CHINA SERIES · BOOK TWELVE

Taizong of Tang

The Making of the Tang Dynasty and the Golden Age of China

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Chapter One

China Series · Book Twelve · Available April 2, 2027

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

PART ONE

The World Before the Tang

第一部 天下大亂

Chapter One

The Wreck of the Sui

第一章 隋室傾覆

> *The ruler is the boat; the common people are the water. The water can carry the boat, and the water can overturn it.*
>
> — *Xunzi, quoted often by Emperor Taizong*

To understand Li Shimin, one must first understand the empire that collapsed around him in his youth, because the memory of that collapse haunted him for the rest of his life. Again and again during his reign he would point to the fallen Sui dynasty as a warning: this is what happens when a ruler exhausts his people, ignores his ministers, and mistakes the obedience of the frightened for the loyalty of the contented. Every reform of the Zhenguan era can be read, in part, as an answer to the question of what went wrong under the Sui.

The Sui dynasty was itself a great achievement. For nearly three centuries before its founding, China had been divided. The Han dynasty, which had ruled a unified empire for four centuries, had disintegrated at the end of the second century. A brief reunification under the Western Jin in the late third century collapsed within a generation into civil war and invasion. From the early fourth century onward, northern China was ruled by a succession of states founded

by peoples from the steppe and its borderlands, the Xiongnu, the Jie, the Di, the Qiang, and above all the Xianbei, while the south was governed by a succession of short-lived Chinese dynasties based at Jiankang, the city we now call Nanjing. The division lasted so long that many people, north and south, must have assumed it was permanent.

It was not. In the north, the Xianbei Tuoba clan founded the Northern Wei dynasty in the late fourth century and gradually unified the northern plain. The Northern Wei rulers, though of steppe origin, adopted Chinese institutions, Chinese dress, and eventually Chinese surnames, moving their capital in 494 from the frontier city of Pingcheng to Luoyang in the heart of the old Chinese world. That policy provoked a backlash among the frontier garrisons, whose soldiers felt abandoned and despised, and in the 520s the garrisons rose in a rebellion that tore the Northern Wei apart. Out of the wreckage came two rival states, eventually known as the Northern Zhou in the west, with its capital at Chang'an, and the Northern Qi in the east, with its capital at Ye.

The Northern Zhou was the weaker of the two at first, but it had something the Northern Qi lacked: a tightly knit ruling elite that combined Xianbei military aristocrats with leading Chinese families of the northwest. Modern historians, following the great twentieth-century scholar Chen Yinke, call this elite the Guanlong group, after the regions of Guanzhong (the Wei River valley around Chang'an) and Longxi (the territory to its west). Its members intermarried, fought side by side, and shared a hybrid culture in which a gentleman was expected both to ride and shoot like a steppe warrior and to read the classics like a Chinese scholar. The founder of the Northern Zhou's power, Yuwen Tai, organized this elite into a military system known as the twenty-four armies and the eight pillars of state. Among the eight pillars of state was a man named Li Hu. He was the great-grandfather of Li Shimin.

In 577 the Northern Zhou conquered the Northern Qi and reunited the north. Four years later, in 581, the Zhou throne was usurped by one of its own leading ministers, Yang Jian, the father-in-law of the reigning emperor, who proclaimed a new dynasty called the Sui. Yang Jian, known to history as Emperor Wen, was a hard, suspicious, frugal, and enormously capable man. In 589 his armies crossed the Yangzi River and destroyed the southern Chen dynasty, reuniting China for the first time in nearly three hundred years.

Emperor Wen's achievements were enormous. He rebuilt Chang'an on a grand new plan, laying out the city that the Tang would inherit and make famous. He issued a new law code, the Kaihuang Code, which simplified and softened the harsh laws of his predecessors and became the basis of the later Tang Code. He reorganized local government, abolishing a whole layer of administration and cutting the number of officials. He began the practice of recruiting officials by written examination, though on a small scale. He filled the state granaries to overflowing. He conducted census after census, bringing millions of households back onto the tax registers. He practiced a personal frugality so severe that it became legendary; he is said to have worn patched clothing and to have punished officials who presented him with luxuries. By the end of his reign the Sui state was probably richer and better organized than any Chinese state since the height of the Han.

