

# A GENERAL HISTORY OF CHINA

VOLUME

IV

From the Five Dynasties Period to  
the Yuan Dynasty



中国对外翻译出版有限公司  
China Translation & Publishing Corporation

Compiled by Liu Chong and Chen He  
Translated by Wang Weidong



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传 真 / (010) 68357870

电子邮箱 / book@ctpc.com.cn

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特约译审 / Natalie Zee Elisabeth Hallett

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# THIRTY- THREE

AGE OF SEPARATION



## 1

## Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

It was an era of warlords trying to sever ties with the central government and vying for supremacy with each other. Numerous regimes came and went like splendid yet fleeting meteors. Self-proclaimed as well as real heroes, taking advantage of the prevailing chaos, mustered forces to achieve great aims. Dynastic changes were common in the Central Plain areas; smaller states stood side by side with each other down south. More than half a century of the flames of war brought endless misery to the people. Why was this chaotic situation? When would all this agony be over? Who would be the saviour of the people, delivering them out of the flames of war?



Portrait of Zhu Wen ◈

IN 907, Zhu Wen dethroned the Tang Emperor Ai and founded the Liang regime (called 'Later Liang' by historians), with Kaifeng as the capital city. The founding of the Later Liang marked the end of the Tang Dynasty and the start of the chaotic Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era.

The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms refer specifically to the period that started with Zhu Wen's toppling of the Tang Dynasty to Zhao Kuangyin's founding of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). During that time, there emerged the Later Liang, the Later Tang, the Later Jin, the Later Han and the Later Zhou dynasties successively in the Central Plains of China, and over ten regional states including the Former Shu, the Later Shu, the Wu and the Chu in southern China (roughly put as ten). How did such a chaotic period come about? Would the people be able to see the light of national unification despite all that chaos and war?

In the peasant uprisings towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, the Tang Empire was badly hit and near the breaking point. The warlords who had emerged from the upheaval ran the regions as if they were independent states. The most powerful ones in the north were Zhu Wen, the military governor of the Xuanwu Garrison in Henan, and Li Keyong, the military governor of the Hedong Garrison in Shanxi.

Zhu Wen, also named Zhu Quanzhong, was born in Dangshan of Songzhou (today's Dangshan County in Anhui Province). He first joined Huang Chao's rebellion, but later betrayed Huang Chao and surrendered to the Tang court. He was therefore granted the title of Xuanwu Military Governor. He gradually developed his power, using Kaifeng as his base from where he defeated many military governors. He controlled the areas in Henan and Shandong and was granted the title of King of Liang by the Tang court. Afterwards, his power greatly increased and he fiercely battled with Li Keyong, then King of Jin, in the north. Zhu Wen won most of the battles and became more and more powerful.

Although the Later Liang replaced the Tang, it only controlled a small territory across Henan, Shandong and, parts of Hebei, Shaanxi, Hubei and Anhui. The rest of the territory was under the ruling of Li Keyong and other warlords. They either retained the reign title of the Tang Dynasty, enthroned themselves or pretended to accept the Later Liang's ruling while in reality staying separated from central power. As a result, the entire country was falling apart.

In 912, Zhu Wen was murdered by his own son, Zhu Yougui. Li Keyong had already died then and his son Li Cunxu succeeded his title as King of Jin and proclaimed himself emperor in 923. As Li's family was given the surname by the Tang emperor, Li Cunxu decided to keep



the state name 'Tang' and became Emperor Zhuangzong of Later Tang. After he was first enthroned, Li Cunxu was quite ambitious and diligent. Unfortunately, later he became conceited and arrogant and therefore his followers started to rebel. Li finally died in a military coup. The generals and soldiers supported Li Keyong's adopted son Li Siyuan as Emperor Mingzong. Li Siyuan carefully dealt with state affairs and reformed the political system. During his eight-year reign, the state stayed relatively peaceful.

When the internal strife went on in the Central Plains, a powerful tribal force rose in the north and played a very important role in the power struggle of the Central Plains. It was Khitan, a tribe that had long lived along the upper reaches of the Liaohe River and used to be a trouble for the Tang Dynasty at their border. In 916, the tribe leader Yelü Abaoji proclaimed himself emperor and established the Liao Dynasty. He conquered the Bohai Kingdom in the east and the northern desert area in the west, establishing a powerful nomadic state.



