

The Newly Excavated Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben and the Political Situation in the Late Sui and Early Tang Dynasties

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Abstract. Centered on the newly excavated Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben, this paper examines Zhao Xuanben's official career and its political significance during the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the Wu Zhou period and the Kaiyuan era, in combination with official histories and relevant institutional documents. According to the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben joined campaigns against the "Liao and Fan tribes" in his early years, later took part in military operations in the Wu Zhou period, and served successively as Prefecture Sima, General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters, Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital, and Prefect of E Prefecture. His career spanned the critical political transitions from Emperor Gaozong's reign through the Wu Zhou period to the early Kaiyuan era. Through analyzing relevant lines in the epitaph and combining them with Emperor Gaozong's eastern campaigns, the aftermath of the Goguryeo War, the military and personnel background of the Wu Zhou period, and the political adjustments in the early Kaiyuan era, this paper argues that Zhao Xuanben's promotion and retirement were not merely personal experiences, but were closely tied to the restructuring of political order, changes in the military official system, and political shifts from the early Tang to the high Tang period. The Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben not only provides new material for studying Zhao Xuanben's life, but also offers a valuable case for understanding military officials' career paths, the political structure of the Wu Zhou period, and individual choices amid political transformation from Emperor Gaozong's reign to the Kaiyuan era.

Keywords: Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben, Political Situation in the Early Tang Dynasty, Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital

1. Introduction

The *Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben* was unearthed in the Yude Fang area of Luoyang, Henan Province, and the tomb owner was buried in the 10th year of the Kaiyuan reign of the Tang Dynasty (722) [the tomb owner died on the 19th day of the 5th leap month in the 10th year of Kaiyuan, and was buried in the cemetery on the 16th day of the 7th month]. The rubbing of the epitaph measures about 66 cm in length and 64 cm in width (including the sides), preserved as a single piece. The inscription has 26 lines in total, with 26 characters per full line, written in regular script. The tomb owner, Zhao Xuanben, was a native of Tianshui. His official career roughly covered the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the Wu Zhou period and the Kaiyuan era, and he finally held the titles of General of

Cloud Command, General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters, and Prefect of E Prefecture. His family also served as officials between the Sui and Tang dynasties: his grandfather Zhao Mi served as Silver and Green Glow Grand Master and Prefect of Lan Prefecture, and his father Zhao De served as Court Invitation Grand Master and Sima of Hao Prefecture after the founding of the Tang. Judging from the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben's family background and his own official career are connected with each other, making the epitaph not only of general value for recording his life, but also important material for investigating changes in his career and the relevant political background. In terms of structure, the main text of the epitaph can be roughly divided into three parts: life narrative, praise of virtuous governance, and concluding epitaph.

As recorded in the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben's grandfather Zhao Mi served as Silver and Green Glow Grand Master and Prefect of Lan Prefecture, and his father Zhao De served as Court Invitation Grand Master and Sima of Hao Prefecture. In terms of the official ranks listed in the epitaph, Zhao Mi held a higher position than Zhao De, indicating that although the Zhao family maintained continuous official service between the Sui and Tang dynasties, the political status of family members was not entirely consistent. However, limited by available materials, it is difficult to further explore the reasons for this at the present stage. According to the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben's son died before him, leaving only one orphaned grandson. Apart from the brief records above, other details of Zhao Xuanben's ancestors, father and descendants are hard to verify today.

2. Zhao Xuanben and the eastern campaigns during Emperor Gaozong's reign

After a brief account of Zhao Xuanben's family background, the epitaph turns to his personal life. Zhao Xuanben, a native of Tianshui, died in the 10th year of Kaiyuan (722) at the age of 91. Based on this, his birth year can be estimated as around the 6th year of Zhenguan (632). According to the epitaph, he started his career with military merits in his early years, and later served successively as Upper Pillar of State, General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters, and Prefect of E Prefecture. His official career roughly spanned the important political transitions from Emperor Gaozong's reign through the Wu Zhou period to the Kaiyuan era. As for his early experiences, the most noteworthy point is the line in the epitaph that "at the age of weak crown, he campaigned twice against the Liao and Fan tribes and made extraordinary merits again". What exactly the "Liao and Fan tribes" refers to here is directly related to our understanding of Zhao Xuanben's early military experience and the starting point of his career, so it is necessary to make further analysis in combination with the northeastern frontier situation in the early Tang Dynasty. In the early Tang period, there were multiple forces on the northeastern border, including the Xi, Shiwei, Mohe, Khitan, Goguryeo and many other tribal groups. Among them, the Shiwei had already paid tribute to the Tang court during the Zhenguan period, as recorded in *Old Book of Tang*. It can be seen that the Shiwei sent tributes to the Tang in the 8th year of Zhenguan (634) and the 9th year of Zhenguan (635), and continued to do so during the Kaicheng and Huichang periods, which shows that the Shiwei had submitted to the Tang Dynasty by then.

The Xi paid tribute to the Tang court during the Wude reign period. *Old Book of Tang* records: "During the Wude period, they sent envoys to pay tribute. In the 22nd year of Zhenguan, their chief Keduoche led his tribe to submit to the Tang, so the Raole Commander-in-Chief Office was established, and Keduoche was appointed Right Garrison General and Raole Commander-in-Chief, enfeoffed as Duke of Loufan County, and bestowed the surname Li." In the 22nd year of Zhenguan (648), the Xi, led by their chief, submitted to the Tang Dynasty, and the Tang court set up the Raole Commander-in-Chief Office in the Xi territory, marking the formal establishment of Tang administration over the Xi. The Khitan, led by their chief Kuge, surrendered to the Tang in the 22nd

year of Zhenguan (648). *Old Book of Tang* records: "In the 22nd year, Kuge and other tribes all requested to submit to the Tang, so the Songmo Commander-in-Chief Office was established, and Kuge was appointed Left Garrison General and Songmo Commander-in-Chief, Baron of Wuji County, and bestowed the surname Li" [1]. Based on the above historical records, the Khitan had already submitted to the Tang Dynasty before Emperor Gaozong launched the expedition against Goguryeo. The Tang court established the Songmo Commander-in-Chief Office to govern the Khitan.

It can be seen from the above that in the early reign of Emperor Gaozong, most forces on the northeastern border had surrendered to the Tang. However, Goguryeo was the only regime that had not submitted to the Tang at that time. Therefore, we can reasonably infer that the "Liao and Fan tribes" in the epitaph refers to "Goguryeo". The large-scale military expedition against Goguryeo launched by Emperor Gaozong from the 5th year of Xianqing to the 1st year of Zongzhang (660–668) originated from the continuation of previous generations' strategic dilemma against Goguryeo. In the 17th year of Zhenguan (643), Silla sent envoys to the Tang court, stating that Baekje and Goguryeo had allied to capture Silla's cities and intended to cut off the connection between Silla and the Tang. Emperor Taizong ordered Goguryeo to stop the war, but Goguryeo refused and sowed discord between the Tang and the Xueyantuo Khanate. In the 7th month of the 18th year of Zhenguan (644), the Tang allied with the Khitan and Xi to jointly attack Goguryeo. In the 2nd month of the 19th year of Zhenguan (645), Emperor Taizong decided to lead the campaign against Goguryeo in person, hoping to destroy it in one strike. In the 7th month, Tang forces defeated Goguryeo troops at the mountain southeast of Anshi City, and the army withdrew and returned to the capital in the 9th month. Although this battle achieved certain results, it did not fundamentally damage Goguryeo's strength, so the strategic goal of destroying Goguryeo was not reached. After this battle, the Tang court shifted its war strategy, which is mentioned in both *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* and *New Book of Tang*.

It can be seen that after the 19th year of Zhenguan (645), the Tang court's approach to military operations against Goguryeo had changed significantly. Although Emperor Taizong still intended to launch another expedition, the court discussion tended to weaken Goguryeo through continuous harassment and strategic containment while allowing the domestic population to recover and rest, rather than rushing to launch a large-scale decisive battle. After Emperor Taizong's death, Emperor Gaozong ascended the throne in the 23rd year of Zhenguan (649). At the beginning of his reign, Emperor Gaozong needed to consolidate his rule in domestic affairs, so he generally continued the more prudent foreign policy of the late Taizong period and did not immediately restart a full-scale campaign, but did not completely abandon military pressure on Goguryeo. By the 5th year of Yonghui (654), Goguryeo and Baekje jointly attacked Silla and seized 33 cities of Silla, so Silla asked the Tang for help. Emperor Gaozong sent Cheng Mingzhen and Su Dingfang to lead troops to reinforce Silla and defeated Goguryeo. It can be seen that although the Tang and Goguryeo did not return to the full-scale war state of the late Zhenguan period during the Yonghui era, border military conflicts and local troop deployments continued to occur, which provides a suitable historical background for understanding the so-called "two campaigns against the Liao and Fan tribes" in the epitaph.