He also had a famously formidable wife, the Empress Dugu, who exercised great influence over him and over the court. She was the daughter of another of the old Northern Zhou pillars of state, Dugu Xin, and her sisters had married into other great families of the Guanlong elite. One of those sisters married Li Bing, son of Li Hu. Their son was Li Yuan, the future founder of the Tang. Li Yuan was therefore a first cousin of Emperor Wen's sons, including the man who would become the second and last effective emperor of the Sui.

That man was Yang Guang, known to history as Emperor Yang. He came to the throne in 604, in circumstances that later historians

found deeply suspicious. He was the second son, not the first; his elder brother had been crown prince until a long campaign of intrigue, in which Yang Guang played the part of the dutiful, frugal, monogamous son while his brother was portrayed as extravagant and dissolute, persuaded their parents to depose the heir and replace him with Yang Guang. When Emperor Wen died in 604, rumor held that he had discovered his second son's true character too late and had been murdered before he could reverse the succession. The deposed elder brother was forced to commit suicide. Whether every detail of this story is true we cannot know; the account was written by historians of the Tang, who had every reason to blacken the reputation of the dynasty they had replaced. But the parallel with what would happen at the Xuanwu Gate twenty-two years later is striking, and it was not lost on Taizong himself.

Emperor Yang is one of the great villains of Chinese historiography, a byword for extravagance, cruelty, and folly. The reality was more complex. He was a gifted poet, a patron of Buddhism and of learning, and a man of vast ambitions. He built a second capital at Luoyang, the eastern capital, on a scale that rivaled Chang'an. He extended and completed the network of canals that came to be called the Grand Canal, linking the Yellow River and the Yangzi and ultimately the region of modern Beijing in the north with Hangzhou in the south. That canal would be the economic backbone of Chinese empires for the next thousand years, carrying the grain of the rich south to the political centers of the north. Emperor Yang repaired the Great Wall, sent expeditions to Taiwan and to the regions of the southwest, received tributary missions from Japan, and extended Chinese influence deep into Central Asia. In many ways his ambitions anticipated what the Tang would actually achieve.

The problem was the cost. Every one of these projects was built with forced labor. The sources speak of millions of men and women conscripted to dig canals, build palaces, and haul supplies, and of corpses piled along the roads. Even allowing for exaggeration by

hostile historians, the burden was crushing. And then Emperor Yang made the decision that destroyed his dynasty: he resolved to conquer Goguryeo.

Goguryeo was one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, and the most powerful of them. Its territory stretched across what is now northern Korea and the Liaodong region of northeastern China. It was a proud and militarized kingdom, with strong fortress cities and a long history of resisting Chinese pressure. Emperor Wen had already attempted an invasion in 598, the year of Li Shimin's birth, and it had ended in disaster, with the army ravaged by disease and the fleet wrecked by storms. Emperor Yang was determined to succeed where his father had failed. Goguryeo's ruler had refused to come to court and pay homage in person, and there were fears that Goguryeo might ally with the Eastern Turks, the great steppe power to the north. For Emperor Yang, Goguryeo's defiance was intolerable.

In 612 he launched an invasion on a scale almost beyond imagining. The Sui histories claim that the army numbered more than one million one hundred thousand combat troops, with twice that number of laborers and porters to supply them. The figures are surely inflated, but there is no doubt that this was one of the largest military expeditions in the premodern world. It ended in catastrophe. The Goguryeo fortresses held out against siege after siege. A detached force sent to strike directly at the Goguryeo capital at Pyongyang was lured deep into enemy territory by the Goguryeo general Eulji Mundeok, then cut to pieces as it retreated across the Salsu River. According to the Chinese sources, of more than three hundred thousand men who crossed the Liao River in that force, only a few thousand returned.

