

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
<b>Band:</b>	1 (1947)
<b>Heft:</b>	1-2
<b>Artikel:</b>	The composition of the leading political group during the "Five Dynasties"
<b>Autor:</b>	Eberhard, Wolfram
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145252">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145252</a>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 10.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Composition of the Leading Political Group During the "Five Dynasties"

by Wolfram Eberhard

Among students of Chinese history the period of the «Five Dynasties» (Wu-tai; 906–960) has never aroused particular interest. This brief period in which five short-lived dynasties constantly made war against one another, and against other independent dynasties in South-China, seemed not worth special study. However this period is interesting in some respects and even important. The reasons why history and culture under the T'ang dynasty differ so widely from history and culture under the Sung dynasty are to be found in this very Wu-tai period which links together those two great dynasties. Furthermore during the 60 years of the Wu-tai period not less than three dynasties, founded by the Turkish tribe of the Sha-t'o, ruled over North-China. What were the consequences of this foreign occupation and why did the conquerors lose their power so quickly? The solution of this problem is important not only for the short period under consideration, but for certain more lasting results.

## 1

Some years ago I studied a similar period, the T'o-pa empire in North-China (385–550)<sup>1</sup>). At that time foreigners were also in pos-

<sup>1</sup>) To be published soon under the name *Das Toba-Reich in Nord-China, eine soziologische Untersuchung* (as supplement to the *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Leiden); some chapters of this book have been published in a revised form in Turkish (with German abstracts) in the journals *Bulleten* (published by the Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, No. 36, p. 485–496; No. 37, p. 81–96, No. 38, p. 255–270; Ankara 1945–1946) and *Revue de la Faculté de Langues, Ankara* (vol. 1, No. 2, p. 19–32; 1943; vol. 4, No. 3, p. 297–311; 1946); see further W. Eberhard: *China unter der Herrschaft von Fremden* (*Forschungen und Fortschritte*, vol. 20, No. 16/18). – A similar study is being made by K. A. Wittfogel of the Kitan period (see his article *History of the Chinese Society, Liao; General Introduction* in: *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, col. 36, p. 1–35), but Wittfogel is starting from a different point of view.

session of a great part of China whereas Middle and South-China were ruled by native dynasties. My investigations have proved that the structure of the political and cultural situation, especially the problem of the importance of foreign rule for China and its culture, can only be revealed by the sociological method. Thus, in these studies of the Wu-tai period (of which this one is the first<sup>2</sup>), I am making use of the same method again. In order to be able to do so, a systematic study of the «Old Wu-tai Annals» (*Chiu-Wu-tai-shih*, shortened: *ChWTSh*) was necessary. All parts of the annals were used, but in a way quite different from the way the historian and the writers of the annals might have expected. Thus it became possible to keep oneself relatively free from the bias of the authors.

The only source for this and the following studies is the *Chiu Wu-tai-shih*. This book is much more fit for sociological purposes than the *Hsin-Wu-tai-shih* («New Annals of the Five Dynasties»). The *Hsin-Wu-tai-shih* contains less material than the «Old Annals»; furthermore this book is written in the light of a special movement, the Neo-Confucianist ideology of the Sung philosophers. Of course there are numerous other sources for this period, but as our method makes use of the statistical method of sociology it should be based on homogeneous material. Furthermore as the relations between the authors of the annals and their books are to be shown only one single book (but the most complete one) can be made use of.

The «Old Annals» contain about 3300 biographies or material of biographical character. These form the basis of our study. The «Old Annals» are smaller than the *Wei-shu* («Annals of the T'o-pa Dynasty» –  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the *Wei-shu*), but the number of persons mentioned in it is not even half as many as in the *Wei-shu*. One page of the «Old Annals» (in the K'ai-ming edition) contains an average of 16

---

<sup>2</sup>) Another article (*Some cultural traits of the Sha-t'o*) is to be published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.

persons against 24 in the *Wei-shu*, which shows that the biographies in the «Old Annals» are more detailed.

