rise of maternal kin power. Extant records point to Emperor Daowu 道武帝 (r. 386–409), the founder of Northern Wei, as likely to have been the first ruler to enforce this practice. When establishing new institutions, he granted posthumous titles to eight generations of his paternal ancestors and gave their wives the same titles, as he had no knowledge of the structure of their harems. He also put together his own harem, consisting of an empress (*zhonggong* 中宮) and multiple concubines, who were given the title of Mesdames (*furen* 夫人).²⁷ Importantly, missing from these new institutions were ranks for the harem of the crown prince. For instance, the imperial harem during the Han dynasty, which served as a basis for later dynastic harems, had three ranks for the harem of the crown prince, including crown princess (*fei* 妃), 'Lady of Excellence' (*liangdi* 良娣), and 'Child-bearing Concubine' (*ruzi* 孺子).²⁸ Choosing not to adopt the official harem structure from preceding dynasties for the crown prince, Northern Wei emperors occasionally offered titles to the crown princes' concubines; however, they did not appoint crown princesses.

According to the preface of the 'Biography of Sons of Emperor Jingmu' 景穆帝 in *Wei shu*, no official titles were given to crown princesses or concubines of crown princes before Emperor Wencheng 文成帝 (r. 452–465). After becoming emperor, Wencheng

²⁵ McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, pp. 60–63.

²⁶ Holmgren, 'Imperial marriage', p. 77.

²⁷ See Wei Shou 魏收, *Wei shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 13, p. 321. In this article, I chose to use *Wei shu* over *Bei shi*. *Wei shu* was compiled during the Northern Qi dynasty by Wei shou (505–572), while *Bei shi* which was compiled during the Tang dynasty by Li Yanshou 李延壽. Although *Wei shu* is known for its compiler's favouritism and bias, it is generally considered the earliest complete record of Northern Wei. Some chapters of *Wei shu*, including the 'biographies of empresses', were added in later periods, so the records are identical to those in *Bei shi*. See Albert E. Dien et al. (eds), *Early medieval Chinese texts: A bibliographical guide* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2015), pp. 368–372; McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, p. 136.

²⁸ See Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), vol. 63, p. 2741.

granted the posthumous title of Jingmu to his father Tuoba Huang 拓跋晃 (428–451) and the title of ‘Lady of the Pepper Chamber’ (*jiaofang* 椒房, lit. ‘pepper tree residence’) to his father’s palace ladies who had given birth to sons.²⁹ Notably, crown princesses were not installed even after Wencheng’s reign. Emperor Xiaowen’s reformation of the system of empresses and concubines also did not officially establish a ranking system for the harem of the crown prince.³⁰ Xiaowen did, however, bestow the titles of ‘Left and Right Child-bearing Concubines’ 左右孺子 on the daughters of Liu Changwen 劉長文 and Zheng Yi 鄭懿 for his crown prince Yuan Xun 元恂 (483–497). Interestingly, at the same time, while Xiaowen had selected the daughter of the Minister of Education 司徒 Feng Dan 馮誕 for the crown prince, there is no further reference to Feng Dan’s daughter being installed as the crown princess.³¹ While it is plausible that there were vacancies in the imperial harem during the early stages of state-building when institutions were less established, the absence of crown princesses even after Xiaowen’s period cannot be overlooked, considering the comprehensive reformation of the imperial harem.³²

In contrast to the principal wives of crown princes, the principal wives of other princes in the period were officially appointed and bestowed with the title of princess-consort 王妃. For instance, Yuan Yong 元雍, Prince of Gaoyang 高陽王 and the son of Xianwen 獻文帝 (r. 465–471), appointed the sister of Cui Xian 崔顯 of the Boling 博陵 Cui family as princess after his previous princess-consort née Lu 盧氏 died.³³ Yuan Yong had been given a princely title during the reign of Xiaowen in 485 and later became an adviser to the young Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝 (r. 515–528). Apart from the official dynastic histories, epitaphs also corroborate the existence of Northern Wei princess-consorts. According to the epitaph of Lady Qu 鞠氏, she was the princess of Yuan Changshou 元長壽, a son of Tuoba Huang.³⁴ The cases of Lady Shi 石氏, the second princess-consort 次妃 of Yuan Ji 元繼, Prince of Jiangyang 江陽王 and descendant of Daowu, and Lady Li 李氏, the principal wife of Yuan Hao 元顥, Prince of Beihai 北海, both affirm the appointment of princess-consorts.³⁵ A discussion held during

²⁹*Wei shu*, vol. 19a, p. 441.

³⁰During the reign of Daowu, he established two ranks—empress 皇后 and Mesdames 夫人. Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 (r. 423–452) added ‘Left and Right Bright Department’ 左右昭儀, ‘Noble Lady’ 貴人, ‘Lady of the Pepper Chamber’ 椒房, and ‘Qualifying Attendant’ 中式. During the reign of Xiaowen, the harem system was reformed again. He added more ranks, including ‘Three Imperial Concubines’ 三嬪, ‘Six Imperial Concubines’ 六嬪, ‘Hereditary Consort’ 世婦, and ‘Imperial Women’ 御女. He equated the ranks of ‘Left and Right Bright Department’ 左右昭儀 to ‘Commander-in-Chief’ 大司馬; ‘Three Mesdames’ 三夫人 to ‘Three Dukes’ 三公; ‘Three Imperial Concubines’ 三嬪 to ‘Three Ministers’ 三卿; ‘Six Imperial Concubines’ 六嬪 to ‘Six Ministers’ 六卿; ‘Hereditary Consort’ 世婦 to ‘Grand Master of Palace’ 中大夫; and ‘Imperial Women’ 御女 to ‘Senior Servicemen’ 元士. No ranks were established for the harem of the crown prince. See *ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 321.

³¹*Ibid.*, vol. 22, p. 589.

³²Zheng Yaru argued that Xiaowen adopted the Han Chinese concept of legitimate and illegitimate wives. See Zheng, ‘Hanzhi yu hufeng’, pp. 1–76. Considering Xiaowen’s adoption of the concept of legitimate and illegitimate wives places more significance on forgoing the installation of crown princesses and exposes the intentional nature of the absence of crown princesses.

³³*Wei shu*, vol. 21, p. 557.

³⁴Zhao Chao 趙超, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian* 漢魏南北朝墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1992), p. 52.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 55 and 65.

the reign of Emperor Xuanwu 宣武帝 (r. 499–515) offers important insight into the titles of princess-consort and ‘consort’ 妃 given to the wives of princes.

[Yuan] Kuang presented a memorial stating that the principal wives of imperial princes, first regional princes, and second regional princes were all called ‘princess-consort’ (*fei*), but wives of third regional princes and below were all called ‘principal wife’ (*qi*). They cannot have an equal title of princess-consort as above, but also cannot reach the titles of the wives of fifth rank officials below, which is questionable. Emperor Xuanwu answered, ‘when husbands are regarded highly in the court, their wives are made glorious in the house. Nothing is decided for women, so they ascend depending on their husbands. Since third regional princes have already been conferred as princes, the princess title should also be equivalent. The word “principal wife” means being equal and if it is already equal in reason, it can follow the example of the princess-consort’. Starting from now, the title of the wives of third regional princes was decided.³⁶

匡奏親王及始藩、二藩王妻悉有妃號，而三藩已下皆謂之妻，上不得同為妃名，而下不及五品已有命婦之號，竊為疑。詔曰：‘夫貴於朝，妻榮於室，婦女無定，升從其夫。三藩既啟王封，妃名亦宜同等。妻者，齊也，理與已齊，可從妃例。’自是三藩王妻名號始定。

According to the record, the wives of first and second regional princes were already appointed as princesses-consorts before Xuanwu accepted the petition to offer titles to the wives of third regional princes. Throughout the span of the Northern Wei dynasty, the wives of emperors and imperial princes were all bestowed with official ranks and titles, and only crown princesses were not included in the statutes. The absence of crown princesses seems to have been an intentional choice by the Northern Wei court.

The practice of forgoing the installation of crown princesses seems to be connected to the renowned Northern Wei practice concerning empresses and concubines, namely *zigui musu* 子貴母死, ‘if the son is to be exalted, the mother is killed’.³⁷ *Zigui musu* was a form of matricide in which the mother of the heir was killed. Its purpose was to curtail the rise of maternal kin power.³⁸ In *Wei shu*, this practice was recorded as an ‘old institution’ 舊制 or an ‘old statute’ 舊法.³⁹ However, it does not seem to have been practised in

³⁶ *Wei shu*, vol. 19a, p. 453.

³⁷ Regarding this system, see Tian Yuqing 田餘慶, *Tuoba shi tan* 拓跋史探 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2011), pp. 1–51; Valentin C. Golovachev, ‘Matricide among the Tuoba-Xianbei and its transformation during the Northern Wei’, *Early Medieval China*, no. 8, 2002, pp. 1–41.

