

# Southern and Northern Dynasties

Nán-Běi Cháo 南北朝

220–589 CE (*years debated by scholars*)

**The Southern and Northern dynasties (220–589 CE, although scholars debate the exact dates) were periods of civil unrest and warfare, but they also brought the spread of non-indigenous Mahayana Buddhism and native Daoism, the emergence of Chinese Buddhism, and advancement in the arts and sciences.**

The highly complex period of the Southern and Northern dynasties has engendered lively scholarly debate about official and unofficial and regional/local dynasties whose names appear in the Chinese chronologies but are not always recognized as valid by Western scholars. This era is generally bracketed by the Three Kingdoms period (220–265 CE) and followed by the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE). China scholars acknowledge that there is disagreement on the dates for this era. The dynastic subgroups referred to in this article may be best characterized as unofficial local dynastic units whose names appear in unofficial or altered official histories.

During the Southern and Northern dynasties internal strife divided the north and south, and two dynastic successions were formed. Many northern Chinese migrated to southern China, whereas non-Chinese immigrants (primarily Xianbei steppe nomadic tribes) migrated to northern China and to some tribal areas in the south. Among these new migrants the process of sinicization accelerated. The two regions—roughly divided at the Yangzi (Chang) River—had significant ecological distinctions,

with the level northern steppes conducive to livestock and horse breeding and large-scale cavalry warfare with heavily armored, fast-moving, and well-organized horsemen. The stirrup, which gave an advantage to armed riders, was developed during the earlier Western Jin dynasty and was adopted by the horse nomads of northern China and central Asia. The mountainous south was crosscut by major rivers, and warfare included the use of ships and riverine naval tactics as well as armies of foot soldiers. Naval fleets on the Yangzi River formed the line of defense against the non-Chinese from the north. The construction of irrigation works (dams, canals, and terraces) facilitated rice production to feed a population that was increasing as a result of a high birth rate and Chinese immigration from the north. Small communities grew in size, and major urban centers arose.

Buddhism, introduced into northern and southern China during the first century CE, spread and flourished in the north in part because the aristocrats who had been the main followers of Confucianism migrated to the south, and the north was then controlled by immigrant non-Chinese who were not committed to either local shamanism or Confucianism. In addition, Buddhist religious tenets and scriptures appealed to the northern farmers and craftsmen who had been oppressed by the previous nobility, especially because of the promise of an afterlife, which is not found in Confucianism.

Daoism also had its adherents. The two sects were the Supreme Purity Sect and the Numinous Treasure Sect. (The preferred way to translate into English or romanize the name *Daoism*, a native Chinese religion and

philosophy, has been the subject of controversy.) Buddhism in southern China was influenced by the teachings of monks such as Hui Yüan (334–416).

## Cultural Advances

During this era the Southern dynasties especially enjoyed major cultural achievements in technology and manufacturing and a proliferation in arts and crafts, literature, and the sciences. Important advances occurred in astronomy, mathematics, cartography, medicine, and porcelain production; gunpowder was invented for use in fireworks. The arts, including the composition and recitation of poetry, the composition of music and the playing of instruments, and calligraphy and painting, prospered mainly under the emperors in the south, and members of the Chinese nobility were expected to master these endeavors to gain prestige among their fellow aristocrats. Among them were the influential poet Tao Qian (365–427), the calligrapher Wang Xizhi (307–365), and landscape artists such as Gu Kaizhi (344–406). Knowledge and the application of the sciences were also held in high regard; for example, a noted mathematician and astronomer, Zu Chongzhi (429–500), was esteemed in the south at the capital of Nanjing, where he calculated the length of the solar year, predicted eclipses, and worked out the value of pi. Institutions of higher learning were established, including the Zongmingguan (Imperial Nanjing University). The Southern dynasties were in commercial contact with the Indian subcontinent by sea and with the kingdoms of Funan and Champa in Southeast Asia (the latter are situated in contemporary Cambodia and Vietnam).

## Southern Dynasties

The Jin dynasty was succeeded by four Southern dynasties, each led by military commanders who seized power for brief periods but were unable to establish hereditary succession; these dynasties were the Liu Song (420–479 CE), Southern Qi (479–502 CE), Liang (502–557 CE), and Chen (557–588 CE). In spite of naval strength, building and maintaining land armies were difficult. There were shortages of conscripts; troop desertions caused shifting political

alliances and social statuses because specific households had been designated for military service to the exclusion of others. The sovereigns of the Liu Song dynasty included Wu Di (420–422), Shao Di (423–424), Wen Di (424–453), Xiao Wu Di (454–464), Qian Fe Di (465), Ming Di (465–472), Hou Fei Di (473–477), and Shun Di (477–479). The Southern Qi had seven emperors: Gao Di (479–482), Wu Di (483–493), Yu Lin Wang (494), Hai Ling Wang (494), Ming Di (494–498), Dong Hun Hou (499–501), and He Di (501–502). The subsequent Liang dynasty had six sovereigns: Wu Di (502–549), Jan Wen Di (549–551), Yu Zhang Wang (551–552), Yuan Di (552–555), Zhen Yang Hou (555), and Jing Di (555–557). The Chen dynasty had five emperors: Wu Di (557–559), Wen Di (560–566), Fei Di (566–568), Xuan Di (569–582), and Hou Zhu (583–589). Emperor Wen Sui (581–604), the first emperor of the Sui dynasty, constructed a fleet in Sichuan and was able to conquer the south and reunify China.