## 2

The problem of this first study is the following: after the end of the feudal period (ca. 250 B. C.), the «gentry» was the ruling class in China. This type of «gentry» (called «chin-shen» in modern Chinese) resembles in some points the European «bourgeoisie» but is not identical with it. The Chinese «gentry» was a group consisting of proprietors of estates, the majority of which were let to tenants. The proprietors and their families lived partly on their farms but partly in the big cities where they worked as government officials and made their living out of the rents of the tenants and from their government salaries. Almost all men of education belonged to this class. The gentry was normally divided into rival «cliques». An emperor of strong personality was able to maintain a balance of power between the rival groups, thus enforcing his own will. Weak emperors became wholly dependent on a single group, which often dethroned an emperor not fit for its purposes and made another puppet emperor or declared a member of the clique as emperor, thus founding a new dynasty. Only three Chinese dynasties resulted from a rebellion of the peasants (Han, Hou-Liang, Ming) and not from an activity of the gentry; but even the leaders of these movements changed quickly and became exponents of the interests and politics of the gentry.

Now the beginning of a new dynasty in China normally was accompanied by a change in the composition of the gentry. In some cases, this change was quite irrelevant, in others rather worthy of notice. But the occupation of China by a *foreign* power *always* produces a considerable change in the composition of the gentry, because legally the foreigners become the new ruling class of China. Our aim is to study to what degree the membership of the gentry changed during the Wu-tai period. This will enable us to evaluate

the importance of the foreigners during and after the period of occupation. Some other investigations to be published later (on the proportion of foreigners in the most important governmental posts, in the economy, social life and so on) will confirm the results of this first study.

## 3

A part of the persons mentioned in the *ChWTS*h are persons not subject to the empires of North-China but belong to other states; these are not dealt with here. They belong to the following groups:

a) *Northern foreigners*:

1) subjects of the Kitan empire	.. . . .	65
2) subjects of other states north of China	.. . . .	66
3) subjects of states in Turkestan and western Kansu	.. .	<u>17</u>
		<u>148</u>

b) *Southern foreigners*:

1) subjects of the Yang-tse states (Wu and Huai-nan)	..	67
2) subjects of the Chêkiang state	.. . . .	39
3) subjects of the Fukien state	.. . . .	27
4) subjects of the states in Hunan and Kuangtung	.. .	51
5) subjects of the Shu state in Szuch'uan	.. . .	20
6) subjects of non-Chinese tribal states in the South-west	.. .	<u>13</u>
		<u>217</u>

Total number of foreigners = 365

These foreigners belonged to different ethnological groups, some were Chinese, others non-Chinese, but as a whole the Northerners normally were non-Chinese, the Southerners Chinese. All of them lived their whole lives, or the greater part, outside of North-China; only 11 subjects of the state Shu in Szuch'uan (group B 5) are included among the subjects of North-China, as they belong to a branch of a North-China family which emigrated to Shu. Thus the basis of our study is approximately 2950 persons.

## 4

When we studied the social structure of the T'o-pa empire we proved that about 50% of the persons mentioned in the T'o-pa annals belonged to the so-called «gentry-families». These gentry-families of the T'o-pa period, numbering not more than about 100, were the politically leading class of that period. During the 165 years of the T'o-pa reign there were very few families originally belonging to the commoners who succeeded in rising into the circle of the gentry-families. During the T'o-pa period the gentry-families were divided into two major groups: a) members of T'o-pa families, i. e. of the foreign conquerors, and b) members of Chinese families. T'o-pa gentry-families normally belonged to the indigenous nobility; on the other hand 92% of the Chinese gentry-families belonged to the leading political class of China even before the T'o-pa time. In the course of the T'o-pa reign the importance and number of the T'o-pa gentry diminished constantly, but the importance of the Chinese gentry increased. At the end of the period in question the political leadership was in the hands of purely Chinese gentry-families just as it was before the occupation. The reasons for this change are explained in my book on the T'o-pa.

Now we have studied the same question again. The results are the following: like all Chinese annals the *ChWTSh* reports only on the course of political events; thus members of the lower classes (peasants, slaves, craftsmen, musicians, fortune-tellers, common soldiers etc.) are mentioned very exceptionally. The members of the politically leading class can be divided into two groups: a) members of gentry *families*, i. e. persons who exercised a political influence not because of their individual qualities but because of their social position, and b) *individuals* who became influential by means of their personal qualities and only for their own life-time. This last group again can be divided into two groups: 1) individuals who became important

as members of a gang, or of a group of regular or irregular soldiers, and 2) individuals who became important for other reasons (i. g. eunuchs). In this study only the first group (a) is to be analysed.