³⁸ *Zigui musu* is well known to have been practised to prevent a rise of maternal kin power. Scholars such as Holmgren and Golovachev have written on the custom of matricide as a response to fear of the power of women and distaff relatives. See Golovachev, ‘Matricide among the Tuoba-Xianbei’, pp. 10 and 22; Holmgren, ‘The harem’, pp. 72–73; Zheng, ‘Hanzhi yu hufeng’, p. 21.

³⁹ According to *Wei shu*, Lady Liu, the mother of Emperor Mingyuan, was killed due to the ‘old statute’ 舊法, and Lady Lin, the mother of Yuan Xun 元恂, was killed due to the ‘old institution’ 舊制. See *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 325 and p. 332, respectively.

Dai 代, during Northern Wei predynastic times.⁴⁰ Moreover, earlier historical records such as the *History of Later Han* (*Hou Han shu* 後漢書) do not describe the practice. The records of the earlier Xianbei people instead emphasized the maternal kin power of other powerful groups.⁴¹ Women in the northern non-Han groups were known to have enjoyed more freedom and power compared to their Han counterparts. They often assumed the role of advisers, while also having more liberty in their everyday lives and are known to have engaged in activities such as horseback riding and archery.⁴² The principal wives of rulers prior to the Northern Dynasties period also came from powerful groups.⁴³ The *zigui musu* practice was most likely not an old institution or statute inherited from earlier Xianbei groups, but rather a policy introduced during Northern Wei.⁴⁴ Aware of predynastic maternal kin power, *zigui musu* was conceived of to preclude the rise of such power by killing the mothers of crown princes.⁴⁵

Similarly, the practice of forgoing the installation of crown princesses shared the common goal of preventing the rise of maternal kin power in court. The purpose of investing a crown princess was to confer on her the title of empress in the future. While many unexpected situations such as the deposition of the crown prince could preclude the elevation in status, the crown princess would typically become an empress when the crown prince acceded to the throne. Fear of maternal kin power not only gave

⁴⁰There are no records of pre-Northern Wei empresses having been killed in accordance with the statute. Rather, the mothers of the predynastic Northern Wei rulers helped their sons lay the foundations to their rule.

⁴¹In *Hou Han shu*, it is stated that the Wuhan/Xianbei clans followed the advice of their mothers and wives. See Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 90, p. 2979.

⁴²Horseback riding, archery, or travelling was not unusual for Northern Wei women. McMahon noted *zigui musu* demonstrated Northern Wei's anxiety of potential interference in politics. See McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, pp. 135–138. Sixth-century aristocrat Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (533–590s) provided insight into the differences between Han and non-Han women (southern versus northern women) in his *Family instructions of Master Yan* 顏氏家訓. He portrayed northern women as active participants in their family affairs, unlike their counterparts east of the Yangzi River. By pointing to examples such as seeking jobs for their sons and talking to the authorities on behalf of their husbands, he attributed such behaviour to the influence of the Northern Wei dynasty. Wang Liqi 王利器, *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), p. 48. For details on the background and themes of Yan Zhitui's text, see Mark Edward Lewis, 'Writing the world in the family instructions of the Yan clan', *Early Medieval China*, no. 13–14.1, 2007, pp. 33–80.

⁴³For instance, the mother of Emperor Daowu was from the Helan 賀蘭 group, a prominent Xianbei people, and Daowu received considerable help from them in his establishment of Northern Wei. *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 324. Also, the principal wife of Tuoba Shiyijian 拓跋什翼犍 (320–376), posthumously known as Emperor Zhaocheng 昭成帝, was from the Murong 慕容 group, another influential Xianbei group. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 323.

⁴⁴Wei Shou, the compiler of *Wei shu*, mentioned that this practice followed the precedent of Emperor Wu of Han who killed his consort Gouyi upon installing her son as crown prince. See *ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 341. Li Ping 李凭 also agreed that the practice could have started when Emperor Wu of Han killed the mother of his crown prince. For details on each case of the practice, see Li Ping 李凭, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai* 北魏平城時代 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2014), pp. 154–168. Also see Holmgren, 'Women and political power', pp. 57–58.

⁴⁵The practice of *zigui musu* continued until the appointment of the mother of Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝, Empress Dowager Ling née Hu, as empress, and was discontinued in the Eastern Wei and Western Wei courts.

rise to *zigui musu*, but also led to the careful selection of empresses.⁴⁶ Northern Wei empresses who were appointed during their husbands' tenure did not have sons and came from the non-Han ruling families of relatively weaker conquered states without the usual retinue of maternal kin in court.⁴⁷ The absence of crown princesses not only averted the rise of powerful crown princesses, but also allowed the court to control the position of empress and, in turn, prevent the rise of maternal kin power. Moreover, *zigui musu* dictated the death of a crown princess if she bore a son. Take as an example Lady Lin 林氏, a concubine of Xiaowen, who was killed due to *zigui musu* when her son was appointed as crown prince. Her sacrifice was all for naught as her son was then deposed, failing to ascend the throne.⁴⁸ Forgoing the appointment of crown princesses prevented meaningless sacrifice stemming from the practice of *zigui musu*. This practice can also be viewed from the perspective of the primogeniture succession system, the prevailing succession rule favouring first-born males as legitimate heirs to the throne.⁴⁹ As the first-born male would become the heir regardless of the rank of his mother, who would consequently be killed due to *zigui musu*, the traditionally key position of crown princess would be rendered inherently superfluous. Altogether, through the dual practices of *zigui musu* and abstaining from the appointment of crown princesses, Northern Wei rulers intended to stabilize their rule by preventing the rise of potential maternal kin power in court.

Intermarriage practices in the Northern Wei court

In addition to these two practices, intermarriage practices in the Northern Wei court present a clearer picture of how Northern Wei rulers consolidated their rule over a vast unified territory. An examination of the marriage partners of the imperial family reveals that the intermarriage practices of Northern Wei tied the imperial family to diverse groups of conquered local elites, or pre-existing nodes of power. Not only was the Northern Wei court especially conscious and selective of the Han and non-Han backgrounds of marriage partners, but certain positions in the imperial family were also effectively used to bridge divisions between imperial and local elites for the political purpose of consolidating rule over a dispersed, heterogeneous population. The most conspicuous intermarriages were those of the emperor, who often took wives from different ethnic groups.

Empresses from Northern Wei can be separated into two distinct categories: those who were granted posthumous titles and empresses who were appointed during their husbands' reigns. The empresses in the first group, who were originally concubines of the crown princes or emperors, were simultaneously the victims of the *zigui musu*

⁴⁶The second section of this article talks at length about empresses and empress selection in the Northern Wei court. For more on the selection of empresses, see Holmgren, 'The harem', pp. 76–80.

⁴⁷Empress Yu 于皇后 of Xuanwu was an exception as she was installed as empress and had a son during the reign of her husband, Xuanwu. However, her son died when he was three and she died soon after. Empress Gao 高皇后 of Xuanwu was installed as empress after Empress Yu died. She had a son who died at a young age before she became empress. See *Wei shu*, vol. 13, pp. 336–337.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 332.

⁴⁹Zheng Yaru mentioned that the Northern Wei's succession system is considered primogeniture. Zheng, 'Hanzhi yu hufeng', p. 26. Also, Holmgren noted that Tuoba adopted Chinese primogeniture, but the difference is that empresses' sons did not become heirs. See Holmgren, 'Imperial marriage', p. 79.

practice and the mothers of emperors. They received posthumous titles only after their sons had ascended the throne, and memorial ceremonies were offered for them in the Imperial Ancestral Temple 太廟.⁵⁰ Lady Du 杜氏, the posthumous empress of Emperor Mingyuan 明元帝 (r. 409–423), was selected for her background as ‘an offspring of a good family’ (*liangjiazi* 良家子) when Mingyuan was still a crown prince, later becoming a ‘Noble Concubine’ 貴嬪 during Mingyuan’s reign. She received the title of empress posthumously after her son Emperor Taiwu acceded to the throne.⁵¹ Lady Yujiulü 郁久閭氏, the posthumous empress of Jingmu, was in residence at the Eastern Palace 東宮, where her husband lived when he was the crown prince.⁵² While she did not officially hold a title while she was alive, as her husband failed to ascend the throne, she was later appointed as empress posthumously by her son, Emperor Wencheng. Similarly, Lady Li 李氏 was selected by Wencheng to enter the Eastern Palace, and after her husband Emperor Xianwen succeeded his father, she became ‘Noble Lady’ 貴人. After her son Xiaowen became emperor, she was posthumously installed as empress.⁵³ Notably, none of these three posthumous empresses was given a rank when they were still in the crown princes’ harems.