Emperor Yang tried again in 613. This time the campaign was cut short not by Goguryeo but by rebellion at home. Yang Xuangan, the son of one of the dynasty's greatest ministers and a man trusted with organizing supplies for the army, rose in revolt near Luoyang. The revolt was crushed, but it was a sign of how deeply the Sui elite itself

had come to resent the emperor's demands. In 614 Emperor Yang tried a third time, and Goguryeo, exhausted, offered a nominal submission. The emperor declared victory and went home. Goguryeo never fulfilled its promises, and Emperor Yang began planning a fourth campaign.

By then the empire was coming apart. Across the north China plain, where the burden of the Goguryeo campaigns had fallen most heavily, peasants fled their villages rather than be conscripted, and gathered in bands in the marshes and mountains. Floods along the Yellow River in 611 had already devastated the region. Bandit groups grew into armies, and armies into rival regimes. Local officials and military commanders, cut off from the court or contemptuous of it, began to act on their own. A popular song of the time, recorded in the histories, urged young men not to go to Liaodong to die for nothing.

In 615 Emperor Yang went north to inspect the frontier. The Eastern Turks, whose ruler Shibi Qaghan had grown resentful of Sui attempts to divide and weaken his people, surprised the emperor and besieged him in the fortress city of Yanmen. For more than a month the ruler of all China was trapped, surrounded by steppe cavalry, while his ministers scrambled to raise relief forces. Among the young men who answered the call was a sixteen-year-old named Li Shimin. We will return to his part in that episode in a later chapter. The siege was eventually lifted, partly through the arrival of relief armies and partly because the Turkic khagan's Sui-born wife, the Princess Yicheng, sent him a false message that his own territory was under attack. But the humiliation of the emperor was complete.

Emperor Yang's response was to withdraw. In 616 he left the north entirely and went south to Jiangdu, the city now called Yangzhou, on the Grand Canal near the Yangzi, which he loved and where he had spent many years as a young prince governing the south. From there he could no longer control the north at all. The empire his father had reunited fell into pieces. Rebel leaders proclaimed themselves kings and emperors. A former Sui aristocrat named Li Mi, who had been

one of the leaders of Yang Xuangan's rebellion, took command of a great rebel army called the Wagang army and threatened Luoyang. In the northeast a former village headman named Dou Jiande built a powerful regime that was known for its relatively good order and its leader's personal decency. In the northwest, in the region of Gansu, a local strongman named Xue Ju proclaimed himself emperor of Qin. In the north, along the Great Wall, a former Sui officer named Liu Wuzhou killed his commander and allied with the Turks. In the far south, the far west, and the Yangzi valley, other warlords did the same. By 617 there were dozens of rival regimes on the territory of the Sui empire, and the emperor in Jiangdu was emperor in little more than name.

In the spring of 618 the end came. The imperial guards at Jiangdu, northerners who longed to go home and could see no future in serving an emperor who refused to return, mutinied under the leadership of Yuwen Huaji, the son of one of the emperor's most trusted ministers. They seized Emperor Yang in his palace. According to the traditional account, he asked for poison so that he might die with dignity, and when none could be found he was strangled with a silk scarf. He was about forty-nine years old. His wife buried him in a coffin made from the boards of a bed.

The fall of the Sui left a profound impression on everyone who lived through it, and on none more than the young man who would become Taizong. Throughout his reign he returned to Emperor Yang's example again and again, sometimes as a warning, sometimes almost as a mirror. He knew that he and Emperor Yang shared many qualities: intelligence, ambition, a love of grand projects, a fondness for military glory, a taste for literature, and the experience of having reached the throne over the claims of an elder brother. He knew, too, that the Sui had possessed full granaries, a strong army, and a well-ordered government, and had lost everything in less than fifteen years. The lesson he drew was that no amount of material strength could save a ruler who exhausted his people and would not hear the

truth. “Emperor Yang,” he once remarked to his ministers, “had storehouses full of grain and silk, and still he lost the empire. Was it not because he did not care for the people?” At another time he observed that the Sui ruler’s ministers had all known the empire was collapsing but none had dared to say so, because the emperor punished those who spoke. The ruler who closes his ears, Taizong concluded, sooner or later loses his head.