We could establish 88 gentry-families. This number should perhaps be increased a little (reaching about 100) if the biographical material of the Old Annals were more complete because a number of persons who probably belonged to gentry-families are mentioned, but information concerning their social position is lacking. These 88 gentry-families include 881 individuals. If the material were more detailed this number would increase too. The annals mention quite a few people, presumably belonging to one of these families, but the family-relationships cannot be clearly established. As the same is true of the T'o-pa gentry-families, the two sets of statistics can well be compared. During the T'o-pa period about 50% of the persons mentioned in the annals belonged to the gentry-families, but only about 30% of the Wu-tai persons belonged to the gentry. This means that the percentage of the gentry is smaller in the Wu-tai period than in the T'o-pa period, as a consequence of the social disturbances during this period.

The 88 gentry-families can be grouped in the following way:

a) *Non-Chinese gentry-families:*

1) Sha-t'o (Turks, belonging to the invading group) . . . . .	15
2) Uigurs and T'u-chüeh (Turks) . . . . .	4
3) T'u-hun (ethnic affinity not definitely established yet)	1
4) Families belonging to the former T'o-pa federation, but not yet wholly sinicised . . . . .	3
	<u>23</u>

b) *Chinese gentry-families:*

1) Families living in South-Shansi and Shensi . . . . .	17
2) Families living in Hopei (mostly South-Hopei) . . . . .	21

3) Families living in Honan, North-Kiangsu, North-Anhui, West-Shantung . . . . .	19
4) Families living in Central and East-Shansi . . . .	5
5) Families living in East-Kansu . . . . .	3
	<hr/>
	65

These statistics prove that the percentage of foreigners in the gentry (26%) is not higher than it was during the T'o-pa period (28%). The home of the Chinese gentry-families is either a) the environment of the ancient capital of the T'ang dynasty Ch'ang-an and its hinterland South-west Shansi, or b) the environment of the second capital of the T'ang dynasty Lo-yang and its eastern and northern agrarian hinterland, or c) Southern and Central Hopei. This last group is of special interest. Even as early as the T'o-pa period, a great number of gentry-families derived from the same area, especially from the district of Ch'ing-ho which is also the most important district in the Wu-tai period. (During the T'o-pa time 42% of all gentry-families originally lived in this very district!)

During the T'ang dynasty a certain number of gentry-families segregated themselves into a special group of self-styled 'noble' families, who did not intermarry outside their group, if they were not obliged to do so for special reasons. Some of these 'noble' gentry-families even refrained from intermarrying with the imperial family of the T'ang dynasty because, according to their belief, this imperial family was of lower birth! These 'noble' gentry-families continue to exist even in the Wu-tai period. Three of these six families originated from the district of Ch'ing-ho (Hopei province), two others from the neighbourhood of Ch'ing-ho, and only a single one from the neighbourhood of Ch'ang-an. Five of these six families belonged to the highest gentry-families even during the T'o-pa period, and their family-trees go back as far as the Han dynasty, that is to the period of the foundation of the gentry! And even during the Han

dynasty, in the last two centuries B. C., they lived in the same places. The family-tree of the sixth family cannot as yet be reconstructed with absolute certainty, but even this family seems to have been well established as a high Chinese gentry-family during the T'o-pa period<sup>8)</sup>. That is to say some of the Wu-tai gentry-families have a history of at least 1000 years; they lived in the same area during the whole 1000 years and were politically leading during the entire period!

