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NORTHERN YEN

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**SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE NORTHERN DYNASTIES:
A CASE STUDY OF THE FENG OF NORTHERN YEN**

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Any scholar working with records of the Northern and Southern Dynasties cannot fail to be impressed by the inordinate emphasis in that period on family status and social origins where political rank was concerned. This obsession with birth, rank, and status has been seen as the manifestation of an unusual rigidity in social relations: the period has frequently been described as one of social immobility and stratification, where individual political rank was determined primarily by family status, and where family status in turn derived from previous political merit.

Unfortunately, this rather general characterization of mediaeval Chinese society ignores both regional and temporal variations within the period. It also ignores differences between the period of division and the unified empires of Sui and early T'ang from whence most investigations into mediaeval society derive. Since political developments in the north during the period of division differed considerably from those in the south, there is no reason, despite the presence of a powerful north-eastern elite at the early T'ang court, to assume that social developments took the same course in north and south.

Most of the extant historical material on the Southern Dynasties was compiled during early T'ang. These texts thus reflect the social values of the newly unified empire; suggesting the likelihood of anachronistic distortion in questions of family status and social mobility. In contrast, the study of northern society, through the records of the *Wei-shu* offers a unique opportunity to avoid these dangers and to compare T'ang attitudes with the period of division. The majority of chapters in *Wei-shu* were written in the sixth century under the supervi-

sion of the house of Northern Ch'i (550 – 577); the rest, clearly identifiable, are the product of T'ang historians in the seventh century.¹

While some of the material in *Wei-shu* does suggest rigid social stratification in the north in that it contains much evidence of social snobbery, obsession with family status, and concern about political rank and family merit,² it also raises a number of other issues on the question of social mobility. One of these concerns the extent of lineage and ethnic falsification in the north during Northern Wei (398 – 532).

The issue of lineage falsification by influential individuals of Chinese origin was the subject of an earlier paper on the ancestry of the Northern Ch'i historian, Wei Shou 魏收 (506 – 572). That study showed how Wei Shou's family in the latter part of the fifth and early sixth centuries became attached to the politically insignificant, but socially respectable, Wei clan of Chü-lu 鉅鹿. It was pointed out that the phenomenon of lineage and ethnic falsification in the north has been admitted by many scholars, yet few have taken the trouble to point out its implications for the question of social mobility in the Northern Dynasties.³ Until we know the full extent and history of lineage falsification among Chinese and non-Chinese families, and the extent of influence of those families on the politics of the day, we cannot begin to understand the social mainsprings behind the obsession

Abbreviations used:

CS	<i>Chin-shu</i> 晉書 . Peking, 1974.
HHS	<i>Hou Han-shu</i> 後漢書 . Peking, 1975.
HS	<i>Han-shu</i> 漢書 . Peking, 1975.
PCS	<i>Pei Ch'i-shu</i> 北齊書 . Peking, 1972.
PS	<i>Pei-shih</i> 北史 . Peking, 1974.
SC	<i>Shih-chi</i> 史記 . Peking, 1975.
SLKCC	<i>Shih-liu kuo ch'un-ch'iu chi-pu</i> 十六國春秋輯補 . Peking: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1958.
TCTC	<i>Tzu-chih t'ung-chien</i> 資治通鑑 . Hongkong, 1971.
WS	<i>Wei-shu</i> 魏書 . Peking, 1974.

1) See Li Cheng-fen 李正奮, "Wei-shu yüan-liu k'ao" 魏書源流考, *Kuo-hsüeh chi-k'an* 國學季刊 2, no. 2 (1929): 363 – 87.

2) For examples of this, see D. G. Johnson, "The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy" (Ph. D. Thesis, Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1970).

3) J. Holmgren, "Lineage Falsification in the Northern Dynasties: Wei Shou's Ancestry," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 21 (1980): 1 – 16.

with birth, rank, and status in the north.

Unfortunately, our sources may not permit much direct investigation into the extent of lineage falsification among low-status non-Chinese families who moved into the various non-Chinese elite groups in the north. They will, however, permit investigation of non-Chinese families who were integrated into Chinese aristocratic circles. Whether or not the majority of these families came from aristocratic or humble backgrounds will be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine. This paper deals with one clear case of lineage and ethnic falsification in the north. The Feng 馮 of Northern Yen 北燕 (408 – 437) are described by contemporary historians as barbarized descendants of Pi Wan 畢萬 of the Spring and Autumn Period. This paper attempts to show the metamorphosis of the clan from a humble, non-Chinese, background, through their acceptance into the non-Chinese elite of the fifth century, to their final emergence at the end of the Northern Dynasties as a Chinese gentry family of the north-eastern plain.

Undoubtedly, the most celebrated member of the Feng clan was the Grand Empress-dowager Wen-ming 文明 (442 – 490), consort of Northern Wei Kao-tsung (r. 453 – 465), regent for emperors Hsien-tsu and Kao-tsu, and initiator of the Northern Wei land reform program in the latter part of the fifth century.⁴ She was a granddaughter of the second and last ruler of Northern Yen, a state established by Feng Pa 馮跋 (d. 429) near modern Ch'ao-yang 朝陽 in Liaotung – territory formerly held by the Mu-jung 慕容 rulers of Yen 燕.⁵ Wen-ming's father Feng Lang 馮朗 had fled to the Northern Wei court with his wife, mother, and brothers after a succession dispute in Northern Yen in 433.⁶ On the maternal side, the Grand Empress-dowager's relatives came from the Wang 王 clan of Lo-lang 樂浪 – one of the oldest and most celebrated clans of the Chinese aristocracy in Liaotung.⁷

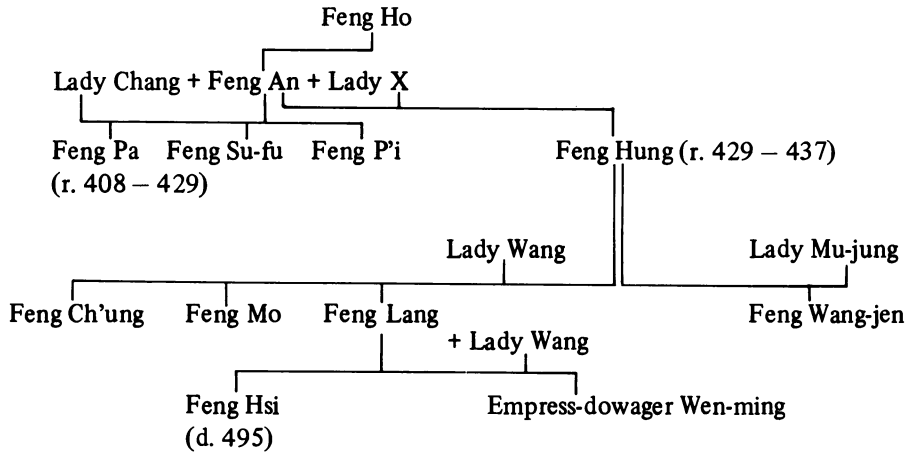
4) See J. Holmgren, "Women's Biographies in the Wei-shu" (Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, 1979), pp. 68 – 82 and 303 – 11; A. G. Wenley, *The Grand Empress Dowager Wen-ming and the Northern Wei Necropolis at Fang Shan*. Freer Gallery of Art, Occasional Papers 1, no. 1 (Washington, 1947).

5) On Former Yen (285 – 370) see G. Schreiber, "The History of the Former Yen Dynasty," part 1, *Monumenta Serica* 14 (1949 – 55): 374 – 480 and part 2, *Monumenta Serica* 15 (1956): 1 – 141.

6) *TCTC*, pp. 3836, 3841 and 3846.

7) *WS* 13, p. 328.