Empresses who were appointed by emperors and bore no sons comprise the second category. These empresses were from the ruling families of conquered non-Han peoples. Empress Daowu née Murong 道武皇后慕容氏 entered the Northern Wei court after the pacification of Later Yan 後燕.⁵⁴ Also, Empress Mingyuan née Yao 明元皇后姚氏 was the daughter of Yao Xing 姚興 of Later Qin 後秦; Empress Taiwu née Helian 太武皇后赫連氏 was the daughter of Helian Bobo 赫連勃勃 of Xia 夏; and Empress Wencheng née Feng 文成皇后馮氏, known as Empress Dowager Wenming 文明太后, was from the imperial family of Northern Yan 北燕.⁵⁵

These appointed empresses came from relatively weaker conquered non-Han states. Jennifer Holmgren named these empresses ‘captive concubines’ and argued that they were preferred as empresses simply because their decimated and scattered families could not pose a threat to the authority of the imperial household.⁵⁶ However, empresses from the latter half of Northern Wei cannot be considered to have come from less prominent backgrounds. The empress of Xuanwu was the daughter of Yu Jing 于勁, who was formerly from the Wuniuyu 勿忸于 clan, a powerful Xianbei

⁵⁰Having been the mothers of emperors, Lady Liu (see *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 325), Lady Du (*ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 326), Lady He (*ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 327), and Lady Li (*ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 331) were offered ceremonies in the Imperial Ancestral Temple.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 326.

⁵²*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 327.

⁵³*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 331. *Wei shu* states that they ‘entered the Palace of Crown Prince’ 入太子宮 or ‘entered the Eastern Palace’ 入東宮.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 325. Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Bei shi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 13, p. 492. Lady Murong was appointed through a petition by Yuan Yi 元儀, who was Prince of Wei 衛王 and Left Prime Minister 左丞相.

⁵⁵*Wei shu*, vol. 13, pp. 325–328; *Bei shi*, vol. 13, pp. 493–496. Although Lady Yao received the title of empress only after her death, as she was not allowed to cast a statue or receive the title of empress while she was alive, she was prominent as she received special treatment from Mingyuan. Lady Helian became a part of the Northern Wei court after the city of Tongwan 統萬城 was conquered by Taiwu. Empress Dowager Wenming entered the court after Northern Yan 北燕 was defeated by Northern Wei.

⁵⁶See Holmgren, ‘The harem’, pp. 76–83.

group.⁵⁷ The empress of Xiaoming was the niece of his mother Empress Dowager Hu.⁵⁸ Emperor Xiaozhuang's 孝莊帝 (r. 528–531) empress was the daughter of Erzhu Rong 尔朱榮, a Xiongnu general. The empresses of Prince of Donghai 東海王 (r. 530) and Emperor Jiemin 節閔帝 (r. 531–532) were the daughters of Erzhu Zhao 尔朱兆.⁵⁹ And the empress of Xiaowu 孝武帝 (r. 532–535), the last empress of Northern Wei, was the daughter of Gao Huan 高歡.⁶⁰ Compared to the earlier years of Northern Wei, empresses in the dynasty's later years started to wield immense power, utilizing their influence to put their own groups in power. An example is Empress Dowager Wenming 文明皇太后 whose two nieces became empresses of Xiaowen.⁶¹

Appointed empresses served as a way to seek friendly relations with the non-Han conquered groups from which the empresses hailed. In addition to the timely nature of the intermarriages after the conquest of these states, the Northern Wei rulers were familiar with the use of intermarriage to create friendly relations, mirroring the *heqin* practice established during the Han dynasty.⁶² Even before the establishment of Northern Wei during Dai (310–376), Tuoba Shiyijian, the grandfather of Emperor Daowu, received Lady Murong, the daughter of Emperor Wenming of Former Yan, as his primary wife to 'continue good terms' (*jihao* 繼好) with Former Yan.⁶³ Likewise, Emperor Daowu sought a marriage alliance with Yao Xing of Later Qin and initially sent 4,000 horses, which Yao Xing accepted. However, Yao Xing later reneged on the offer due to Daowu, having already installed an empress, eventually leading to war.⁶⁴ Northern Wei rulers pursued marriage alliances and were cognizant of the strategic use of intermarriage to establish peace from the outset. Importantly, intermarriage was used to create alliances with conquered groups even during Dai. For instance,

⁵⁷ *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 336; Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), vol. 144, p. 4498; *Bei shi*, vol. 23, p. 837. Yu Jing was descendant of Yu Lidi 于栗磾 who was from Dai.

⁵⁸ *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 340.

⁵⁹ *Bei shi*, vol. 14, p. 518 and vol. 48, p. 1766.

⁶⁰ In terms of Gao Huan's background, scholars have agreed that his family held a hybrid identity. Chen Yinke (1890–1969) asserted that the Northern Qi imperial family was 'Xianbeinized'. He argued that Gao Huan was ethnically Han, but culturally Xianbeinized. See Chen Yinke, 'Bei Qi de Xianbeihua ji xihuhua 北齊的鮮卑化及西胡化', in *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu* 魏晉南北朝史講演錄, (ed.) Wan Shengnan 萬繩楠 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1987), pp. 292–300. Also see Albert E. Dien, 'Eastern Wei–Northern Qi', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 2*, (eds) Dien and Knapp, p. 188.

⁶¹ *Wei shu*, vol. 13, pp. 332–333; *Bei shi*, vol. 13, pp. 499–500. Empress Dowager Feng, namely Empress Dowager Wenming (442–490), was the empress of Emperor Wencheng and assumed regency over her foster-grandson, Emperor Xiaowen. With respect to her influence on Northern Wei history, see A. G. Wenley, *The Grand Empress Dowager Wen Ming and the Northern Wei necropolis at Fang Shan. Vol. 1, no. 1* (1947) (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1947); Pearce, *Northern Wei*, pp. 172–175; Song Qirui 宋其蕪, *Bei Wei nüzhū lun* 北魏女主論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), pp. 133–220; McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, pp. 139–140.

⁶² While arguing that empresses hailing from non-Han conquered territories arose primarily because they did not pose a threat due to there being few, if any, maternal kin, Jennifer Holmgren surmised that the position of empress could have also been used by the Northern Wei court for political purposes. Particularly, 'their appointments were politically advantageous in that they hastened the integration of subject populations into the Northern Wei empire'. See Holmgren, 'The harem', pp. 79–80.

⁶³ Initially, Murong Huang (慕容皝, r. 337–348) of Former Yan sent his sister to Tuoba Shiyijian, but she died shortly afterwards. He then sent his daughter, Lady Murong, to Tuoba Shiyijian. See *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 323.

⁶⁴ Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 118, p. 2991.

Tuoba Yülü 拓跋鬱律 (d. 321) married his daughter to Liu Lugu 劉路孤, a cousin of the Tiefu-Xionggnu chieftain, after Liu Lugu defected to Dai.⁶⁵ Also, after Tuoba Shiyijian 拓跋什翼犍 defeated Tiefu, he married his daughter to their chieftain Liu Wuhuan 劉務桓 who defected to Dai.⁶⁶ In a continuation from Dai, the Northern Wei court used the practice of intermarriage to manufacture a peace over conquered territories. With the exception of the posthumous empresses who were victims of *zigui musi*, marrying elite women from different subjugated groups and appointing them as empresses aided Northern Wei emperors in their efforts to bring diverse conquered groups of people under their rule.⁶⁷

This intermarriage system to consolidate rule over a dispersed, heterogeneous population extended beyond the role of empress. Take, for example, the other members of the emperors' harems who stand in stark contrast to the non-Han backgrounds of empresses. Starting from mid-Northern Wei during the reign of Xiaowen, the emperor focused on domestic policies to diversify and integrate the upper classes. One of these policies was the New Ranking System of the Clans (known as *ding xingzu*, 定姓族), providing a platform for the two groups, Han and Xianbei, to establish relations. Through this policy, the eight elite Xianbei family names Mu 穆, Lu 陸, He 賀, Liu 劉, Lou 樓, Yu 于, Ji 嵇, and Yu 尉 were made equal to the Four Great Families of Han 漢族四姓, which included the Cui Family of Qinghe 清河崔氏, the Zheng Family of Xinyang 滎陽鄭氏, the Lu Family of Fanyang 范陽盧氏, and the Wang Family of Taiyuan 太原王氏.⁶⁸

Along with these domestic policies, at the same time Xiaowen took several concubines of Han origin.⁶⁹ According to *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑), Xiaowen cherished the Four Great Families, and so in 496, he accepted their daughters as concubines. Later, he accepted a daughter from the Li family of Longxi as his *furen*. His acceptance of Han concubines extended beyond himself

⁶⁵ *Wei shu*, vol. 1, p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 12.

⁶⁷ The use of intermarriages to stabilize rule over conquered groups was also practised by later dynasties such as Yuan and Qing. For example, after Chinggis Khan (1162–1227) defeated the Tatars, he took two daughters of the Tatar Yeke Cheren, Yisügi and Yisüi, as his principal wives. See Igor de Rachewiltz, *The secret history of the Mongols: A Mongolian epic chronicle of the thirteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), vol. 1, p. 78. The subject of Chinggis Khan's marriage partners hailing from conquered groups is well studied by Anne Broadbridge. See Anne Broadbridge, *Women and the making of the Mongol empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 73–100. Also, marriage exchanges during the Qing dynasty were crucial in the forging of new alliances. See Evelyn Rawski, 'Ch'ing imperial marriage and problems of rulership', in *Marriage and inequality in Chinese society*, (eds) Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.175.