The Divided Inheritance

It is worth pausing to consider what kind of world the Sui had made, because the Tang inherited it almost entire. The Sui reunification created institutions that would last for centuries: the reorganized local administration, the law code, the beginnings of examination recruitment, the system of three central departments that the Tang would refine, the equal-field system of land allocation inherited from the Northern Wei and the Northern Zhou, the tax system based on grain, cloth, and labor service, and the militia system known as the fubing, in which farmer-soldiers attached to regional headquarters served in rotation in the capital guards and on campaign. It created the physical infrastructure of empire: the great capitals at Chang’an and Luoyang, the Grand Canal, the granaries. And it created a ruling class drawn from the Guanlong aristocracy, reinforced by the great families of the northeast and the south, that would continue to dominate the Tang court for generations.

What the Sui had not created was legitimacy that could survive defeat. Emperor Wen had seized power from the child emperor of the Northern Zhou and had massacred the Zhou imperial clan. Emperor Yang had come to the throne under the shadow of his father’s possibly violent death and his brother’s forced suicide. The dynasty’s claim to rule rested on success, and when success turned to failure there was nothing left to sustain it. The Tang founders, who were themselves members of the same aristocracy and relatives of the Sui ruling house, understood this very well. Much of their political effort

in the first decades of the dynasty would be devoted to building a legitimacy that did not depend on victory alone: a legitimacy rooted in the claim that the Tang ruled for the people, listened to its ministers, governed by law, and enjoyed the favor of Heaven because it deserved it.

This is the context in which we must read the Zhenguan era. Taizong's government was not created in a vacuum. It was created by men who had seen an empire fall, and who were determined not to fall themselves.

Sources and Debates

The standard history of the Sui is the Book of Sui (Sui shu), compiled under Taizong's own sponsorship by a team led by Wei Zheng and presented in 636. That fact alone should make us cautious. The Book of Sui was written by officials of the dynasty that had overthrown the Sui, at the command of an emperor who used the Sui as his principal negative example. Its portrait of Emperor Yang as a cruel and extravagant tyrant served an obvious political purpose. Arthur F. Wright, in his classic study The Sui Dynasty (1978), and Victor Cunrui Xiong, in Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy (2006), have both argued that Emperor Yang was a far more capable and complex ruler than the traditional picture allows, whose reign was undone less by personal depravity than by the overextension of a fragile state and the catastrophic failure of the Goguryeo campaigns. Few modern historians would defend the Goguryeo wars, but many would see in Emperor Yang a visionary whose projects, especially the Grand Canal, laid foundations on which the Tang built its prosperity.

The figures given for the size of the 612 invasion army are almost certainly inflated. Premodern Chinese sources often give round figures for armies that reflect official paper strength or rhetorical exaggeration rather than actual numbers in the field. Still, even

scholars skeptical of the figures accept that the expedition was enormous and that its failure was a turning point.

The Guanlong group thesis, associated with Chen Yinke and developed in his studies of Tang political history in the 1940s, remains influential, though later scholars have questioned how cohesive the group really was and how long it survived as a distinct political force. Readers interested in this debate can consult the relevant chapters of the Cambridge History of China, volume 3, Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I, edited by Denis Twitchett (1979).

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

The China Series

Twenty-one volumes.
A world of enduring ideas.

Preorder the complete 21-volume China Series at 15% off through the final volume's launch, approximately June 4, 2027.

Book Twelve available April 2, 2027

ipcnews.org · ipc.asia

orders@ipcnews.org

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

© 2026 Robert Miller. All rights reserved.