Genealogy of the Feng of Northern Yen



Although the heyday of Feng power and prestige came at the beginning of the fifth century in Liaotung, and in the latter part of that century under the Grand Empress-dowager at the Northern Wei court, the Feng were still important in both Northern Ch'i and early T'ang social life when most of the sources relating to them were compiled. These sources claim Hsin-tu 信都 in Ch'ang-lo 長樂 Commandery, southern Hopei, as the family home-land: they are *ch.* 97 of *Wei-shu*, compiled in the sixth century by Wei Shou; *ch.* 125 of *Chin-shu* and *ch.* 93 of *Pei-shih*, both compiled in the seventh century by T'ang historians; and finally, the extant versions of *Shih-liu kuo ch'un-ch'iu*, a text originally compiled by Ts'ui Hung 崔鴻 in the sixth century but lost sometime after Southern Sung.⁸

While all these sources refer to the Feng as "barbarized Chinese" from the prefecture of Hsin-tu, only *Chin-shu* and *Shih-liu kuo ch'un-ch'iu chi-pu* give the ancestor of the family as Pi Wan. Pi Wan had been enfeoffed in Wei 魏 Commandery in 660 B.C. by Duke Hsien 獻公 of Chin. During the Warring States, his descendants had founded the state of Wei (403 – 241 B.C.).⁹ Neither *Chin-shu* nor *Shih-liu kuo ch'un-*

8) On *SLKCC* see Schreiber, part 1, pp. 381 – 6.

9) *CS* 125, p. 3127; *SLKCC* 98, p. 675; J. Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (reprint, Hongkong, 1939), vol 5, part 1, p. 125; *SC* 44, pp. 1835 – 6.

ch'iu chi-pu name any ancestor between Pi Wan and Feng Ho 馮和 of the fourth century A.D., and the explanation for the change in surname is hardly convincing.¹⁰ Moreover, a study of other individuals given biographies in *Wei-shu*, *Pei-shih* and *Pei Ch'i-shu* shows that almost every genuine Chinese genealogy in the Northern Dynasties went back only as far as Han. Very few families could name ancestors from the Spring and Autumn Period (722 – 481 B.C.).

The original source for the statement about Pi Wan probably came from Kao Lü's 高閭 now lost *Yen-chih* 燕志, written under the patronage of the Grand Empress-dowager Wen-ming in the latter part of the fifth century.¹¹ Since Pi Wan's descendants founded the ancient state of Wei in southern Shansi and the empress-dowager's great great grandfather, Feng Ho, had had some connection with southern Shansi (see below), a genealogical connection with Pi Wan must have been very flattering for this woman who was regent for the state of Wei in the latter part of the fifth century.

While the link between the Feng of Northern Yen and Pi Wan of Spring and Autumn can be more or less dismissed, this does not necessarily invalidate the claim to a Chinese ancestry. However, there is still the question of the Feng homeland in Hsin-tu Prefecture.

Starting with Feng Ho of the fourth century – the earliest reliable ancestor of the clan – we can see that in his time, and during the following one and a half centuries, the Feng had no connection at all with Hsin-tu Prefecture: Ho's activities, and those of his son, An 安, were centered around Shang-tang 上黨 in southern Shansi.¹² After that, the family moved to Ch'ang-li 昌黎 Commandery in Liaotung where they remained until Feng Lang's defection to Northern Wei in 433.¹³ Lang's brother, Ch'ung 崇, was enfeoffed by Northern Wei in Liao-hsi 遼西 Commandery, while Lang settled in Ch'ang-an and

10) CS 125, p. 3127; *SLKCC* 98, p. 675.

11) See Chin Yü-fu 金毓黻, *Chung-kuo shih-hsüeh shih* 中國史學史 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1962), p. 62; Schreiber, part 1, p. 387.

12) Modern Lu-ch'eng 潞城 Prefecture.

13) *SLKCC* 98, p. 675 states that Feng Pa moved to Ch'ang-ku 長谷 near Ch'ang-li in Liaotung. *WS* 97, p. 2126 and *PS* 93, p. 3077 state that Pa's father moved to Ch'ang-li and then settled his family at Ch'ang-ku.

received a feoff in Shensi.¹⁴ The first member of the family to be enfeoffed in Hsin-tu, Ch'ang-lo Commandery, was Lang's grandson, Feng Tan 馮誕 (d. 495), and that was his second enfeoffment.¹⁵ Since it was customary during Northern Wei to grant a feoff in the vicinity of the subject's homeland, it seems that in Shih-tsu's time (r. 423 – 453), Ch'ang-lo was not regarded as the family homeland. The connection with Ch'ang-lo derived from Tan's enfeoffment there in the time of the Grand Empress-dowager Wen-ming in the latter part of the fifth century.