## Northern Dynasties

The proto-Mongol Xianbei nomadic tribes dominated northern China and established the Northern dynasties, which included the Northern Wei (386–535), Eastern Wei (534–550), Western Wei (535–556), Northern Qi (550–577), and Northern Zhou (557–588). The Xianbei maintained a polity (political organization) of social stratification between them and their Chinese dependents but employed Chinese as low- and mid-level bureaucrats for political administration.

The Northern Wei had fourteen sovereigns: Dao Wu Di (386–409), Ming Yuan Di (409–423), Tai Wu Di (424–452), Nan An Wang (452), Wen Cheng Di (452–465), Xian Wen Di (466–471), Xiao Wen Di (471–499), Xuan Wu Di (500–515), Xiao Ming Di (516–528), Xiao Zhuang Di (528–530), Chang Guang Wang (530–531), Jue Min Di (531–532), An Ding Wang (531–532), and Xiao Wu Di (532–535). The Northern Wei emperor, Xiao Wen, had mixed ancestry—a Touban clan Xianbei father and a Chinese mother—and renamed his clan “Yuan” (Chinese for “first” or “primal”). He relocated the capital city from Pingcheng to the old Eastern Han and Western Jin dynasties’ imperial site at Luoyang (which had a population of one-half million by 510) and constructed a series of Buddhist temples.



**A pictorial brick of the Southern Dynasties unearthed in Dengxian County of Henan province. It depicts the story about the crown prince of King Wuling of Zhou blowing a flute to attract phoenixes before becoming a Taoist Immortal.**

Ultimately more than twelve thousand Buddhist temples and monasteries were built. The temples were used for worshipping and for storing scriptures, and the form of the buildings derived from Buddhist stupas (dome-shaped structures serving as Buddhist shrines) but assumed the appearance of Chinese pagodas.

In addition, Xiao Wen Di instituted a major sinicization program in 493 that required that the Xianbei elite conform to certain Chinese standards, which included wearing Chinese garments rather than Xianbei clothing at the royal court. He encouraged intermarriage among the higher-ranked clans of Xianbei and Chinese, and required the Xianbei who were under thirty years of age to learn the Chinese language. As another form of acculturation, tea, commonly drunk in south China, began to replace yogurt drinks as the beverage of choice among the northerners. Prince Donyang of the Northern Wei served as governor of Dunhuang from 523 to 538 and with the wealth of local families devised a monumental project to honor Buddhism with the modification and mural paintings in the Mogao Caves. Other Buddhist murals were painted in the Yungang, Longmen, and Maijishan grottoes.

Food shortages among troops garrisoned in the north led to several insurrections in 523 and from 526 to 527, and led to rebellions in the Northern Wei court. Xiao Jing Di assumed control of the Eastern Wei and the capital at Luoyang, while a rival took control of the west and the older capital at Chang'an in 535. After Xiao Wen Di's death his

successors gradually abolished the Xianbei-Chinese assimilation policy.

## Emperors

The Eastern Wei's sole emperor was Xiaojing (534–550), whereas the Western Wei dynasty had three: Wen Di (535–551), Fei Di (552–554), and Gong Di (554–556). The Northern Qi emperors were Wen Xuan Di (550–559), Fei Di (560), Xiao Zhao Di (560–561), Wu Cheng Di (561–565), Hou Zhu (565–577), You Zhu (577), and Fan Yang Wang (577). Lastly, the Northern Zhou dynasty had five sovereigns: Xiao Min Di (557), Xiao Ming Di (557–560), Wu Di (561–578), Xuan Di (579), and Jing Di (579–581). The Eastern Wei monarch was forced to abdicate, and the Northern Qi dynasty was established under Wen Xuan Di. Emperor Gong Di of the Western Wei was deposed, and the Northern Zhou dynasty was created under Xiao Min Di. In 577 the north was reunified when the Northern Zhou conquered the Northern Qi, but Yang Jian (who became Emperor Wen Sui) overthrew the Northern Zhou in 581, and the Sui were able to conquer the south and reunify China for the brief period ending in 618, when the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) succeeded in maintaining this unity.

**Charles C. KOLB**

## Further Reading

- Fairbank, J. K., & Goldman, M. (2006). *China: A new history* (2d ed.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Gernet, J. (1996). *A history of Chinese civilization* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Institute of East Asiatic Studies, University of California. (1952–1968). *Chinese dynastic histories translations/ Zhong gu shi yi cong*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Needham, J. et al. (Eds.). (1954–2005). *Science and civilization in China* (7 vols.). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkinson, E. (2000). *Chinese history: A manual* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute.