

## CHAPTER



# Introduction

In the history of China, the T'ang and Sung dynasties have often been mentioned together, the first as a period of vigorous growth and brilliant achievements and the second as one of literary and artistic maturity. It is rarely noted that between these two great dynasties, the years from 907 to 960, there was a period of division called the Wu-tai (Five Dynasties). These five dynasties were in North China. They were important to orthodox historians because they could claim to have been successors of the T'ang in 907 and the fifth dynasty was succeeded immediately by the Sung in 960. Each was really too short to deserve to be called a dynasty. They were the Liang (16 years), the Later T'ang (14 years), the Chin (9 years), the Han (3 years) and the Chou (9 years). None of them ruled over more than a third of the territories of China of the eighth century. The remainder of the T'ang empire were broken up into the so-called Ten Kingdoms largely located in southern and central China. In addition, north of what marks the Great Wall today were the Khitan who had their own empire of Liao in what was later called Manchuria in Western maps and, in the north-west close to Central Asia, numerous garrison-states remained semi-independent throughout that period.

Following after almost 300 years of T'ang and coming before more than 300 years of Sung, the Wu-tai period was too short and confusing to be considered either interesting or significant. Many traditional Chinese historians have been content to find one main topic of interest in the 53 years from the fall of the T'ang to the foundation of the Sung. The topic concerned the problem of how the T'ang mandate was passed on to the Sung. It gave rise to arguments about dynastic legitimacy and about the respective status of the five dynasties of North China and the various 'dynasties' to the south and west, but it did not stimulate much interest in the history of the period itself. This neglect was largely due to the fragmented state of the old empire. In a period that was so divided, there was no centre of authority and therefore no integral subject for study. Also, although the Five Dynasties in North China were important as the precursors of the Sung and could claim to have been bearers of the Mandate of Heaven, they each survived so briefly that historians, accustomed to studying history by dynastic periods, were driven to conclude that there was little to say about them as there was no time for anything important to have happened.

It is now widely recognized that many significant issues in Chinese history have been obscured by the traditional dynastic approach. The weakness of this approach is particularly remarkable in periods of disunity and periods of frequent dynastic change. The Wu-tai was a period which saw the greatest disunity and the most frequent dynastic changes in Chinese history. In the Chinese mind, it was a unique example of the anarchy and moral confusion that inevitably followed the breakdown of the Confucian state. Hence there was probing inquiry into the reasons for the failure of the T'ang central government and uncritical praise of the Sung reunification. The intervening years of lawlessness and disorder were fitted into a preconceived pattern as a warning and example of failure to future statesmen.

It may well be that the Wu-tai period will always be known as one of moral and political disintegration. Such a classification, however, will not do justice to the two generations of men who lived through the difficult years. Nor will it help us to understand how the social and political framework struggled to survive and develop through the

dynastic changes, and how the enduring traditions of the Chinese were transmitted to a new era. What is necessary is a new exploration of this transitional period free from Confucian preconceptions. The exploration may lead to several 'interpretations' and numerous fresh distortions before we settle on a clearer picture. But nothing surely can equal the judgements of the tough-minded Confucian historians both in severity and lack of sympathy. The present study is an attempt to explain some of the features of the Wu-tai period in the light of the movement of events, the changes in political institutions and the ever shifting decisions of the many men in positions of power.<sup>1</sup> It concentrates on the evolution of a new structure of power from the last years of the Huang Ch'ao rebellion, 875–884, when the T'ang empire had all but disintegrated, to the Khitan invasion in 946–947. During this period of 60 years, the distribution of power went through a fundamental change. The system of military governors known as the *chieh-tu shih* which had undermined the authority of the T'ang dynasty was made obsolete. Independent provincial power was broken down and a new type of imperial government emerged.

This new type of government has never been fully examined. It has always appeared that the victory of the Confucian state under the Sung dynasty was merely the re-establishment of the T'ang system with a few modifications. The modifications were supposed to include greater centralization under the bureaucrats and the re-establishment of an even more Confucian government. This study shows that the changes during the Wu-tai period led to a central government which succeeded not because it rejected the *chieh-tu shih* system and returned to T'ang institutions but because it had incorporated the basic features of the *chieh-tu shih* system itself. This development came about firstly because the emperors of the Wu-tai up to the Khitan invasion had all been powerful *chieh-tu shih* themselves and thus brought to the new imperial courts those aspects of provincial government which they had found effective. Also, the emperors were able to create new centres of power at the court and to absorb other provincial personnel, both civil and military, into these centres. The two main features were the Palace Commissions through which the *chieh-tu shih* retainers exercised great influence and the Emperor's Personal Army which served the emperor in the same way that the *ya-ping* (governor's private army) had served their *chieh-tu shih*.