Feng Ho's history raises the most serious doubts about the family's claim to Chinese ancestry. Ho's name is not mentioned in either *Wei-shu* or *Pei-shih*. It appears only in *Chin-shu* and *Shih-liu kuo ch'unch'iu chi-pu*. The latter state that in the troubles of Yung-chia 永嘉 era (307 – 313), Ho fled to Shang-tang Commandery in southern Shansi.¹⁶ Presumably, the reader is meant to conclude that Ho fled from Ch'ang-lo into Shang-tang. It seems strange, although by no means impossible, that while many of his countrymen were fleeing north-east to the safety of the Mu-jung empire in Liaotung,¹⁷ Ho was fleeing into the thick of the fighting in southern Shansi. Perhaps he was a fighting man in search of adventure.

The problem becomes more intriguing when we learn that Shang-tang was the home of a very distinguished Chinese clan of the name Feng.¹⁸ If Ho was fleeing to the safety of distant relatives in Shang-tang, why was this genealogical link not given in any of our texts? A connection with the Feng of Shang-tang would have been no disgrace for an important family in the Northern Dynasties. It would certainly have been more convincing than the genealogical link with Pi Wan. We can only conclude that Ho was not related to the Chinese clan in Shang-tang, and that there was some reason why sixth century historians preferred to omit his name and his connection with Shang-tang from

14) *WS* 83A, p. 1818; *WS* 13, p. 328; *TCTC*, p. 3846.

15) *WS* 83A, p. 1821.

16) *CS* 125, p. 3127; *SLKCC* 98, p. 675.

17) See Chin Fa-ken 金發根, *Yung-chia luan-hou pei-fang te hao-tsu* 永嘉亂後北方的豪族 (Taipei, 1961), pp. 118 – 27; Schreiber, part 1, pp. 405 – 9 and 474 – 5.

18) *HS* 79, pp. 3293 – 3309.

the records.

We can be sure that Wei Shou and the historians working on the *Wei-shu* in the sixth century knew the truth about the origins of the Feng family. It is probable that the omission of Ho's name from the *Wei-shu* record was a deliberate attempt to obscure the real origins of the family. Ho may have belonged to a band of early Hsien-pi or Hsiung-nu invaders into southern Shansi at the beginning of the fourth century. It is interesting to see that as well as omitting Ho's name from the records, Wei Shou also ignored the claim to descent from Pi Wan. In doing so, he presents a far more consistent and plausible picture of Feng origins than the compilers of *Chin-shu*. Less familiar with the details of northern history, the latter probably took their account from the original *Shih-liu kuo ch'un-ch'iu* which followed the line given in Kao Lü's *Yen-chih*.

Since our sources were written by Chinese historians in the Chinese script, we always find a high proportion of thoroughly Chinese-sounding names in any biographies of this period whatever the ethnic background of the individuals concerned. The absence of non-Chinese names in any set of biographies from this period is therefore no guarantee of Chinese ancestry or the adoption of Chinese culture. However, the presence of some names with characters not normally used for Chinese personal names, or the appearance of three and four-character personal names is a good indication of non-Chinese background. Since many of the characters used for the personal names of Feng members occur very frequently in Chinese transcriptions of T'o-pa names, and since the sources tell us that Feng Pa's *hsiao-ming* 小名 was Ch'i-chih-fa 乞直伐,¹⁹ it seems that the first language of the Feng family at the beginning of the fifth century was not Chinese but a Hsien-pi dialect.

While it could be argued that this represents the barbarization of the clan in Liaotung, the amount of cultural exchanges involved seems too great for us to be satisfied with the unsubstantiated claim in the literary sources that the Feng were ethnic Chinese. It seems more probable that the phrase "barbarized Chinese" was a sixth century compliment to the ancestors of sinicized, politically influential, non-Chinese families. It should be noted that this expression was never

19) *WS* 97, p. 2126.

used for branches of the Chinese aristocracy which did in fact become barbarized through repeated intermarriage with ruling nomadic houses in the Northern Dynasties.²⁰

Studies of certain prominent T'ang families by Yao Wei-yüan 姚薇元 have shown how ethnic and lineage falsification in the T'ang was often based on the idea that a 'Chinese' ancestor had become barbarized during a sojourn among the northern nomads.²¹ This seems to be the thrust of the Feng claim: Feng An and his son, Pa, becoming influenced by non-Chinese ways after the move to Liaotung. However, neither the literary sources nor recent archaeological evidence bears this out.