⁶⁸ *Wei shu*, vol. 113, p. 3014. After the addition of the Li family of Longxi 隴西李氏, the Four Great Families were renamed the Five Great Families. See *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 140, p. 4393. Also, the Li family of Zhaojun 趙郡李氏 and the Wang family of Langye 琅琊王氏 were considered prominent families. In this article, I consider these seven families as the Great Families. For details on the Great Families during the Northern Dynasties period, see Chen Shuang 陳爽, *Shijia dazu yu Beichao zhengzhi* 世家大族與北朝政治 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998).

⁶⁹ In Holmgren, 'The harem', pp. 82–83, the author briefly covered concubines. Holmgren mentioned that the records suggest there was an increase in the number of Han concubines in the fifth century; however, none of these women came from aristocratic or influential Han families. Her analysis seems incomplete because after Xiaowen, several of the concubines did in fact come from the Great Families.

as he also encouraged imperial princes to marry women from the Great Families.⁷⁰ As can be seen in Table 1 in the Appendix, 12 out of Xiaowen's 14 concubines were of Han origin.⁷¹ Of the 12, seven were from the Great Families.⁷² This trend of installing concubines of Han origin continued in the reigns of his successors, Xuanwu and Xiaoming. Five out of Xuanwu's six concubines were of Han origin, including three from the Great Families: one from the Wang family of Langye 琅邪王氏, one from the Cui Family of Qinghe, and one from the Li family of Zhaojun 趙郡李氏.⁷³ Five out of Xiaoming's seven concubines were from Han families and four of them were from the Great Families.⁷⁴ This trend becomes untraceable after Emperor Xiaoming due to a lack of records on emperors' concubines. However, based on the aforementioned cases alone, it can be surmised that the Northern Wei policy of emperors accepting concubines from predominantly Han families endured for approximately 50 years after Xiaowen. While Northern Wei empresses were of non-Han backgrounds, the fact that the majority of the emperors' concubines were of Han origin demonstrates the emperors' intent to involve people from all backgrounds, including Han peoples, in their court.⁷⁵

Outside of the harem of emperors, princesses were also a useful medium to connect the imperial family with other groups. Unlike the dichotomy seen between empresses and concubines, Northern Wei princesses were married into an assortment of Han and non-Han groups. According to Li Jinhe 李金河, who compiled data on a total of 50 recorded marriages of Northern Wei princesses, 20 were married to men of Han origin, 25 to men with a Xianbei background, and five to men from other non-Han

⁷⁰Xiaowen made Lu Min's 盧敏, Cui Zongbai's 崔宗伯, Zheng Yi's 鄭義, and Wang Qiong's 王瓊 daughters his concubines. Additionally, Xiaowen was angry when his brother, Prince of Xianyang 咸陽王, married a woman from a slave family, and encouraged five out of his six brothers to marry women from the Great Families. *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 140, pp. 4393–4394. See the biographies of Xiaowen's six brothers in *Wei shu*, vol. 21, pp. 533–586.

⁷¹Xiaowen's Han concubines were Lady Lin, who was the mother of the crown prince and later installed as empress posthumously, Lady Yuan 袁氏, Lady Zheng 鄭氏 (*Wei shu*, vol. 22, p. 587; *Bei shi*, vol. 19, p. 713), Lady Cui 崔氏 (*Wei shu*, vol. 57, p. 1264), Lady Wang 王氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 38, p. 878), Lady Lu 盧氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 47, p. 1053), Lady Zheng 鄭氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 56, p. 1239), Lady Zheng 鄭氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 56, p. 1243), Lady Wei 韋氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 45, p. 1012), Lady Cui 崔氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 69, p. 1525), Lady Li 李氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 53, p. 1181), and Lady Zhao 趙氏 (Zhao, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian*, p. 74).

⁷²Two were from the Zheng Family of Xingyang (*Wei shu*, vol. 56, p. 1239, p. 1243); one from the Lu Family of Fanyang (*ibid.*, vol. 47, p. 1053); one from the Wang Family of Taiyuan (*ibid.*, vol. 38, p. 878); one from the Cui Family of Qinghe (*ibid.*, vol. 69, p. 1525); one from the Li family of Longxi 隴西李氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 53, p. 1181); and one from the Cui Family from Boling 博陵崔氏 (*ibid.*, vol. 57, p. 1264).

⁷³Emperor Xuanwu's Han concubines were Lady Wang (*Wei shu*, vol. 63, p. 1412; *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian*, pp. 69–70), Lady Cui (*Wei shu*, vol. 66, p. 1477), Lady Li (*ibid.*, vol. 62, p. 1399), Lady Sima 司馬氏 (Zhao, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian*, pp. 120–121), and Lady Li (*ibid.*, p. 184).

⁷⁴Emperor Xiaoming's Han concubines were Lady Wang (*Wei shu*, vol. 63, p. 1412), Lady Cui, Lady Li (*ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 340), Lady Lu (*ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 340; Zhao, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian*, pp. 127–128), and Lady Zhang (*Wei shu*, vol. 94, p. 2021). Among them, Lady Wang, Lady Cui, Lady Lu, and Lady Li were from the Great Families.

⁷⁵This bifurcated strategy was also pursued in the Manchu Qing court to stabilize control over conquered groups. Empresses, or first wives of emperors, came from Manchu and Mongol families, while emperor's concubines were recruited from not only Manchu and Mongol families but also Chinese banner families. Han Chinese outside the banner system were excluded from imperial marriage. See Rawski, 'Ch'ing imperial marriage', pp. 170–203.

groups.⁷⁶ With the Northern Wei court critically needing support from the Xianbei, many of the princesses were married to men from various Xianbei groups who followed the Tuoba group when they established Northern Wei.⁷⁷ The number of marriages increased during the reigns of Xiaowen and Xuanwu.⁷⁸ Of these marriages, a total of 17 were with men from the Han Great Families.⁷⁹

Princesses were convenient political assets to use to create friendly relations with diverse local elites, including not only leaders of refugee groups from other states and members of select non-Han lineage, but also the Han elite.⁸⁰ This seems particularly true after Xiaowen implemented the New Ranking System of the Clans. In addition to accepting Han concubines, Xiaowen conducted reciprocal intermarriages with the Lu family of Fanyang. He received Lu Min's 盧敏 daughter as his concubine and his daughter Grand Princess of Jinan 濟南長公主 was married to Lu Min's nephew, Lu Daoqian 盧道虔. Lu Daoyu 盧道裕, another nephew of Lu Min, was married to Xiaowen's sister, Grand Princess of Lelang 樂浪長公主.⁸¹ Accepting a plurality of Han concubines and the cases of intermarriage during Xiaowen's reign strongly indicate his intent to create robust connections with the Han elite.

Princes and male members of the Tuoba family were also married to women of the Han Great Families.⁸² With all members of the imperial family, including empresses, concubines, princesses, and princes, at their disposal, the Northern Wei rulers enforced an intermarriage practice that integrated people of diverse group origins into the imperial family and the upper classes. However, it is important to note that many of the concubines of Han origin in the harems of the Northern Wei emperors were not bestowed with particularly high ranks.⁸³ Among the seven

⁷⁶Li Jinhe collected the data from *Wei shu*. See Li Jinhe 李金河, *Wei Jin Sui Tang hunyin xingtai yanjiu* 魏晉隋唐婚姻形態研究 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2005), p. 114 (Table 12). Li considered the Feng family to be of Han origin. See *ibid.*, p. 116. However, considering that they were rulers of one of the Sixteen Kingdoms and followers of the Murong group, it is uncertain whether they were really Han or from another ethnic background.

⁷⁷Twelve princesses married members of the Mu 穆 family who originated from Dai. One member of the Mu family, Mu Pingcheng 穆平城, posthumously received the title of 'Chief Commandant of Escorting Cavalry' 駙馬都尉, which is a title generally reserved for spouses of princesses. See *Wei shu*, vol. 27, pp. 661–673. Three princesses were married to members of the Yi 乙 family who came from Dai. See *ibid.*, vol. 44, pp. 991–992. Two princesses were married to the Wan 萬 family from Dai. See *ibid.*, vol. 34, p. 804. Two princesses were married to the Ji 嵇 family. See *ibid.*, vol. 34, p. 805. One princess was married into the Helian 赫連 group. See *ibid.*, vol. 30, p. 724. One princess was married to the Lu 陸 family. See *ibid.*, vol. 40, p. 909. Also see Li, *Wei Jin Sui Tang hunyin xingtai yanjiu*, p. 115.

⁷⁸Li's data indicate that among 24 identifiable cases of intermarriage between Northern Wei princesses and Han men, six occurred during each of the reigns of Xiaowen and Xuanwu. Li, *Wei Jin Sui Tang hunyin xingtai yanjiu*, p. 120 (Table 13).

⁷⁹See *ibid.*, p. 121 (Table 14).

⁸⁰In passing, Holmgren asserted that imperial princesses 'were given in marriage either to leaders of refugee groups arriving in Wei from other states, or to members of a select line of a non-Han lineage'. This explanation seems incomplete as imperial princesses were married not only to non-Han men, but also Han men, including those from the Great Families. Holmgren, 'Imperial marriage', p. 79.

