

Research on the Hu-Han Relations in the Northern Wei Dynasty

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Abstract. As the last dynasty to unify northern China the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, the Northern Wei Dynasty confronted a highly complex ethnic landscape. It included relations among different Xianbei tribal groups, between the Xianbei and other minorities, between the Xianbei and the Han Chinese, as well as among the Han Chinese and other non-Han ethnic groups. Within the multi-ethnic context, the Tuoba Xianbei ultimately chose to collaborate with the Han Chinese clans in state-building, even aspiring toward ethnic integration. Such strategic cooperation significantly influenced the political trajectory of the Northern Wei Dynasty. This paper focuses on three crucial political transformations in the Northern Wei Dynasty, outlining a three-stage development process alongside the evolution of ethnic relations.

Keywords: The Northern Wei, Hu-Han relations, Cui Hao, Emperor Xiaowen, the Riots of Six Military Towns

1. Introduction

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the political power established by ethnic minorities in northern China underwent varying degrees of Sinicization, with the process reaching its peak during the Northern Wei Dynasty. However, this transformation did not occur overnight; rather, it was the result of decades of gradual cultural and political integration. Scholarly discussions on Hu-Han relations during this period have, moreover, been extensive and ongoing. Some studies focus on specific cases—analyses of a single incident—exploring their cultural and religious underpinnings in depth [1-3]. Others take a broader approach, examining long-term developments in particular domains, such as the evolution of military systems in the Northern Dynasties [4]. While studies concentrating on individual aspects offer valuable depth, they often lack a macro-level perspective.

In light of this, the present study selects three representative historical events from the political history of the Northern Wei Dynasty—including the compilation of national history, the Taihe Reformation, and the Riot of the Six Military Towns, aiming to demonstrate the broader political dynamics of the period through the lens of Hu-Han relations. By examining key historical events, one can better understand the evolving dynamics of Hu-Han relations and their impact on the political development of the Northern Wei.

2. Sinicization in the early Northern Wei: the case of compiling national history

The case of compiling national history is one of the most representative political events during the early Northern Wei period, which illustrated a delicate relationship between the Tuoba hierarchy and Chinese clans. Particularly, the death of Cui Hao and his family (Five familial exterminations) [5] shed light on the early Northern Wei period's development of national relationships: the force of Xianbeization was much stronger than that of Sinicization. In Northern Wei's official historiography, *The Book of Wei*, Cui Hao was "executed on charges of bribery" [6] in his biography. Nevertheless, the biography of Gao Yun in the same book [6] indicated that Cui Hao was punished due to his straightforwardness and honesty in recording the history of Xianbei. Other materials provided different reasons, including plot treason (the *Book of Song* [7]) and religious contention (*Biographies of Eminent Monks* [8]). Indeed, it seems impossible to pinpoint the single core reason that led to the elimination of Cui Hao and his family have to be eliminated since the event has been thousands of years, while the surviving materials were filtered through practical considerations. In this way, the flashpoint, the case of compiling national history, is worth discussing.

Historical accounts of Cui Hao's death were as follows: Hao wrote the history of Xianbei ancestors without deletion or change, later carved these contents on stone and placed them on the street; the northern people felt offended, so they maligned Cui Hao with the Emperor Taiwu. The emperor was so furious that he immediately handled and convicted Cui Hao [5]. The record in the *Book of Wei* had little difference: Cui Hao stated all the history, but not in an acceptable manner [6]. Such descriptions draw attention and queries about the motivation behind killing Cui Hao, for collecting and writing history was not a negative and unacceptable issue. One of the conceivable reasons was that there assuredly existed contents that had irritated the Xianbei people in the finished part of the *Guo Shu*. *Guo Shu* was not entirely prepared by Cui Hao, but also contained ten rolls written by Deng Yuan during the period of the Emperor Dao Wu (386-406) [6]. While such contents were acceptable and unremarkable to Emperor Daowu and his contemporaries, they became unacceptable fifty years later, which reveals that there indeed came up with some cultural transformations under the rule of the Tuoba empire. Furthermore, the incident was exacerbated by Cui Hao's political stance, ultimately resulting in the tragedy. Cui Hao was not a tolerant man and had made many enemies in politics. As a politician with traditional Confucian and aristocratic ideals, he believed that his mission was to "restore the five ranks as the foundation" [6]. He hoped to utilize the power of the Tuoba regime to reconstruct the social hierarchy in the North Wei. According to Cui Hao's vision of "regulating human ethics and distinguishing family names" [6], the Tuoba nobility would find themselves subordinate due to their cultural weaknesses. The Dai Group could not accept this without doubt. Thus, after Cui Hao was imprisoned for his role in the national history incident, his political enemies, including the Dai Group and territorial chieftains, attacked him. This also led to cruelty for Cui Hao and his family.