The remains of Feng Su-fu's 馮素弗 tomb in Ch'ang-ku show that the religious burial customs followed by the Feng in Liaotung were non-Chinese. Chinese culture in the burial is represented only by its grosser material aspects.²² Since the first elements to be accepted in any cross-cultural exchange are usually the material aspects of the incoming culture, the remains in Su-fu's tomb indicate not the barbarization of the clan, but the first stages of sinicization.

According to the literary sources, Feng Pa's mother was a woman named Chang 張.²³ Although she may have come from the celebrated Chinese Chang clan of Liaotung,²⁴ it is more likely, given that the Feng did not shift into Liaotung until Pa's time, that she came from a southern-based Chang clan – perhaps the Hsiung-nu Chang of Shang-tang²⁵ or the Wu-huan Chang of Hopei. The latter had had connections

20) See *WS* 37 and 59 for biographies of members of the Ssu-ma 司馬 house of Chin and the Liu 劉 of Sung who married into the royal T'o-pa house in the fifth century.

21) Yao Wei-yüan 姚薇元, *Pei-ch'ao hu-hsing k'ao* 北朝胡姓考 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1962), p. 158 on the Fang 房 of Ch'ing-ho 清河, pp. 38 – 9 on the Tu-ku 獨孤 families, and p. 272 on the Kao 高 of Liaotung.

22) See Su Po 宿白, "Tung-pei nei-meng-ku ti-ch'ü te hsien-pi yi-chi" 東北內蒙古地區的鮮卑遺迹, *Wen-wu* 文物 5 (1977): 44 – 6.

23) *TCTC*, p. 3622.

24) For the early history of Chinese clans in Liaotung see K. Gardiner, *The Early History of Korea*. Oriental Monograph Series 8 (Canberra: Australian National Univ. Press, 1969).

25) See Yao Wei-yüan, pp. 358 – 60.

with the Mu-jung rulers of Yen in Liaotung and Hopei.²⁶ Chinese archaeologists working on Feng Su-fu's tomb have noted a strong similarity between Feng burial customs and early Chinese descriptions of Wu-huan beliefs in the after-life.²⁷ Thus it would not be surprising if Su-fu and Pa's mother had come from the Wu-huan clan associated with the Mu-jung rulers of Yen.

It was only in Liaotung during Feng Hung's 馮弘 reign (429 – 437) that the family began to intermarry with Chinese families. Hung had one wife née Wang and another née Mu-jung.²⁸ Lady Wang's son, Feng Lang, married a Wang of Lo-lang.²⁹ It is therefore probable that Lang's mother had also come from this clan. The Wang of Lo-lang were one of the most distinguished Chinese clans in Liaotung³⁰ and no doubt saw the need to secure their position with the new rulers of Yen shortly after the establishment of the dynasty.

In 433, Hung's wife née Wang and her sons sought protection at the T'o-pa court. Happy to have an excuse to attack Northern Yen, Shih-tsu began a series of hostile forays into Liaotung. The result was the collapse of Northern Yen and the T'o-pa conquest of Liaotung in 437.³¹ The *Wei-shu* presents the events of these years after the well-tried Chinese formula of personal favoritism causing political chaos and the ultimate destruction of the state. It refers to Lady Wang as Hung's principal wife and claims that Hung had her degraded in order to make one of Lady Mu-jung's sons heir-apparent.³² However it is unlikely that the Chinese concepts of principal wife, concubine, and fixed succession by primogeniture were accepted by the Northern Yen leadership in Hung's day.³³ The dispute of 432 probably involved

26) See Yao Wei-yüan, p. 254; T'ang Ch'ang-ju 唐長孺, *Wei-Chin nan-pei-ch'ao shih lun-tsun* 魏晉南北朝史論叢 (Peking, 1955), p. 434.

27) Su Po, pp. 44 – 6; T'ang Ch'ang-ju, p. 434; *HHS* 90, pp. 2979 – 80.