Looking back at the epitaph, it mentions that "he made extraordinary merits again, which demonstrated his loyalty", "he was appointed Court Dispersed Grand Master, Upper Pillar of State, and Sima of the local prefecture", and "soon he was promoted to Palace Grand Master and appointed Sima of Shang and Dai prefectures". This fully shows that Zhao Xuanben made outstanding contributions in this campaign. According to *Six Codes of the Tang Dynasty*, Court

Dispersed Grand Master was established by Emperor Wen of Sui, ranking fourth rank, upper grade, as a civil honorary rank. As for Upper Pillar of State, *Six Codes of the Tang Dynasty* records: "There are twelve grades of merit titles: twelve promotions lead to Upper Pillar of State, equivalent to second rank, upper grade." This title was a merit grade in the Tang Dynasty, awarded to those with outstanding military exploits, mostly to generals who had won battle honors. It can be seen that Zhao Xuanben made remarkable military achievements in Emperor Gaozong's war against Goguryeo. "Sima of the local prefecture" was an official position in the Tang Dynasty, ranking from fifth rank, lower grade to sixth rank, upper grade. Zhao Xuanben took part in this expedition against Goguryeo and performed outstanding military service, and this position enabled him to enter the official ranks of the Tang Dynasty.

3. Zhao Xuanben and the political situation from the Wu Zhou period to the Kaiyuan era

Zhao Xuanben joined Emperor Gaozong's campaign against Goguryeo "at the age of weak crown", and was recognized by the court and the emperor for his military merits, serving successively as "Sima of the local prefecture" and "Sima of Shang and Dai prefectures". Regarding the position of "prefecture sima", *Six Codes of the Tang Dynasty* records: "The Prefect, Vice Prefect, Biejia, Chief Clerk, and Sima assist in the administration of the prefecture, oversee all official affairs, and jointly adjudicate matters of all departments. At the end of the year, they take turns to report to the capital" [2]. The sima was responsible for assisting the prefect in handling prefectural affairs, managing various affairs of the prefectural government, and jointly ruling on matters of all subordinate departments. At the end of the year, officials took turns to go to the capital to report on work. This nature of the position required the holder to have good political literacy and governance ability. Although Zhao Xuanben entered the official ranks of the Tang through military merits, it is known from the epitaph that he served as sima consecutively, which shows that he had strong governance capacity. "Prefecture sima" belonged to the middle and lower rank officials of the Tang Dynasty. Without proper opportunities and correct political choices, it would have been difficult for Zhao Xuanben to be promoted to later positions such as "General of the Garrison Guard". His career advancement came during the Wu Zhou period. The epitaph records: "In the past, the Quanrong caused obstruction and the Xunyu repeatedly invaded. The court appointed Prince of Liang Wu Sansi as the grand marshal. Empress Wu Zetian the Great Holy commended the duke's loyalty and integrity, and summoned him to participate in military planning. He devised strategies in the military tent, comparable to Han Xin; he stormed cities and fought in the field, performing like Zhang Liang (Zifang). He possessed the ability of seven captures and seven releases, and the skills of nine attacks and nine defenses."

"Quanrong" and "Xunyu" in the epitaph both refer to northern ethnic minorities, and here they should denote wars against northern peoples in the Wu Zhou period. The line in the epitaph that "the court appointed Prince of Liang Wu Sansi as the grand marshal" also confirms that this was a war against northern ethnic groups during the Wu Zhou period. During the Wu Zhou era, the Turks frequently raided the borders, becoming a major threat to the regime. Wu Zetian twice appointed Prince of Liang Wu Sansi as marshal, one of which was in the 2nd year of Chang'an (702). *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* records:

"On the Xinsi day, Prince of Xiang Li Dan was further appointed Marshal of Bingzhou Circuit, with Wu Sansi, Wu Youyi and Wei Yuanzhong as his deputies; Yao Yuanzhong as Chief Clerk, and Zheng Gao, Vice Director of the Court of Imperial Rites, as Sima. However, the deployment ultimately did not proceed. On the Renshen day, the Turks raided Xin Prefecture. On the Jimao day, Tibet sent its minister Lun Misa to seek peace. On the Gengchen day, Wu Sansi, Crown Prince

Guest, was appointed Grand Commander of Dagu Circuit, with Jing Hui, Prefect of Luo Prefecture, as his deputy."