⁸¹*Wei shu*, vol. 47, p. 1051.

⁸²There were 37 cases of intermarriage between Tuoba princes or male members of the imperial family and Han women from Great Families. See Li, *Wei Jin Sui Tang hunyin xingtai yanjiu*, pp. 138–139 (Table 15).

⁸³The Northern Wei's imperial harem system was reformed by Xiaowen. The first two ranks were the 'Left and Right Bright Department' (*zuo/you zhaoyi* 左右昭儀) and 'Three Mesdames' (*san furen*, 三夫人).

concubines from the Great Families in Xiaowen's harem, with the exception of a concubine from the Li family of Longxi who was bestowed with the title of *furen*, the rest were given the title of Imperial Concubine (*pin* 嬪). Similarly, Xuanwu only appointed one concubine from the Great Families as *furen* and Xiaoming appointed one out of the four concubines from the Great Families as *pin*, with the other three given the title of Hereditary Consorts (世婦 *shifu*).⁸⁴ A passage in the 'Biography of Empress Xiaoming' provides further insight into this principle of conferral.

Emperor Suzong (Xiaoming) had quite the drinking manner. [He] only favored Lady Pan, thus the empress and imperial concubines were not favored. The empress dowager selected [concubines] for Suzong so that not only one would be favored. At the time, the daughters of Cui Xiaofen of Boling, Lu Daoyue of Fanyang, and Li Zan of Longxi etc. became nothing other than Hereditary Consorts.⁸⁵

肅宗頗有酒德，專嬖充華潘氏，后及嬪御並無過寵。太后為肅宗選納，抑屈人流。時博陵崔孝芬、范陽盧道約、隴西李瓚等女，但為世婦。

When the mother of Xiaoming, Empress Dowager Ling née Hu, selected his concubines from the Great Families, she made them 'nothing other' (*dan* 但) than *shifu*.⁸⁶ She intentionally appointed these concubines of Han origin to relatively low ranks.⁸⁷ The divide between non-Han empresses and Han concubines, and the relatively lower status of the Han concubines compared to their non-Han counterparts, suggest that the Northern Wei court made distinctions in the selection of marriage partners in their system of political intermarriage.⁸⁸

The next ranks were the 'Three Imperial Concubines' (*san pin*, 三嬪), 'Six Imperial Concubines' (*liu pin*, 六嬪), and 'Hereditary Consort' (*shifu* 世婦). I consider the first two—*zhoayi* and *furen*—as high ranks, as they are the two ranks just below the rank of empress. For more comparisons of harem systems, see Hans Bielenstein, 'The Six Dynasties', *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 69, 1997, pp. 28–38.

⁸⁴Lady Lu, the daughter of Lu Daoyue, was initially appointed as *shifu*, but her epitaph proves that she was later installed as *pin*. See *Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 340; Zhao, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian*, pp. 127–128.

⁸⁵*Wei shu*, vol. 13, p. 340.

⁸⁶Considering Lu Daoyue's family status, his daughter being made *shifu* from the outset is quite surprising. Lu Daoyue was the son of Lu Yan 盧淵. Two of Lu Daoyue's brothers were married to Xianwen's and Xiaowen's daughters, respectively. Also, Lu Daoyue's cousin was appointed as *pin* of Xiaowen. See *ibid.*, vol. 47, pp. 1047–1052.

⁸⁷Empress Dowager Ling née Hu was one of the female rulers of the Northern Wei dynasty. Unlike other palace ladies who were killed for giving birth to a first son of an emperor, she survived to see her son becoming crown prince. After her son became emperor, she was invested as empress dowager and became de facto ruler during her son's reign. When considering the power she wielded as empress dowager it is likely that she selected her son's concubines. Her biography is seen in *ibid.*, vol. 13, pp. 337–340; *Bei shi*, vol. 13, pp. 503–505. See more details in McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, pp. 143–145. Jennifer Holmgren also wrote an article on Empress Dowager Ling as a de facto ruler. Tracing Empress Dowager Ling's rise and fall, Holmgren detailed the revival of military supremacy, brotherly succession, and male domination in the political arena. See Jennifer Holmgren, 'Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T'o-pa Sinicization question', *Papers of Far Eastern History*, no. 18, 1978, pp. 123–170.

⁸⁸A court dispute during Northern Qi, one of the successor states of Northern Wei, gives more clues regarding attitudes towards the Han and non-Han divide in the imperial harem. When Empress Wenxuan

Installation of coterminous empresses in the northern states

Beyond the borders of the Northern Wei state, other northern states during the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Dynasties periods employed imperial women to consolidate their rule. Among the many uses of imperial women was the practice of installing multiple empresses, or coterminous empresses, which, while not uncommon for nomadic rulers, is quite rare in Chinese history.⁸⁹ Coterminous empresses were those who served in their roles concurrently. They first appeared during the reign of Liu Cong 劉聰 (r. 310–318) of Former Zhao, who appointed his original empress as Senior Empress 上皇后 and his concubines as Left and Right Empresses 左右皇后.⁹⁰ Commenting on this occurrence in his *Nian'ershi zhaji* 廿二史劄記, Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814), an eminent scholar of the Qing period, observed that ‘when troubled dynasty arrived, law and discipline were completely absent and there have been cases of installing plural empresses simultaneously’ (至荒亂之朝, 則漫無法紀, 有同時立數后者。)⁹¹ Along with the case of Liu Cong, Zhao Yi cited two other cases of coterminous empresses. The next case was of Sun Hao 孫皓 (r. 264–280) of Wu 吳, one of the Three Kingdoms.⁹² After Sun Hao expelled his empress Lady Teng 滕氏, many women in the palace wore the royal seal of empress.⁹³ The last case featured Emperor Xuan 宣帝 (r. 578–579) of Northern Zhou who appointed five empresses. In his assessment of the practice of coterminous empresses, Zhao Yi deemed the reigns of Sun Hao and Emperor Xuan to have marked the end of their respective dynasties, and regarded Former Zhao, one of the Sixteen Kingdoms, as an example of turmoil and troubled times. Therefore, he concluded that this practice only appeared during disordered times.⁹⁴ An analysis of these cases proves Zhao Yi’s statement to be inaccurate, as out

née Li was about to be appointed as empress, court officials stated that a woman of Han origin should not become mother of All-under-Heaven (*tianxia*) and told Emperor Wenxuan to choose another, more appropriate spouse. See Li Baiyao 李百藥, *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 9, p. 125; *Bei shi*, vol. 14, p. 521.

⁸⁹It was not uncommon for nomadic rulers to have multiple wives and concubines. McMahon noted that the Xianbei (Tabgatch) chieftains had multiple wives and concubines. See McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, p. 137. Take, for example, the Mongol-Yuan dynasty. The section called ‘Tables of empresses and imperial concubines’ (*houfei biao* 后妃表) in the *History of Yuan* 元史 records multiple Khatuns during each Khan’s reign. See Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuan shi* 元史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), vol. 106, pp. 2693–2700. Regarding Ögödei’s wife, Töregene, and her status as one of the empresses, see Igor de Rachewiltz, ‘Was Töregene qatun Ögödei’s “sixth empress”?’’, *East Asian History*, no. 17–18, June–December 1999, pp. 71–76. However, it was rare in Han tradition. According to Han tradition, the emperor customarily had one empress, and the practice of having multiple wife was often considered taboo and abhorrent. McMahon briefly noted that the simultaneous installation of five empresses was unprecedented. He stated, ‘in terms of empresses and consorts, the Northern Zhou mainly stands out because one of its emperors enthroned five empresses at once, something never seen before or since’. See McMahon, *Women shall not rule*, p. 171. However, there is precedent, as shown during the reign of Liu Cong of Former Zhao.

⁹⁰*Jin shu*, vol. 102, p. 2668.

⁹¹See Zhao Yi 趙翼, *Nian'er shi zhaji jiaozheng* 廿二史劄記校證, (ed.) Wang Shumin 王樹民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p. 331.

⁹²*Ibid.*, pp. 331–332.

⁹³Chen Shou 陳壽, *San guo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 50, pp. 1202–1203.