28) *WS* 97, p. 2127; *TCTC*, p. 3841.

29) *WS* 13, p. 328.

30) See Tojin Kayamoto, "Han tombs of Lo-lang – Their Studies by Japanese Scholars," *Memoirs, Toyo Bunko* 21 (1962): 97 – 123.

31) *TCTC*, pp. 3836, 3841, 3846 and 3858 – 64.

32) *WS* 97, p. 2127.

33) See J. Holmgren, "Women's biographies in the *Wei-shu*," pp. 1 – 61 on early T'o-pa succession; Wittfogel and Feng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907 – 1125)* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 201 and 211 – 2 on early Mongol and Ch'i-tan succession.

general issues about the pace of sinicization at court and the power of Chinese families like the Wang of Lo-lang to determine court policy and succession procedure.

The Empress-dowager Wen-ming was born in Ch'ang-an ten years after her father's defection to the T'o-pa.³⁴ We might assume from this, and from the fact that her mother was a Wang of Lo-lang, that Wen-ming's early years had been spent in a Chinese cultural milieu. Yet we know that the family-nursemaid was of Ch'iang origin, and that when her father was executed, Wen-ming's brother was taken to live with Ti and Ch'iang families in Shensi.³⁵ Wen-ming's later patronage of men such as Fu Ch'eng-tsu 苻承祖, of Ti origin, and Wang Jui 王叡, of Ch'iang origin,³⁶ probably reflects the close association of her family with sinicized non-Chinese families in Shensi during the years spent in Ch'ang-an.

Once in the T'o-pa harem, Wen-ming found comfort in a group of women – one her paternal aunt³⁷ – from similar backgrounds in Liaotung and Shensi. Families such as hers provided the T'o-pa leadership with considerable support during the latter part of the fifth century. As individuals, members of these families were able to operate in both the T'o-pa and Chinese milieu. Male members of the clan thus provided the Northern Wei leadership with a valuable source of competent and loyal officials. Unlike the Chinese aristocracy, these officials had no ties with the south and had few qualms about intermarriage with the royal house. They thus formed a special enclave at court and were deliberately patronized by the Northern Wei rulers in order to reduce the dependency of the royal house on the managerial skills of the Chinese literati.

One of Wen-ming's most important champions was the Empress-dowager née Ch'ang 常 (d. 460), foster-mother to T'o-pa Chün 濬, Wen-ming's consort and the future Emperor Kao-tsung (r. 453 – 465). The

34) *WS* 13, p. 330.

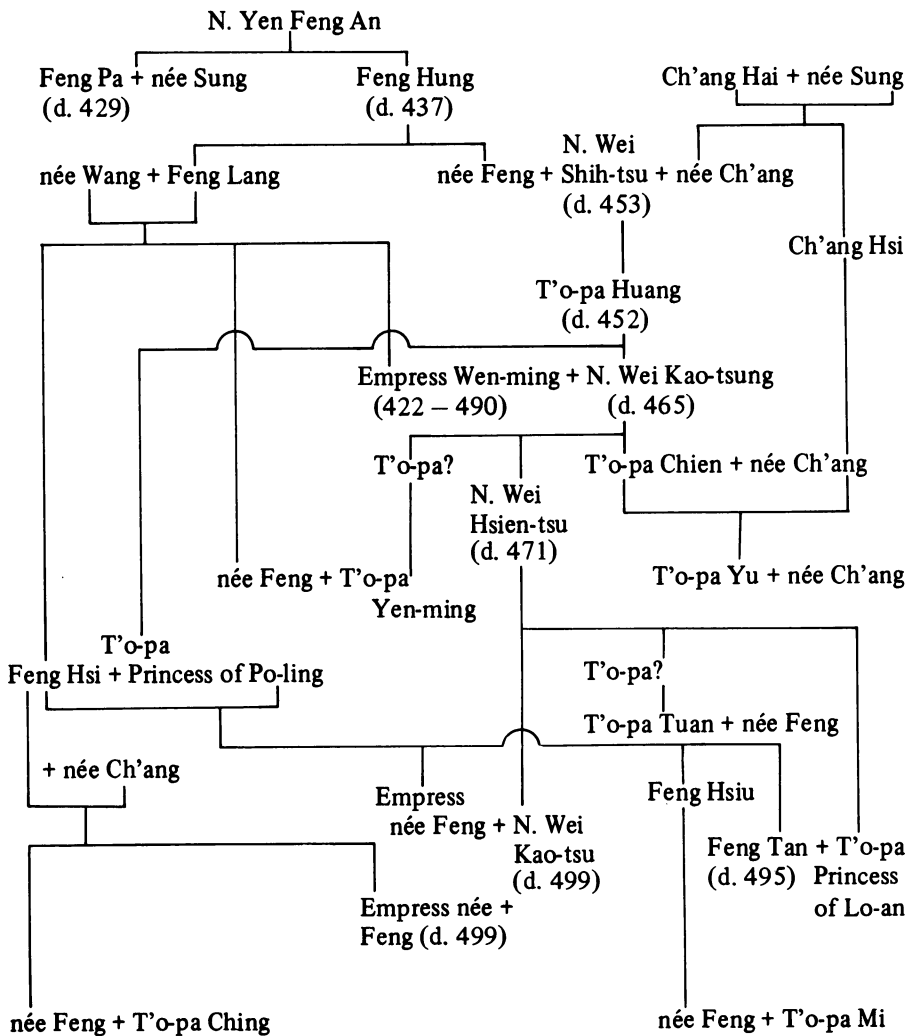
35) *WS* 83A, p. 1818.