Significantly, the death of Cui Hao was a complex case that cannot be attributed to one or two separate factors. The case of compiling national history revealed a delicate relationship between the Dai Group and the Chinese clans, which could be concluded as an ethnic conflict. The Tuoba people, an ethnic minority, were unable to establish a social mechanism to sustain a vast empire because their productivity was constrained. They had no choice but to rely on the knowledge of the Chinese clans that had remained in the north after the Yongjia Migration to consolidate their rule. However, ethnic relations during the early Northern Wei period remained tense.

3. A significant transformation: the Taihe reformation

The Taihe reformation marked the second stage of development in Hu-Han ethnic relations during the Northern Wei Dynasty, which was a drastic integration. Emperor Xiaowen was passionate about reform and had a vision of Sinicization. He was raised by a person closely associated with Chinese culture—Empress Wenming Feng of the Wencheng Dynasty. As a prominent figure in the Northern Wei Dynasty, Empress Feng was known for eliminating powerful threats Yi Hun, purging the court of corruption, and overseeing state affairs [6]. Despite her lineage tracing back to Feng Ba of the Northern Yan Dynasty, her family underwent rigorous Sinicization, adopting a governance style starkly different from the "barbaric" rulers of her time [9]. Emperor Xiaowen's education was entirely covered by Empress Wenming, with her guidance of a political vision of cultural integration that he ultimately put into practice. Empress Wenming ruled for about 25 years (476–490), during which she established the Three-Rank System and the Equal-Field System, which had a lasting impact. Undoubtedly, the Taihe Reformation can be considered a social transformation achieved jointly by Empress Feng and Emperor Xiaowen.

Xiaowen's reformation had changed the Northern Wei society to a profound extent. Initially, Xiaowen attempted to remold the allocation of the capital city, Ping Cheng, and 'transform it into a typical Chinese cultural capital, without any intention of moving southward' [10]. According to the Book of Wei, he ordered to build and rebuild many sacrificial sites from 488 to 493. However, pressures from the Dai Group severely hindered Xiaowen's reforms, forcing him to seek alternative solutions. In August of the 17th year of the Taihe (493), Xiaowen excused a campaign to the southern dynasty, led his troops to Luoyang, where he decided to relocate the capital. According to the "Stele of Memorizing Bi Gan", over 80 ministers accompanied him, all trusted confidants of Xiaowen—at least none openly opposed the capital's relocation southward. Among them were both Xianbei nobility (the ten imperial clans and the eight meritorious clans) and Chinese clans. Nevertheless, Xiaowen's subsequent efforts indicated that there were many twists along the way, for he finally returned to Pingcheng to negotiate after four months in February of the following year (494). Most Xianbei conservative forces, represented by Yuan Pi, Mu Tai, and Lu Rui, were unwilling to leave Pingcheng [9]. They regarded the movement as abandoning the cultural and customs of their nomadic heritage, while Xiaowen was unwilling to concede. From 494 onward, Xiaowen gradually issued various edicts. In December of the same year, he replaced the minoritarian clothing system with the Han cloth style. In 495, he stipulated that those who had relocated to Luoyang should be buried in Luoyang, with a change of their place of birth [6]. He also "abolished all northern dialects and adopted standard Chinese pronunciation" [5]; changed Xianbei people's surnames to Chinese ones, and transliterated Xianbei names into Han Chinese names. These policies aimed to eliminate the distinction between Chinese and non-Chinese through language reform and achieve ethnic integration. In the same year, Xiaowen reorganized surnames and clans to select officials, while promoting intermarriage with Han Chinese families to reform the existing marriage and bureaucratic systems.. At the same time, Xiaowen left room for maneuver in his policies to seek understanding and concessions from the northern Dai Group.