⁹⁴This statement lacks accuracy and should be considered as a hasty generalization by Zhao Yi. Liu Cong’s case should not be simply overlooked as a period of turmoil. Even though the period was historically called the Sixteen Kingdoms period, Former Zhao flourished during the reign of Liu Cong.

of the three cases, only Liu Cong and Emperor Xuan officially appointed coterminous empresses. Sun Hao did not officially appoint any of his palace ladies as empresses.⁹⁵

In Former Zhao, Liu Cong appointed several empresses after the death of Empress Huyan 呼延皇后. At first, he installed two daughters of Grand Guardian 太保 Liu Yin 劉殷 as Left and Right Noble Concubines 左右貴嬪, and four granddaughters of Liu Yin as Noble Ladies 貴人.⁹⁶ Among them, Left Noble Imperial Concubine née Liu 左貴嬪 劉氏 became an empress.⁹⁷ Later, he appointed two daughters of Capital Protector 中護軍 Jin Zhun 靳準 as Left and Right Noble Imperial Concubines 左右貴嬪 and installed them as Senior Empress 上皇后 and Right Empress 右皇后. Concurrently, Noble Consort Liu 貴妃 劉氏 was installed as Left Empress 左皇后.⁹⁸ After Senior Empress née Jin was dethroned due to her infidelity, Senior Empress Fan 樊氏 and Left Empress née Wang 王氏 were also appointed.⁹⁹

The coterminous practice in Former Zhao helped contain the power of influential men in court. Apart from Liu Yin, Empress Liu's father, whose power in court is unclear, records show that the fathers of the other empresses wielded abundant power. Jin Zhun seized control of the military, and after the death of Liu Cong, staged a coup and killed Liu Can, the successor of Liu Cong, installing himself as the Great King of Han 漢大王.¹⁰⁰ When Liu Cong appointed Wang Shen's 王沈 adopted daughter as Left Empress and Xuan Huai's 宣懷 daughter as Middle Empress 中皇后, both Wang and Xuan became central nodes of power in court. Their authority is illustrated by an episode in which an official who petitioned for the removal of Wang Shen's daughter as Left Empress was executed in the Eastern Market 東市. Before his execution, the official accused Jin Zhun and Wang Shen of being the main instigators of the state's ruin.¹⁰¹ By installing the daughters of these powerful men as coterminous empresses and pitting these influential factions against one another, Liu Cong created a system of checks and balances in an attempt to contain his political rivals and stabilize his own power.

Liu Cong's appointment of coterminous empresses should also be understood in the context of the dual administration system, one of the founding principles of Former Zhao. In his reformation of the bureaucracy, Liu Cong created the positions of Left and Right Directors of Convict Labor 左右司隸 tasked with managing 200,000 Han households, and the positions of Left and Right Wing Commanders of Chanyu 單于左右輔 were charged with supervising 100,000 non-Han groups.¹⁰² In adhering to this policy

Its territory expanded to cover modern-day Shaanxi, Gansu, and Shanxi. More importantly, Liu Cong conquered Western Jin's capital and captured Emperor Huai of Jin. Also, non-Han rulers often had multiple wives at the same time. For example, the early Mongol rulers had multiple empresses concurrently.

⁹⁵Emperor Xuan's case is recorded in Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 et al., *Zhou shu* 周書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971), vol. 7, p. 122.

⁹⁶*Jin shu*, vol. 102, p. 2660.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 102, p. 2663.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, vol. 102, pp. 2667–2668; *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 89, p. 2821.

⁹⁹*Jin shu*, vol. 102, p. 2673 and p. 2676. In addition to the empresses, there were seven women who wore the seal of empress.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, vol. 102, pp. 2678–2679.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, vol. 102, p. 2677.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 429. The dual administration system was observed in many non-Han states. For example, the Kitan Liao dynasty (916–1125) had a dual administration system similar to that of Former Zhao. Their northern administration (*beiyuan* 北院) oversaw the tribal population, while the southern

established by his predecessors, Liu Cong demonstrated his dedication to continuing a confederation consisting of both Han and non-Han peoples.¹⁰³ With respect to his empresses, Liu Cong accepted both non-Han and Han women, even though the records are not always clear about their backgrounds. His first empress, Lady Huyan, hailed from a prominent Xiongnu group.¹⁰⁴ Liu Cong also particularly favoured Empress Liu's family which was of Han origin. Her father, Liu Yin, was a descendant of Duke Kang of Liu of Zhou 周劉康公, and many of his daughters and granddaughters also served as Liu Cong's concubines. When Emperor Huai 懷帝 (r. 307–313) of the Jin dynasty was held captive, Liu Cong held a banquet for him and appointed him as Duke of Kuaiji Commandery 會稽郡公. As a gesture of goodwill, he gave Emperor Huai one of his concubines, Lady Liu, the granddaughter of Liu Yin, who was introduced as 'a granddaughter of a famous minister' 名公之孫, to be his principal wife.¹⁰⁵ In Former Zhao, the appointment of coterminous empresses seemed to have also served the purpose of further integrating Han and non-Han elites.

In Northern Zhou, the coterminous empress practice was first enforced by Emperor Xuan. His rise to the throne was tumultuous on account of the purge of imperial princes and powerful courtiers who tried to usurp power following the death of his father, Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 561–578).¹⁰⁶ To consolidate his position after the purge, he enlisted the help of his father-in-law, Yang Jian 楊堅 (r. 581–604), the future founder of Sui, who claimed Han descent and had extensive Xianbei military experience.¹⁰⁷

administration (*nanyuan* 南院) was responsible for the sedentary population. See Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, 'The Liao', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 6: Alien regimes and border states, 907–1368*, (eds) Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 77. For more on the use of Kitan military institutions for control over Han people, see Yi Yup'yo 이유포, 'Kōran ūi hanin t'ongch'i rül wihan kunjōng kigu unyong 거란의 한인 통치를 위한 군정기구 운용', in *Umjiginin kukka, Kōran: Kōran ūi t'ongch'i chō llyak yōn'gu* 움직이는 국가, 거란: 거란의 통치전략 연구, (ed.) Kim In-hū 김인희 (Sōul-si: Tongbuga Yō ksa Chaedan, 2020), pp. 169–199. A similar dual system was employed during the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234). The Jin court controlled the Jurchens and early subjugated peoples through the Mingan Moumuka system 猛安謀克制, a socio-military organization based on tribal groups, while Han people in Chinese proper were controlled through a 'Chinese' style. See Herbert Franke, 'The Chin dynasty', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 6*, (eds) Franke and Twitchett, pp. 265–270 and 273–277.

¹⁰³For more on 'Sino-Barbarian Synthesis' during Former Zhao, see Pak Han-je, 'Hohan ch'eje ūi chōn'gae wa kū kujo 胡漢體制的 綻開와 그 構造', in *Kangjwa Chungguk sa* 講座中國史 II (Sōul: Chishik sanōp sa, 1989), pp. 66–71.

¹⁰⁴*Jin shu*, vol. 97, p. 2550. 'The four surnames [of Xiongnu] are Huyan, Bu, Lan, and Qiao. Amongst them, Huyan was considered the most precious'. 其四姓, 有呼延氏、卜氏、蘭氏、喬氏。而呼延氏最貴。Both Liu Cong's and his father's principal wives were from the Huyan group. Also see Li Lei 李磊, 'Liu Yuan de guming dachen yu Herui, Jiaping zhiji Hanguo de huangquan chongguo 劉淵的顧命大臣與河瑞、嘉平之際漢國的皇權重構', *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊, no. 9, 2021, p. 179.

¹⁰⁵*Jin shu*, vol. 102, pp. 2660–2661.

¹⁰⁶From the early days of the Northern Zhou court, there was a struggle for power between the members of the imperial family and the emperor. Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 561–578) came to power after killing his uncle Yuwen Hu 宇文護, the dynastic regent. Similarly, when Emperor Xuan succeeded his father, he killed his uncle Yuwen Xian 宇文憲. At the time, Yuwen Xian, Prince of Qiyang 齊陽王, had great power as he helped Emperor Wu defeat Northern Qi and pacify Ji Hu 稽胡. When Emperor Xuan took the throne, he was jealous of and feared Yuwen Xian's authority and eventually killed him. See *Zhou shu*, vol. 12, p. 195.

¹⁰⁷Initially, the regent Yuwen Hu tried to recruit Yang Jian, but Yang Jian refused as he feared his father's disapproval. See *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 170, p. 5274. Yang Jian's opposition to Yuwen Hu started then. See Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), vol. 1, p. 2.

After Emperor Xuan ascended the throne, Yang Jian was swiftly appointed Senior Pillar of the State 上柱國, Grand Marshal 大司馬, and Grand Rear Councillor 大後丞.¹⁰⁸ However, to keep Yang Jian's influence over the court in check and secure his son's succession, Emperor Xuan abdicated and installed his son as Emperor Jing 靜帝 (r. 579–581), but he still continued to hold the reins in court, naming himself Heavenly Primary Emperor 天元皇帝.¹⁰⁹ After abdicating and crowning his son, Emperor Xuan started installing coterminous empresses. Women who should have been installed as empress dowagers were installed as empresses as well.¹¹⁰ Therefore, during the reign of Emperor Jing, there were effectively two emperors and six empresses, including Emperor Jing's empress Lady Sima.¹¹¹ For Emperor Xuan, these empresses were part of a key strategy to counterbalance the power of Yang Jian.