Painting of Khitans using eagles to hunt ◉





Portrait of Shi Jingtang

In 933 Emperor Mingzong of the Later Tang died and the regime suffered internal conflict again. In 936 Emperor Mingzong's son-in-law and the military governor of Hedong, Shi Jingtang launched a rebellion. He asked Khitan for help with a promise to cede territory and be subdued to them. Even his closest allies were extremely reluctant to regard the khitans as kith and kin and to trade the state interest for their own selfish ends, but Shi Jingtang would not listen to them anyway. Emperor Taizong of Liao, Yelü Deguang himself led an army of 50,000 soldiers to defeat Later Tang, and made Shi Jingtang the emperor of the Later Jin regime.

After Shi Jingtang came into power with the help of Liao, he changed the title of regime to Jin and decided Kaifeng as the capital city. In order to show his loyalty to the Liao court, forty-five-year-old Shi Jingtang revered thirty-four-year-old Yelü Deguang as the 'Father Emperor' and called himself the 'Son Emperor'. Every year he would pay a huge amount of tributes to Liao and he also ceded the Sixteen Prefectures from Yanzhou to Yunzhou (an area in northern China stretching from present-day Beijing westward to Datong). From then on the hinterland of Hebei was open to the Khitan, which deprived the Central Plains of advantageous natural defence. Shi Jingtang's traitorous act humiliated his entire court and caused rebellions one after another in the state. Eventually, because of the situation arising inside and outside the court, Shi Jingtang died of stress. His nephew Shi Chonggui took over the power and declared independence from Khitan. Consequently, Khitan launched a large-scale attack to the south. In early 947, Emperor Yelü Deguang invaded Kaifeng and annihilated Later Jin.

Yelü Deguang changed the dynasty title into Liao and planned to stay in the Central Plains after entering Kaifeng. He turned a blind eye to his soldiers' plundering and looting and imposed heavy taxes on the people. This instigated strong resistance from the people in the Central Plains. Moreover, the weather in Kaifeng was extremely hot in summer, so Yelü had to withdraw from Kaifeng and return to the north. Yelü Deguang's withdrawal to the north created an opportunity for the Hedong military governor of Later Jin, Liu Zhiyuan. Liu Zhiyuan declared himself emperor in Taiyuan in 947 and named the state 'Han' (called Later Han in history). He recovered the prefectures and counties of the Central Plains and set Kaifeng as the capital. Unluckily, he died of disease one

year later. His young and innocent son Liu Chengyou succeeded the throne and became Emperor Yin. At that time, the state was under pressure from external uprisings and internal conflicts amongst court officials. The political situation was very unstable. In 951, a general of the Imperial Guards, Guo Wei of Later Han launched a military coup to usurp the throne and established Later Zhou, becoming Emperor Taizu of Later Zhou.

The characteristics of the Five Dynasties can be concluded as such: unstable, politically dark, legally corrupt and economically depressed. In over fifty years, there were fourteen emperors. Political arena was extremely chaotic and the regimes were frequently replaced. While the Five Dynasties were replacing each other, there also existed other separatist regimes in other areas of the country. How did these separatist regimes come into being? What differences were there between the Five Dynasties in the Central Plains and them?

These separatist regimes were mostly established by the military governors during the late Tang period. The turmoil of the late Tang Dynasty allowed these governors to break off from the Tang court. When the power struggle continued in the Central Plains, the northern powers could not avail themselves of the effort to conquer the southern part of the country. Therefore, these military governors remained relatively independent and constantly fought for more land and set up separatist regimes with themselves as the kings. However, amongst them ten were more important than the others. They included Wu established by Yang Xingmi; Southern Tang by Li Sheng in today's Jiangsu, Jiangxi and southern Anhui; Former Shu by Wang Jian and Later Shu by Meng Zhixiang in today's Sichuan; Wuyue by Qian Liu in today's Zhejiang;

Min by Wang Chao in today's Fujian; Southern Han by Liu Yin in today's Guangxi and Guangdong; Chu by Ma Yin in today's Hunan; and Nanping by Gao Jixing in the west of today's Hubei. The above-mentioned added up to nine kingdoms which were all located in the south. Together with the Northern Han in today's Shanxi established in the late Five Dynasties period, there were ten kingdoms. Amongst the ten kingdoms, Southern Tang occupied the largest territory, covering Jiangsu, Jiangxi and southern Anhui. Later it defeated Min and Chu and occupied the most part of today's Fujian and controlled Hunan for some time. The smallest one was Nanping, which only covered Jingzhou, Zigui and Yichang in today's Hubei.

Political strife and control were seen throughout the Ten Kingdoms. The founders of the ten kingdoms were mostly nobody but were knowledgeable about grassroots life. On the one hand, after they had become separated from central government, they implemented policies to safeguard territory, pacify the people and build their strength. Luckier than the Central Plains, many of the kingdoms were exempted from wars for decades. On the other hand, the political environment in these kingdoms was never stable as their successors were often times incompetent, fatuous, debauched and cruel. Civil strife and, killings and murders amongst family members were common occurrences. However, as a whole, the south suffered less from wars than the north at the end of the Tang Dynasty. Moreover, society was relatively stable in the south; therefore, the economy and culture there developed further than that of the Tang Dynasty.