Unfortunately, the new policies and the conservative faction remained at odds. Significant political struggles included the rebellion against the Crown Prince Xun and Mu Tai. In 496, Crown Prince Xun was demoted to a commoner for plotting to flee to Dai, later was executed the next April. Before this, Crown Prince Xun had returned to Pingcheng for the funeral of imperial tutor Feng Xi [6]. Crown Prince Xun himself was not interested in Emperor Xiaowen's political ideology; hence, he may have reached certain agreements with the conservative forces in the Dai Bei area. In the same year, Mu Tai, the governor of Hengzhou, rebelled in his province, with co-conspirators

including Lu Rui, Yuan Long, and He Tou, who proclaimed Yangping Wang Yuan Yi, the governor of Shuozhou, as their leader [6]. Although Rencheng Wang Yuan Cheng crushed this rebellion, it demonstrated that the Taihe reformation failed to achieve ethnic integration and national unification. Instead, it created a potential crisis of fragmentation in the Northern Wei dynasty.

Consequently, the evaluation of Xiaowen's effort was turned into different perspectives. On the one hand, Emperor Xiaowen was seen as a traitor who was to blame for the collapse of the Northern Wei. As stated in the biography of Sun Shao: "In the past, the capital Dai was characterized by martial prowess and stability. However, since the establishment of the Central Capital Luoyang, it has been marked by cultural refinement and political chaos [6]. During Emperor Xiaowen's reign, anti-Sinicization forces were overwhelmed by Sinicization forces under absolute imperial power. This resulted in the weakening of ethnic conflicts, which were replaced by class conflicts. On the other hand, Xiaowen was regarded as a great monarch who promoted ethnic integration, possessing courage and vision beyond his time. His cultural ideals reflected the Confucian traditional aspirations of the Chinese people for national restoration since the Yongjia Migration, as well as the efforts of the Xianbei, led by Xiaowen, to achieve coexistence between the two ethnic groups.

4. From ethnic conflict to class conflict: the Riot of Six Military Towns

The Riot of Six Military Towns was an uprising that took place in the late Northern Wei dynasty, profoundly reshaping the final political landscape of the Northern Dynasties. Namely, the "Six Military Towns" were six important military strongholds located along an east-west axis in the northern regions of the Hetao and the Yinshan: Huai Shuo, Wu Chuan, Fu Ming, Rong Xuan, Huai Huang, and Wo Ye. Initially, the Six Towns served as a defense against the Rouran's invasion [11]. It was a customary practice that Xianbei nobles enlisted in these regions as military officers and soldiers. According to volume 151 of Literary and Historical Investigation, section Military Affairs III: "The Tuoba was believed to have originated from Yunsu and controlled the Central Plain through military force. The Yulin and Huben troops were the royal court guards, while the Six Towns' soldiers were the defensive troops. They were frequently descendants of the Xianbei tribes." [12] Therefore, the Six Towns' troops included Xianbei soldiers. Additionally, there were non-Xianbei soldiers, primarily Gaoche and other minorities; the Han Chinese primarily engaged in agricultural production to supply the military. Such a separation of military and civilian was a form of Hu-Han separation in the Northern Wei [4].

While the case of compiling national history and the Taihe Reformation could be categorized as ethnic conflicts, the Riot of Six Military Towns manifested the sharp class contradictions in the later period of Northern Wei. According to "The Biography of Guangyangwang Shen", during Emperor Daowu's reign, border defense and military affairs took the utmost significance. Therefore, he "assigned the sons of noble families to defend the borders with their lives". Consequently, these nobles were granted preferential treatment: guaranteed career prospects and were exempt from taxes and labor. At the time, contemporaries considered it a praiseworthy matter [6]. After Emperor Xiaowen standardized the surnames, the Northern Wei initially established a social hierarchy that could accommodate both Xianbei and Han clans. Nonetheless, this order was at odds with the long-standing traditions of nomadic minorities, which were that they relied on military force to establish their states. During the Taihe era, members of noble clans who had remained in the capital were often granted high-ranking positions; by contrast, nobles stationed at border towns were categorized as Fuhu and thus excluded from access to higher official careers. Likewise, the border military was neglected: either mediocre officials were appointed as frontier commanders or corrupt officials were exiled as punishment [13]. The status of the Six Towns Garrisons deteriorated further, becoming