This war was a campaign against Tibet during the Wu Zhou period. In the 1st year of Jiushi (700), Tang Xiuqing, Commander-in-Chief of Liang Prefecture, defeated Tibetan troops at Hongyuan Valley, weakening their military strength. By the 2nd year of Chang'an (702), the Tibetan tsanpo had sent envoys to request a marriage alliance and peace with Wu Zhou, showing a clear intention of détente. In the 10th month of the same year, Tibet broke the agreement and raided Mao Prefecture. *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* states: "On the Wushen day, the Tibetan tsanpo led more than ten thousand troops to raid Mao Prefecture. Grand Protector Chen Daci fought four battles with him, defeated him all, and beheaded more than a thousand enemies." After this battle, the Tibetan threat was effectively contained, and Wu Zhou no longer needed to launch large-scale expeditions. In the 2nd year of Chang'an (702), Wu Zhou shifted its strategic focus on northern ethnic minorities, paying more attention to the problem of Turkish border raids.

During the Wu Zhou period, the court attached increasing importance to responding to northern border troubles, but did not always adopt the approach of active large-scale expeditions. In the 2nd year of Chang'an (702), on the one hand, Wu Zhou established the Beiting Protectorate to strengthen control over the Western Regions; on the other hand, it created the military imperial examination [3] to select military talents to cope with border pressure. Judging from existing historical materials, no large-scale foreign military campaign highly corresponding to the situation described in the epitaph occurred that year. Therefore, attributing the statement "the Quanrong caused obstruction and the Xunyu repeatedly invaded" in the epitaph to this year lacks sufficient evidence. In comparison, the rebellion of Khitan chiefs Li Jinzhong and Sun Wanrong against Zhou in the 1st year of Wansui Tongtian (696) matches the situation described in the epitaph more closely. *Old Book of Tang* records: "On the Xinhai day of the 7th month, Wu Sansi, Minister of Rites, was appointed Pacification Commissioner of Yuguan Circuit, with Yao Shu, Grand Councilor, as his deputy, to defend against the Khitan" [4]. It can be seen that Wu Sansi did take part in this military response. Combining with the statements in the epitaph such as "the court appointed Prince of Liang Wu Sansi as the grand marshal" and "summoned to participate in military planning", it should be a credible explanation to link Zhao Xuanben's important military merits in the Wu Zhou period with this rebellion suppression. The epitaph further praises him with lines like "devising strategies in the military tent, comparable to Han Xin; storming cities and fighting in the field, performing like Zhang Liang". Although this inevitably carries the eulogistic tone typical of epitaph style, it at least indicates that Zhao Xuanben should have played a considerable role in this military operation, and his military qualifications and abilities were further highlighted.

It was precisely by virtue of his outstanding merits in suppressing the Khitan rebellion that Zhao Xuanben gained the high trust of the Wu Zhou regime. The epitaph states: "The duke was skilled from youth and early studied military texts. He campaigned against various tribes for over thirty years, and was promoted in rank and appointed to twelve official positions. The duke devoted his loyalty and efforts, and was specially awarded the title of General of Cloud Command by imperial decree, and appointed General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters." After more than thirty years of military career, Zhao Xuanben received twelve promotions and appointments, and was granted the titles of "General of Cloud Command" and "General of the Garrison Guard Headquarters". General of Cloud Command was a military honorary rank in the Tang Dynasty. According to *Six Codes of the Tang Dynasty*: "Third rank, lower grade is General of Cloud Command, eighteenth in the Liang dynasty court ranking. Fourth rank in the Chen dynasty, with a salary of two thousand shi. General of Submitting Virtue; established by the Tang court to be