According to a passage in the *History of Northern Zhou* (*Zhou shu* 周書), Emperor Xuan first installed Empress Yang as Heavenly Primary Empress 天元皇后 and later, the other empresses:

Later, the emperor called himself Heavenly Primary Emperor, and the empress Heavenly Primary Empress. Before long, he installed Heavenly Empress and, Left and Right Empresses, which together with [the Heavenly Primary] Empress, makes four empresses. In the second year, he announced, 'Emperor Shun married two women, and [this was because] the virtue of the empresses made a pair with the emperor. There are four constellations in the sky, the configuration of consorts is therein shining brightly'... Before long, he appointed Heavenly Middle Great Empress, which together with [other four] empresses makes five empresses.¹¹²

帝後自稱天元皇帝，號后為天元皇后。尋又立天后及左右皇后，與后為四皇后焉。二年，詔曰：‘帝降二女，后德所以儷君；天列四星，妃象於焉垂耀。...’尋又立天中大皇后，與后為五皇后。

Wanting to follow the configuration of the four constellations, Emperor Xuan appointed four empresses and later decided on one more empress. Empress Yang 楊皇后 was the daughter of Yang Jian and held the title of crown princess when

¹⁰⁸Yang Jian was appointed as Senior Pillar of the State 上柱國 and Grand Marshal 大司馬 in 578. See *Zhou shu*, vol. 7, pp. 116–117. The Grand Marshal was a significant position. See Wang Zhongluo 王仲榮, *Beizhou liudian* 北周六典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), pp. 322–323. He was appointed as Grand Rear Councilor in the first month of 579. See *Bei shi*, vol. 10, p. 374.

¹⁰⁹*Zhou shu*, vol. 7, p. 119; *Bei shi*, vol. 10, p. 375. There are some cases of abdication in medieval Chinese history. In most cases, the abdicating emperors called themselves *taishang huangdi* 太上皇帝, which is often translated as 'retired emperors'. However, I do not consider Emperor Xuan to be a 'retired emperor' because he was deeply involved in politics until his death in 580. For other examples of retired emperors, see Andrew Eisenberg, 'Retired emperors in Medieval China: The Northern Wei', *T'oung Pao*, vol. 77, 1991, pp. 49–87.

¹¹⁰Emperor Xuan abdicated in favour of Emperor Jing in the second month of the first year of Daxiang (579), and installed coterminous empresses starting from the fourth month of the same year. See *Zhou shu*, vol. 7, pp. 117–120.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 148.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 145.

Emperor Xuan was still the crown prince. Other than Lady Zhu, the other three were consorts (*fei*) before they were installed as empresses.¹¹³ Empress Chen 陳皇后, the daughter of Great General 大將軍 Chen Shanti 陳山提, was initially appointed Virtuous Consort 德妃, while Empress Yuan 元皇后, the daughter of Commander 開府 Yuan Sheng 元晟, was initially appointed as Noble Consort 貴妃.¹¹⁴ Empress Yuchi 尉遲皇后, a granddaughter of Yuchi Jiong 尉遲迥, was formerly married to Duke of Xiyang 西陽公, Yuwen Wen 宇文溫, and later entered the palace as Long Noble Consort 長貴妃.¹¹⁵ While Empress Zhu became empress as the mother of Emperor Jing, she seems to have been the only empress to have not hailed from an illustrious family, nor did she hold a rank before her appointment.¹¹⁶

Emperor Xuan employed the coterminous empress practice to enact a system of polyarchy to stabilize his family's rule. He brought Lady Yuchi, who was already married to his cousin Yuwen Wen 宇文溫, to the palace and installed her as a consort.¹¹⁷ Emperor Xuan chose to make Lady Yuchi a concubine since this would guarantee the support of her grandfather Yuchi Jiong 尉遲迥, who had been Grand Preceptor 太師 and Senior Pillar of the State since the reign of Emperor Wu.¹¹⁸ He later appointed her as Heavenly Left Great Empress and her grandfather as Grand Senior Adviser 大前疑 in the second month of 579.¹¹⁹ Similarly, the daughter of Sima Xiaonan 司馬消難 was appointed as an empress of Emperor Jing. Of Han descent, Sima Xiaonan was a Military Inspector of Yuzhou 豫州刺史 who defected from Northern Qi.¹²⁰ Following Yang Jian's appointment as Grand Senior Adviser in the seventh month of 579, Emperor Xuan appointed Sima Xiaonan as Grand Rear Councillor, and a few days later, installed his daughter as an empress.¹²¹ In addition, Emperor Xuan appointed Chen Shanti, whose daughter was Heavenly Middle Great Empress Chen, as Senior Pillar of the State and Grand Chamberlain for the Imperial Clan 大宗伯.¹²² Coincidentally, Emperor Xuan's death resulted in a power struggle among the fathers of the empresses, with Yang Jian on one side and Yuchi Jiong and Sima Xiaonan on the other. Emperor Xuan's efforts to create a stable polyarchal system ultimately failed as his son Emperor Jing was dethroned by Yang Jian.

¹¹³*Bei shi*, vol. 14, p. 529.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 14, pp. 530–531.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 531.

¹¹⁶*Zhou shu*, vol. 9, pp. 146–148.

¹¹⁷Here, I use 'polyarchy' to define a political system in which power was invested in multiple people. Also, when Lady Yuchi entered the palace, she was raped by Emperor Xuan who admired her beauty. According to the records, Yuwen Liang 宇文亮, the father of Yuwen Wen, rose in rebellion out of fear of the emperor when he heard that Emperor Xuan had taken Lady Yuchi to the palace. See *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 125. Yuwen Liang was distinguished in the battlefield and had been appointed as Senior Pillar of the State in 576 by Emperor Wu. See *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 99. From Yuwen Liang's perspective, Emperor Xuan's actions could have indicated that he was on a purge list, hence his rebellion.

¹¹⁸Yuchi Jiong became a Grand Preceptor in 572 and Senior Pillar of the State in 575. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 80; vol. 6, pp. 93–94.

¹¹⁹*Bei shi*, vol. 10, p. 375.

¹²⁰Sima Xiaonan's father, Sima Zirou 司馬子如, was a confidante of Gao Huan 高歡 and Director of State Affairs 尚書令 of Northern Qi. Sima Xiaonan defected to the Northern Zhou court in 558. See *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 167, pp. 5173–5174; *Zhou shu*, vol. 4, p. 54.

¹²¹*Zhou shu*, vol. 7, p. 120.

¹²²*Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 147.

This coterminous empress practice was based on the principles of Northern Zhou's state ideology. Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507–556), who played a crucial role in the founding of Northern Zhou, put in place policies to satisfy both Han and non-Han peoples. One of his policies was the use of the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) for Northern Zhou's bureaucratic system.¹²³ Pak Han-je argued that the adoption of *Zhouli* was not a show of Sinicization, but, rather, the pursuit of an era when there was no distinction between Han and non-Han peoples. Using the *Rites of Zhou* as the basis of his political ideology, Yuwen Tai also created the Twenty-Four Armies, a militia system later called *fubing* 府兵.¹²⁴ Tōdō Kōjun 藤堂光順 asserted that relations and positions within the *fubing* system should be understood as 'tō'i' 等夷 or of equal rank.¹²⁵ Apart from Empress Zhu, who came from a relatively humble background, the other empresses' fathers were all given equivalent ranks of Senior Pillars of the State by Emperor Xuan under the *fubing* system.¹²⁶ Emperor Xuan used the system to assign all the fathers of the empresses the same rank to not only build a system of checks and balances within court but also to preserve the founding principles of Northern Zhou by promoting parity in court. His intent is further revealed by his attempt to appeal to Han officials and people by invoking an ancient mythical figure in his appointment of coterminous empresses. He cited the legendary Chinese mythical figure, Emperor Shun (Yu Shun 虞舜), who had two wives, the daughters of Emperor Yao 堯.¹²⁷ Stemming from principles of Han and non-Han coexistence, the practice of coterminous empresses in the Northern Dynasties served as a rulership strategy to suppress hostile forces in court, stabilize the rule of the imperial family, and promote integration between Han and non-Han peoples.¹²⁸

¹²³Yuwen Tai intended to use *Zhouli* to abandon the administrative titles that had been used after the Han dynasty, and thus adopted those from ancient Zhou. Albert Dien explained that by using the ancient Zhou system, Yuwen Tai was able to avoid potential uncertainty that could arise from the introduction of a new system. See Albert E. Dien, 'Western Wei-Northern Zhou', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 2*, (eds) Dien and Knapp, p. 219. For more on the adoption of *Zhouli* as a concept of coexistence between Han and non-Han groups, see Pak Han-je, 'Sō Wi-Puk Chu shidae "Churye" kwanje ch'aeyong ūi kyōnggwa wa kŭ ūimi 西魏-北周時代“周禮”官制採用의 經過와 그 意味', *Chungguk hakpo* 중국학보, no. 42, 2000, pp. 251–281. Pak argued that the Western Wei-Northern Zhou court adopted *Zhouli* to legitimize the rule of the Yuwen family by adopting a system of *Zhou* during a period before the creation of the dichotomy between Han and non-Han. In this way, they were able to abolish the bureaucratic system of the Han-Wei periods and focus on the Guanzhong region where Western Wei-Northern Zhou was located.

¹²⁴The *fubing* system was created by Yuwen Tai, the regent of Western Wei, to fight against Eastern Wei. Usually, the Xianbei or non-Han generals were appointed as Pillars of the State 柱國. It later became an integral part of dynastic control over not only soldiers but also farmers. For more details about the *fubing* system, see David Graff, *Medieval Chinese warfare, 300–900* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 109–111.