But this is not all! If we study the history of the 65 families belonging to the Chinese gentry during the Wu-tai period we see:

a) Families belonging to the highest gentry already during the T'ang period . . . . .	32
b) Families belonging to the provincial gentry during the T'ang period . . . . .	13
c) New gentry-families, descending from soldiers of the Hou-Liang dynasty (the first of the Five Dynasties) . . . . .	9
d) New gentry-families, descending from leaders of gangs during the Hou-Liang dynasty . . . . .	2
e) New gentry-families, descending from soldiers of the Hou-T'ang dynasty (the second of the Five Dynasties) . . . . .	9
	65

According to these statistics, only 30% of all Chinese gentry-families were new gentry-families (but 20 of the 23 non-Chinese gentry-families = 87% were new!). The remaining 70% belonged to the gentry and the leading group, mostly to the highest families even

<sup>8)</sup> These families are: a) *Ts'ui* of Ch'ing-ho, and the independant branch of this family living in An-p'ing, district of Po-ling (Hopei) (gentry-families No. 73-74; identical with T'o-pa gentry-families No. 77 c and 77 a). - b) *Tu* of Tu-ling near Ch'ang-an in Shensi (family No. 75; identical with T'o-pa family No. 78). - c) *Lu* of Fan-yang (Hopei province) (family No. 57; identical with T'o-pa family No. 63). - d) *Li* of Ch'ing-ho (Hopei), with its branch in Wan-nien near Ch'ang-an (family No. 42). - e) *Cheng* of Ch'ing-ho (Hopei) (family No. 19; identical with T'o-pa family No. 13). As the two *Ts'ui* families were separated as early as the Han period they are mentioned as two independent families.

during the T'ang time. At the same time 9 of the 32 high gentry-families belong even to the old Chinese gentry of the T'o-pa dynasty (in this number 5 of the above-mentioned 6 'noble' gentry-families are included).

But if we add to this number of 9 families 2 others which had lost their importance during the T'ang dynasty and regained it only during the Wu-tai period, as well as 3 T'o-pa families which did not become Chinese and regained importance during the Wu-tai period as members of the occupation army, amongst the other foreigners, 14 gentry-families of the T'o-pa period are met again as gentry of the Wu-tai period. This fact proves once more the enormous stability of the social system in China's mediaeval time. I am convinced that the percentage of gentry-families belonging to the politically leading group, even before the T'ang period, will prove still greater after a similar systematic analysis of that period has been made.

Such stability of the social system is even more astonishing if we remember that after the end of the T'o-pa dynasty North-China divided into several independent parts, after which period China remained united for some centuries and in the latter part of the T'ang dynasty (9th century) divided again. Another interesting fact is that during the Wu-tai period not a single gentry-family originated from Central or South-China. These regions had belonged to the Chinese empire for several centuries and were quite important for the economics of the T'ang period.

Not a single one of the new gentry-families became important in the so-called normal way, i. e. by making the official examinations and thus becoming official in the service of the government. All of these families became important by pure violence, either as soldiers in the regular or irregular army, or as members of a successful gang, thus in principle in the same way as the non-Chinese new gentry-families; moreover these families vanquished North-China, occupied the country and established themselves by force as leaders of North-

China. The analysis of the T'o-pa gentry led to the same result: even at that time not a single new gentry-family entered the circle of the gentry by way of the official examinations and of the official career. The assertion of some authors that there did not exist a leading class in China and that every member of the 'honorable' classes could ascend to the highest ranks of the state by making the official examinations cannot be maintained. This possibility proves to have been purely theoretical. (Members of 'dishonorable' occupations such as actors, musicians, dancers etc., as well as non-Chinese and slaves, did not belong to the 'honorable' classes.)

The result of this study is: only 26% of the gentry of the Wu-tai period was non-Chinese; its influence was decreasing rapidly towards the end of the said period. 70% of the remaining Chinese gentry belonged to the old gentry and its influence increased continually. Thus, during the whole 60 years of the Wu-tai period the political leadership lay in the hands of the old Chinese gentry, the influence of which was only broken during the first years of the Hou-Liang dynasty (founded by a gang-leader<sup>4</sup>) and the Turkish Hou-T'ang dynasty, in both cases only for some years. The effect of this period for the social history of China brought no revolutionary change in the leading group but produced only a slight shifting in the circles of the gentry itself. But this regrouping was in itself important enough to influence many social and political features of the following Sung period.

---

<sup>4</sup>) See my article: *Wie wurden Dynastien gegründet? Ein Problem der chinesischen Geschichte* (in: *Revue de la Faculté de Langues, Ankara*, vol. 3, No. 4, p. 361-376, Ankara 1945; in Turkish with German abstract). - The *Old Annals* mention about 120 members of gangs, belonging either to the 5 major gangs or being independent gang-leaders.