granted to officials of tributary states" [5]. It represented the honorary rank and political status of military officials. General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters was a functional official position, a military post of fourth rank, lower grade. This position was in charge of imperial guard duty and directly responsible for imperial city security, so the holder must be a trusted confidant of the emperor. It can be seen that Zhao Xuanben's allegiance to the Wu Zhou regime, rising from a local sima to a central imperial guard general, reflected both his military ability and the employment strategy of the Wu Zhou period. As for Wu Zhao, her clan was not part of the Guanlong Group since the Western Wei dynasty. In order to eliminate the power of the Tang royal family, she began to undermine this traditional group. Zhao Xuanben came from the Zhao clan of Tianshui, a scholar-official clan but not a core member of the Guanlong group. His promotion path was a typical case of the Wu Zhou regime weakening old scholar-official clans and cultivating trusted forces. After that, Zhao Xuanben successively served as Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital and Prefect of E Prefecture. The Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital was the highest administrative official of Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, during the Wu Zhou period, usually held by important court officials. Zhao Xuanben held this position for four consecutive years, which fully shows Wu Zetian's trust in him. The epitaph praises his "diligence in guarding the city and integrity in conduct". After that, he was promoted to Prefect of E Prefecture. E Prefecture was a transportation hub connecting the north and south and an important military town. As the highest local administrative official, the prefect had significant powers and responsibilities. During his tenure in E Prefecture, Zhao Xuanben was "virtuous, pure and diligent, with no concerns over internal affairs in office", implemented benevolent governance, and the people under his rule lived and worked in peace and contentment. The epitaph praises his governance achievements with the lines: "When he governed the Xiangchuan area with open authority, the prefecture sang praises of his benevolent rule; when he administered Xiakou with diligent governance, the people enjoyed abundant livelihood", reflecting his excellent local governance ability. In the 4th year of Chang'an of Wu Zhou (704), Wu Zetian was seriously ill. Ministers such as Zhang Jianzhi launched the "Shenlong Coup", enthroned Emperor Zhongzong of Tang, and the Wu Zhou regime collapsed, with the Tang royal family regaining power. Amid this regime change, although Zhao Xuanben had pledged allegiance to the Wu Zhou regime, he was not implicated. During the reigns of Emperor Zhongzong and Emperor Ruizong of Tang, the court was in turmoil, with forces such as Empress Wei and Princess Taiping intervening in state affairs in turn. *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* records: "Posthumously stripped Wu Sansi and Wu Chongxun of their titles and posthumous names, broke open their coffins, exposed their corpses, and leveled their tombs." This marked that the Tang Dynasty began to settle scores with Wu Zhou forces. It was not until the 1st year of Kaiyuan (713) that Li Longji, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, ascended the throne and immediately launched the "Xiantian Coup", executing Princess Taiping and her faction, ending the political chaos since the Zhongzong period. At the same time, Zhao Xuanben panicked because he had once been part of the Wu Zhou forces.

As Li Longji consolidated his throne, Princess Taiping attempted to launch a rebellion with the imperial guard, but Emperor Xuanzong discovered it in time and eliminated her faction [6]. Emperor Xuanzong of Tang ascended the throne in the 1st year of Kaiyuan (713). After the "Xiantian Coup", the remaining forces of Wu Zhou were basically eliminated. According to the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben was over eighty years old at this time. He keenly perceived the major changes in the court situation. Having experienced multiple regime changes and fearing purges, he developed the intention to retire, hoping to spend his remaining years in peace. While living in seclusion after

retirement, he fell ill and died in his mansion in Yude Fang, Luoyang County on the 19th day of the 5th leap month in the 10th year of Kaiyuan (722), at the age of ninety-one.

4. The Imperial City Protectors of the Western and Eastern Capitals during the Wu Zhou period as seen in the epitaph

The protector system of the Tang Dynasty actually formed the basic pattern of the so-called "three capital protectors", namely the Western Capital Protector, the Eastern Capital Protector and the Northern Capital Protector. The Western Capital Protector was originally a position established when the emperor left the capital, with the main responsibility of acting as the administrator of capital affairs. Accordingly, the establishment logic of the Eastern Capital Protector and the Northern Capital Protector was roughly similar. After Wu Zetian proclaimed herself emperor, the political structure changed significantly. Wu Zetian took Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, as her long-term residence and political center for a long time. As a result, Luoyang was not only an ordinary eastern capital in the general sense, but also became the de facto core capital of the Wu Zhou regime; correspondingly, Chang'an was demoted to the Western Capital. Against this background, a permanent protector position was needed in Chang'an, the Western Capital, and a corresponding protector was also required in the Eastern Capital when Wu Zetian left Luoyang. In terms of the actual operation of the three capital protectors in the Tang Dynasty, the Eastern Capital Protector was the most frequently appointed.

It is particularly noteworthy that the political status of Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, during the Wu Zhou period was obviously different from that of an ordinary secondary capital. Wu Zetian's long residence in Luoyang made the palace city order, imperial city gate security, and central administrative operation of Luoyang more politically sensitive. For this reason, the significance of all positions related to the management of the Eastern Capital's imperial city cannot be understood merely as daily opening and closing of city gates or ritual affairs, but should be understood at the level of control, maintenance and defense of the political center space. It is also in this sense that Zhao Xuanben's concurrent appointment as Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital not only indicated his promotion in official rank, but also showed that he had been incorporated into the higher-level trust system of the Wu Zhou regime. Although both the Eastern and Western Capitals had permanent protector positions during the Wu Zhou period, there were still obvious differences in their actual status and functions. The record of the origin and development of the Tang protector system in *Comprehensive Institutions* provides important clues for understanding this difference.