¹²⁵For more on relations of 'dengyi', see Tōdō Kōjun 藤堂光順, 'Seigii Kitashūki ni okeru "tō'i" kankei nit suite 西魏北周期における「等夷」について', *Nagoya daigaku tōyōshi kenkyū* 名古屋大學東洋史研究報告, no. 8, 1982, pp. 90–117. Tōdō argued that the Guanlong bloc 關隴集團 was divided into three groups in relation to time.

¹²⁶*Zhou shu*, vol. 7, p. 116, *Bei shi*, vol. 10, p. 376, and vol. 88, p. 2213.

¹²⁷*Zhou shu*, vol. 9, p. 147. Emperor Shun's wives were Ehuang and Nüying. Although Ehuang was later installed as empress, while Nüying became consort, when they were married to Shun, it seems that no hierarchy existed between the two wives. Generally they were called the two consorts 二妃. Their record can be found in Liu Xiang's *Biographies of Exemplary Women (Lienüzhuan 列女傳)*. See Wang Zhaoyuan 王照圓, *Lienüzhuan bu zhu* 列女傳補注 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue, 2012), p. 1.

¹²⁸Although brief in nature compared to the other two dynasties, Northern Qi also had a case of coterminous empresses. Emperor Houzhu 後主 (r. 565–577) of Northern Qi initially appointed his crown

Conclusion

The chaotic political environment of the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Dynasties periods compelled the northern rulers to adopt practical strategies in their rule over dispersed, heterogeneous populations. The endeavour to consolidate power and to integrate diverse elites was not mutually exclusive as the pursuit of one could quite often overlap with the other. This article has uncovered and examined three of these practices which contributed to the advancement of cosmopolitanism prior to Tang.

For Northern Wei, one of their weightier concerns centred around the influence of maternal kin power. Prior to the founding of the dynasty, the influence of mothers, especially those who originated from highly esteemed groups, was acknowledged and an accepted part of the power dynamics in earlier Xianbei society. To preclude the rise of such maternal kin power, the Northern Wei court famously established the practice of *zigui musu* to kill the mothers of crown princes. Purging the mothers of future emperors helped prevent the emergence of additional centres of power in court. Similarly, the Northern Wei court enforced another practice that aimed to control maternal kin power. An examination of the records shows that no crown princesses were installed throughout the Northern Wei dynasty. This was exceptional as the principal wives and harems of Northern Wei emperors and imperial princes were all bestowed with official ranks and titles. Forgoing the appointment of crown princesses complemented the *zigui musu* practice by preventing the potential rise of powerful crown princesses and their maternal kin.

The absence of crown princesses coincided with the intermarriage practices of Northern Wei which connected the imperial family to diverse local elites. With the exception of posthumous empresses who were victims of *zigui musu*, appointed empresses hailed from the ruling families of various subjugated non-Han groups. In stark contrast to empresses, the vast majority of the emperor's concubines were of Han origin, many of whom came from the Great Families. Outside of the harem of emperors, imperial princesses were wedded to a diverse group of Han and non-Han peoples, while princes were married to women of the Han Great Families. With all members of the imperial family at their disposal, emperors used the intermarriage system to include elites of all backgrounds in the court and tie them to the imperial family. These practices worked alongside the New Ranking System of the Clans introduced by Emperor Xiaowen which encouraged relations between Han and Xianbei peoples, demonstrating the intent of the rulers to integrate the upper classes. By embracing the conquered peoples and maintaining friendly relations with Han aristocratic families, the Northern Wei rulers nurtured coexistence in their courts.

Apart from Northern Wei, the Former Zhao and Northern Zhou dynasties also observed practices that contributed to cosmopolitan societies, namely the installation

princess, Lady née Hulü 斛律氏, as empress. Empress Hulü 斛律皇后 was the daughter of the powerful general Hulü Guang 斛律光. Hulü Guang had such commanding influence that when Empress Hulü gave birth to a girl, Houzhu pretended that his child was a boy to appease his father-in-law. See *Bei Qi shu*, vol. 9, p. 127. After later purging Hulü Guang and consequently dethroning Lady Hulü, following a pressure campaign from Lady in Palace Attendance Lu Lingxuan 陸令萱, Houzhu's wet nurse, and her son Mu Tipo 穆提婆, one of Houzhu's favourite courtiers, Houzhu later installed her adopted daughter as Right Empress and Lady Hu, a niece of Empress Dowager Hu, as Left Empress. See *ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 106; *Bei shi*, vol. 92, p. 3048. Eventually, Empress Hu was expelled from her position and Lady Mu was appointed as empress in her stead. See *Bei Qi shu*, vol. 9, p. 128.

of coterminous empresses. Liu Cong of Former Zhao appointed several coterminous empresses following the death of Empress Huyan, and Emperor Xuan of Northern Zhou appointed six coterminous empresses for him and his son. Most of these empresses came from powerful families of both Han and non-Han backgrounds. These emperors attempted to strengthen their own power by connecting the families of these empresses to the imperial family; at the same time they also created a system of checks and balances by appointing these women to the same rank so as to pit various dominant court factions against one another. When considering the bureaucracies and administrations of both Former Zhao and Northern Zhou, which favoured coexistence between Han and non-Han peoples, the emperors also seem to have implemented the coterminous empress system as a platform of parity for elites of diverse backgrounds.

Rulers of the northern states enforced these practices to stabilize their rule over pluralistic societies. While only glimpses of the intent behind these practices can be seen, these practices ultimately provided a path for imperial families and elites of diverse backgrounds to connect and cross cultural boundaries. By tying these local elites to their respective imperial families, northern rulers integrated pre-existing nodes of power into court and brought stability to their rules over a multicultural populace. Imperial women were central to these practices as they helped maintain a delicate balance of power in the courts of the northern states and contributed to the making of cosmopolitan societies prior to Tang.

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Appendix

Table 1. Titles and backgrounds of empresses and concubines between the reigns of emperors Xiaowen and Xiaoming.

Emperors	Empresses/Concubines	Titles	Backgrounds
Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–499) (Yuan Hong)	Deposed Empress Feng 馮氏*	Empress (<i>hou</i>)	Non-Han/Han
	Empress Feng 馮氏*	Empress (<i>hou</i>)	Non-Han/Han
	Lady Gao 高氏	<i>hou</i> (posthumously)	Non-Han (Koguryō)
	Lady Lin 林氏	<i>hou</i> (posthumously)	Han
	Lady Yuan 袁氏	Noble Lady (<i>guiren</i>)	Han
	Lady Zheng 鄭氏	Lady of Sufficient Splendidence (<i>chonghua</i>)	Han
	Lady Luo 羅氏	Madame (<i>furen</i>)	Non-Han
	Lady Cui 崔氏	Imperial Concubine (<i>pin</i>)	Han (Great Family)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Emperors	Empresses/Concubines	Titles	Backgrounds
	Lady Wang 王氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Lu 盧氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Zheng 鄭氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Zheng 鄭氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Wei 韋氏	<i>chonghua pin</i>	Han
	Lady Cui 崔氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Li 李氏	<i>furen</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Zhao 趙氏	<i>pin</i> (posthumously <i>chonghua</i>)	Han
Emperor Xuanwu r. 499–515 (Yuan Ke)	Empress Yu 于氏	<i>hou</i>	Non-Han
	Empress Gao 高氏	<i>hou</i>	Non-Han (Koguryō)
	Lady Hu 胡氏**	<i>hou</i> (posthumously)	Non-Han/Han
	Lady Wang 王氏	<i>furen</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Cui 崔氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Li 李氏	Lady of Handsome Fairness (<i>jiayu</i>)	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Li 李氏	<i>pin</i>	Han
	Lady Sima 司馬氏	Noble Concubine/Madame (<i>guipin furen</i>)	Han
Emperor Xiaoming r. 515–528 (Yuan Xu)	Empress Hu 胡氏**	<i>hou</i>	Non-Han/Han
	Lady Hu 胡氏**	Lady of Bright Department (<i>zhaoyi</i>)	Non-Han/Han
	Lady Wang 王氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Pan 潘氏***	<i>chonghua pin</i>	Non-Han/Han
	Lady Cui 崔氏	Hereditary Consort (<i>shifu</i>)	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Li 李氏	<i>shifu</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Lu 盧氏	<i>pin</i>	Han (Great Family)
	Lady Zhang 張氏	<i>pin</i>	Han

*The Feng family was ethnically Han. However, considering that they were the direct successors of Northern Yan 北燕, one of the Sixteen Kingdoms, founded by the Murong group, I designate them as both non-Han and Han.

**I deduce that Empress Dowager Hu and her relatives were either of non-Han origin or heavily influenced by Xianbei culture. Their ancestors were the followers of Later Qin rulers. Also, there is a possibility that the Hu family are descendants of the Hegu 紇骨 group, a non-Han surname. Here, I designate them as non-Han/Han.

***Lady Pan's origins are unclear in the records.

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