This study attempts to show that the transition from the T'ang to the Sung can better be understood in terms of the important changes during the first half of the Wu-tai period. It rejects the traditional view that each dynasty can simply be explained through the actions of its founders, that is, that the strengths and weaknesses of the Sung can be understood by merely examining the decisions of Emperor T'ai-tsu, Emperor T'ai-tsung and their ministers. Certainly, with the Wu-tai, the changes were more fundamental than have been noted. It is not possible to understand fully the success of the Sung without first recognizing the complex and painful process which produced the government the Sung emperors eventually inherited.

It will be noted that this is not a study of all the five Wu-tai dynasties. The work begins with the Huang Ch'ao rebellion and ends with the Khitan invasion. It covers the last 20 years of the T'ang, the dynasties of Liang, Later T'ang and Chin and the beginning of the Han in 947. The 60 years studied here comprise merely one segment of the long history of the decline and re-establishment of a centralized empire.

The study does not reject the traditional emphasis on dynastic periods, according to which the T'ang ended in 907 and the Sung began in 960. The dynastic periods have their own uses. But in terms of power, conquest and control rather than morality and legitimacy, a more significant division can be found in the year 755 when T'ang central power suffered a setback from which it never recovered, and in the year 979 when the Sung dynasty reunited under strong central rule the greater part of the territories of the T'ang empire. Between the years 755 and 979, one group after another, with the exception of the Sung founders, attempted without success to rebuild the stricken empire. A crucial point was reached in 884 when the T'ang empire survived only in name after the Huang Ch'ao rebels were driven out of the capital, Ch'ang-an. At this time, central power was at its weakest.

During the 130 years from 755 to 884, two periods may be discerned, a period of apparent but uncertain recovery from 755 to 820 and thereafter one of gradual but unmistakable decline until the catastrophic uprisings of 875-884. As for the 95 years from 884 to 979, it is more difficult to discern different periods of development. Certainly the first 40 years are striking as a period when two equally powerful rivals fought each other for the right to succeed the T'ang

dynasty. On the one hand, there were Chu Wên and the remnants of the Huang Ch'ao rebels, on the other, there were the Sha-t'o Turks, bearing the T'ang imperial surname, in alliance with the Chinese forces of independent Ho-pei.<sup>2</sup> Until 923, the struggle was bitter and Chu Wên and his sons ruled uneasily as the Liang emperors and successors of the T'ang. In 923, the alliance of Sha-t'o Turks and Ho-pei Chinese won and the later struggles were fought between rivals within the alliance until Sung T'ai-tsu defeated the Sha-t'o ruler of Pei Han (Shansi) in 979.

From the point of view of examining the contenders for power it may be convenient to distinguish between the struggles of different groups in 884–923 and those within one group in 923–979. But in this study of the power structure, such a division would be meaningless. There was no significant change in the institutions where power was held and exercised. The T'ang 'restoration' in 923–926 revived features of T'ang government which had already been proved ineffectual. And after 926, it was found necessary to re-introduce military and administrative changes that Chu Wên had experimented with in 907–912. These were the basic features of the *chieh-tu shih* system that, in the following 20 years, transformed the nature of imperial government. By 947, the court had become an enlarged *chieh-tu shih* establishment dominated by the Emperor's Army (*ya-chün*) and the palace commissioners (*ch'in-li*) and made respectable by the bureaucrats and literati (*p'an-kuan*, *shu-chi* and *t'ui-kuan*). And outside the court the Khitan invasion had broken the 190-year-old independence of Ho-pei and exhausted the resources of most of the other provinces. The reconstruction of North China could start afresh. From then on, the *chieh-tu shih* system was no longer a threat to central power; what remained of it had become a part of imperial government itself.

## Endnotes

- 1 In a series of articles on the Wu-tai and in his *Conquerors and Rulers, Social Forces in Medieval China*, Wolfram Eberhard explores the rich material of the *Chiu Wu-tai Shih* in order to clarify his theory of the 'gentry' society and to pursue his ideas on foreign 'Turkic' conquests of China. As he has not been interested in Wu-tai history itself, his works do not attempt to help us understand the developments during this period.
- 2 See Appendix, 'The Alliance of Ho-tung and Ho-pei in Wu-tai history', where I show briefly how this alliance came about and how the various individuals who were active members of the alliance dominated court and military politics during the latter half of the Wu-tai period, the years 926–960.