In the case of Zhao Xuanben, the record of his "concurrent service as Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital" in the epitaph is not only significant for indicating that he once held a certain capital position, but also reflects that he had entered an official rank level closer to capital order, palace city defense and central political operation during the Wu Zhou period. Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, was the political center of the Wu Zhou period, and the Imperial City Protector was involved in imperial city gate security, order maintenance and emergency response. Therefore, this position should not be regarded as an ordinary local assignment, but as an important symbol of Zhao Xuanben gaining central trust. Rising from a local prefecture sima to concurrently serving as Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital shows that his official career had clearly deviated from the promotion path of ordinary prefecture officials, and was closer to the political-military appointment network formed around the capital and imperial guard system during the Wu Zhou period. The protector position can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, the protector position was frequently established and held by numerous officials, mostly of third rank, upper or lower grade. Most holders of the Eastern and Western Capital protector positions were

central officials. *Comprehensive Institutions* also briefly describes the powers of the Imperial City Protector during funerals and sacrifices:

"The Imperial City Protector memorialized: at dawn on the day of the ancestral sacrifice, open the Vermilion Bird Gate. The Inner Palace Protector and the Inner Inspector memorialized to open the Taiji Hall Gate, Jade Gate, and Chengtian Gate" [7].

According to *Six Codes of the Great Tang*, the imperial city was located within the capital, with three gates on the south side: Vermilion Bird, Anshang, and Hanguang, with clear and detailed spatial arrangements for gate security and access order. It can be seen that positions related to the imperial city were not just ritual assignments in the general sense, but were closely related to order maintenance and gate security management in the core area of the capital. In this regard, the Imperial City Protector's responsibility of opening palace gates during important periods such as funerals and sacrifices precisely shows that his duties involved the actual operation of the core space of the capital.

It can be seen from this that the Western Capital Protector was primarily responsible for the security of Chang'an, the Western Capital, to ensure the emperor's safety. During the Wu Zhou period, Wu Zetian resided in Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, for a long time. A large number of Tang-era officials and royal nobles remained in Chang'an, the Western Capital. Wu Zetian feared that they would occupy the former political center of the Tang Dynasty and form rebel forces.

5. Conclusion

The *Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben* provides important new material for investigating Zhao Xuanben and his official career. As seen from the epitaph, Zhao Xuanben started his career with military merits in his early years, and his activities roughly spanned the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the Wu Zhou period and the Kaiyuan era, obtaining corresponding appointments and promotion opportunities at different political stages. His recorded experiences, including "two campaigns against the Liao and Fan tribes", participation in military operations under Prince of Liang Wu Sansi, and subsequent service as General of the Right Garrison Guard Headquarters, Imperial City Protector of the Eastern Capital, and Prefect of E Prefecture, not only fill in several key links in Zhao Xuanben's personal life, but also provide a specific and clear case study for observing the interactive relationship between military officials' careers and the political situation from Emperor Gaozong's reign to the Kaiyuan era. For the discussion in this paper, the development of Zhao Xuanben's official career was not an isolated personal experience, but was closely related to the continuation of northeastern military campaigns since the early Tang, changes in the military and employment structure during the Wu Zhou period, and the readjustment of political order in the early Kaiyuan era. He entered officialdom through military merits in his early years, was further promoted during the Wu Zhou period in middle age, and voluntarily retired amid the political transition in his old age. This course reflects to a considerable extent that military officials' careers and changes in political structure were not isolated from each other, but were always mutually influenced. In particular, his voluntary retirement in the early Kaiyuan era further shows that the figure in the epitaph was not just passively involved in the changing times, but made keen judgments on situation changes based on long-term political experience, and adjusted his own position and life choices accordingly.

Therefore, the significance of the *Epitaph of Zhao Xuanben* lies not only in supplementing the life resume of a Tang military official, but also in providing noteworthy historical evidence for understanding the historical logic of military officials' appointment, promotion and retirement under the background of political transformation from the early Tang to the high Tang period. Furthermore, what this epitaph reveals is both the ups and downs of an individual's official career

and a microcosm of how changes in political order specifically affect individual destinies. Through the figure of Zhao Xuanben, we can more clearly see that in the constantly restructuring political world between the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the Wu Zhou period and the Kaiyuan era, an individual's merits, appointments, trust and retirement always unfolded and gained their historical significance amid the tension of the historical structure.

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