associated with disgrace and low esteem. Their earlier privileges—such as guaranteed career and tax exemptions—were rescinded during the Taihe reformation, leading to a decline in their social standing while they continued their obligation to fulfill military responsibilities. As a result, resentment among these soldiers was inevitable. By the reign of Emperor Xiaoming (515–528), the status of the Six Towns had further diminished, and the garrisons became a low strata of society. After Li Chong was commissioned to lead an expedition against Rouran's leader Anagui, he submitted a memorial proposing [6,14]. It urged the transformation of the six towns into administrative states and counties, with soldiers registered as commoners who were eligible for official careers. This proposal, however, was not accepted, clearly reflecting the emperor's disregard for the six towns regions. Before the outbreak of the Riot of Six Military Towns, there had already been unrest in Luoyang caused by dissatisfaction among military personnel regarding their social status. In 519, a documented event in the biography of Zhang Yi [6] highlighted this serious situation. The violent episode stemmed directly from attempts to marginalize military personnel from the elite bureaucracy. Considering that the royal court guards were largely composed of descendants of the Xianbei and themselves members of the military class, their outrage was understandable. When it came to 523, Puliuhu Baling launched a rebellion in Woye, marking the beginning of the Riot of Six Military Towns. Subsequently, rebellions led by Du Luo Zhou, Xianyu Xiuli, and Ge Rong erupted, plunging the Northern Wei Dynasty into chaos.

After the riot, the Six Towns Garrisons came under the control of Erzhu Rong, who thereby emerged as a dominant political and military figure. Taking the death of Emperor Xiaoming as a pretext, Erzhu Rong marched into Luoyang, drowning over a thousand nobles in the Luo River and exiling numerous clans—an event known as the Heyin Massacre. From this perspective, the objectives of the six towns' soldiers were ultimately realized through Erzhu Rong's actions. However, for a dynasty already plagued by internal conflicts and in decline, such continuous civil strife merely accelerated its eventual collapse.

5. Discussion

Viewed through these three events, the political development of the Northern Wei Dynasty can be divided into three stages.

From Emperor Daowu to Emperor Taiwu, this period was characterized by the strongest influence of Xianbei culture, and the power of the Xianbei faction was stronger than that of the Han faction. However, during this period, a faint trend toward the rise of the Han faction was already evident. Therefore, the death of Cui Hao was the result of the struggle between ethnic political forces and the price of cultural transformation. From Daowu's conscription of Chinese clans and the execution of Deng Yuan to the death of Cui Hao, the Tuoba hierarchy's caution in appointing Chinese officials and swift responses to any signs of rebellion were evident. In other words, the Tuoba ruling elite resisted sinicization during the early Northern Wei period. Their lack of cohesion with the Chinese clans led to internal friction, exacerbating political instability and ultimately resulting in Cui Hao's case.

The second stage was represented by Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Wenming, who began the formal Sinicization reformation. The overall social culture of the Northern Wei tended toward Han Chinese culture, while the Xianbei faction was suppressed. The strong and stable imperial power provided support for Sinicization, but the Taihe Reformation ultimately failed to completely resolve the situation of ethnic conflict between the Xianbei and Han ethnic groups. It is difficult to judge the reformation as right or wrong, but objectively, it created centrifugal forces between the north and south under Northern Wei rule.

In the last stage, the main contradiction in Northern Wei society shifted from the ethnic contradiction between the Xianbei and the Han Chinese to the class conflict. From its founding to its collapse, the Tuoba Xianbei empire relied on military force throughout its existence. The Tuoba rulers neither fully abandoned their militaristic foundation of state-building nor successfully reconstructed a stable social order. Unable to balance these two imperatives, they ultimately failed to stem the tide of political disorder and were eventually replaced by the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou dynasties. In these dynasties, sinicization was replaced by the trend to Hu.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper identifies a significant political trend in the Northern Wei dynasty: the aforementioned three developmental stages demonstrate that ethnic tensions—exemplified by Hu-Han conflicts—gradually diminished and gave way to class conflicts. This does not mean that ethnic contradictions were fully resolved; rather, they ceased to be the primary contradiction in Northern Wei society. From this perspective, the Taihe Reformation almost achieved its goal of rapidly unifying the social status of the Xianbei and Han Chinese clans.

In the long process of ethnic integration, there was no shortage of individuals—such as Cui Hao and Crown Prince Xun—who became sacrificial victims. Yet, the deliberate suppression—or even erasure—of one's own native culture in the name of ideological ideals is akin to killing the goose that lays the golden egg. Sacrificing one's next generation for the sake of assimilation was also a profound ethical tragedy. However, history itself cannot be measured. Those who think they live in the present are often unaware that they are part of history. Only through a balance of caution, clarity, and unyielding passion can one locate the coordinates of meaning between existentialism and nihilism.

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