However, amongst the nine kingdoms in the south of China, the majority were small and had limited power. Their rulers only wanted to maintain peace and independence. Only the Southern Tang, which



enjoyed a large territory, rich resources and a powerful military defence had aspirations to unify China. Li Sheng, the founder of the Southern Tang, who harboured ambitions to unite China, worked very hard for decades to make his state the most powerful one in the south. He waited for an opportunity to launch a full attack against the Central Plains. But his son, Li Jing inherited the throne and changed his father's strategy. At that time, the Liao army captured Kaifeng and the Central Plains fell into turmoil. Instead of using this opportunity to attack the Central Plains, Li Jing battled with Min in Fujian and Chu in Hunan and therefore lost the chance to win the Central Plains. From then on, the Southern Tang declined. In the end, its dream of uniting China evaporated.

Only when the Later Zhou Dynasty was established did the chaotic and separatist era start to reveal a glimmer of unification hope. What kind of regime was the Later Zhou like? Could it achieve the goal of uniting China?

Guo Wei had been devoted to political and economic reforms since he founded the Later Zhou in 951. Politically, he was determined to eliminate corruption, rectify legislature, improve the civil officials' status and suppress the military officers' arrogance. Economically, he revitalised production, pacified outlaws, rewarded wasteland reclamation, reduced or exempted taxes and fairly allocated military services. All of these reforms contributed to the peaceful development of the north which had suffered social unrest for a long time. In 954, Guo Wei passed away and his adopted son Chai Rong took over power and became Emperor Shizong. Emperor Shizong accelerated reforms and launched a campaign to eliminate Buddhism. He issued decrees to downsize temples and monasteries, ordered monks and nuns to resume

*Night Revels of Han Xizai*, by Gu Hongzhong, located at the Palace Museum in Beijing. Han Xizai was a prominent official of Southern Tang. ◦





secular life and greatly developed the economy. All these measures helped create favourable conditions for unification. Emperor Shizong said that he hoped to be in power for thirty years. The first ten years would be used to expand territory, the second ten to build up power and the last ten to achieve unending peace. He was undoubtedly a monarch with vision and ambition.

To achieve the goal of unification, Emperor Shizong made great efforts to reorganise the army and rectify the undisciplined practices amongst generals and soldiers. With the principle that quality was more important than quantity, he reorganised the Imperial Guards by dismissing the old and weak and reserving the strong and skilled ones. In the meantime, he called on warriors from all over the country to participate in the military examination in the capital city. The superior ones would be chosen to serve the Imperial Guards and the court. Thanks to these reforms, military expenses were reduced and the army became better trained and more competent. This powerful and disciplined army played a great role in controlling the rampant separatist regimes and consolidating royal power. Emperor Shizong's army went on expeditions all over the country and were invincible. In 955, Emperor Shizong dispatched generals and troops to conquer Later Shu in the west and recovered the four prefectures of Qinzhou, Fengzhou, Chengzhou and Jiezhou. Afterwards, he led the army himself three times to invade Southern Tang which in the end was forced to surrender and cede fourteen prefectures and sixty-four counties between the Yangtze River and Huai River to Later Zhou. In 959, Emperor Shizong launched a large-scale expedition to the north to recover the Sixteen Prefectures from Yanzhou to Yunzhou. The northern expedition

was fast and unexpected for the enemy, so the battle only lasted forty-two days without much casualty. He regained the three prefectures of Yingzhou, Mozhou and Zhuozhou and seventeen counties to the south of the Waqiao Pass. Unfortunately, he was suddenly beaten down by severe illness and had to withdraw when he was prepared to capture the Youzhou Prefecture. Emperor Shizong of Later Zhou passed away on the nineteenth day of the sixth month of that year at the age of thirty-nine, only five and a half years after his enthronement. His premature death was a great tragedy in Chinese history. The first glimpses of national unification were now gone. How much longer would Chinese people have to wait after suffering in chaos and darkness for so long?

## 2

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# Rise of Khitan

The Khitan was a valiant, strong-willed nomadic people, always eager to soar far and defy heaven. They built the Liao Dynasty vast enough to take the Great Wall in its stride and with the Liaohe River as its heart. They won a glory lasting more than 200 years in Chinese history. They have been so renowned that even today some foreign peoples are still calling China 'Cathay', which means 'a state of Khitans'. What kind of a people were they? How did they rise after all?