36) See *WS* 94, p. 2025; *WS* 13, p. 329; Moriya Mitsuo 守屋美都雄, *Rikuchō mombatsu no ichi kenkyū* 六朝門閥の一研究 (Tokyo, 1951), pp. 116 – 21.

37) *WS* 13, p. 328; *TCTC*, p. 3853.

Ch'ang also came from Liaotung and had had previous connections with the Feng family.³⁸ The diagram below illustrates the complex web of marriage relations which grew up at the T'o-pa court between the old Liaotung families and the royal T'o-pa house after the conquest of Northern Yen in 437.

Intermarriage between the T'o-pa and Liaotung Families of Northern Yen



The fifth century thus saw the integration of the Feng clan into the non-Chinese elite in the north. The first step in this direction had been provided by the chaos in Liaotung after the fall of the Mu-jung empire in 398. After the fall of their short-lived state in Liaotung, the Feng, like the Mu-jung before them, were transported to the T'o-pa court at P'ing-ch'eng. There, they married into the royal T'o-pa household and into other clans of the non-Chinese elite.

After the death of Grand Empress-dowager Wen-ming in 490, the fortunes of the clan began to change. In 497, Wen-ming's protégé, the heir-apparent, T'o-pa Hsün 恂, was forced to commit suicide over his obstructive attitude to the move south.³⁹ The new heir-apparent, T'o-pa K'o 恪, later to become Emperor Shih-tsung (r. 499 – 515), became the focus of a bitter power struggle between the Feng clan, now headed by Wen-ming's niece, and Emperor Kao-tsu's younger brothers. The forced suicide or murder of Wen-ming's niece in 499 put an end to the unique position of the family at court.⁴⁰ This was the beginning of the final stage of metamorphosis for the clan.

In some ways the history of the Feng clan in the latter half of the fifth century resembles that of distaff families in Han and Chin. In other ways, however, it is unique: leadership of the clan was completely in the hands of women; men played little active part in politics. Male members of the clan were no more than pawns in a game of marriage alliances. They were used in the same way as women were used by distaff clans in Han and Chin. The history of Feng power as a distaff clan is also unique in that no Feng woman ever produced an emperor or heir-apparent. Wen-ming's numerous protégés for the throne, and those of her niece, were the offspring of other, lesser, women in the harem.⁴¹

The sixth century saw Feng integration into the lesser Chinese gentry of the north-eastern plain. Male members of the clan occupied bureaucratic positions at court, and females were married off to other

38) J. Holmgren, "Women's Biographies in the Wei-shu," pp. 45 – 6 and 302 – 3.

39) *WS* 22, p. 587 – 9.

40) J. Holmgren, "Women's Biographies in the Wei-shu," pp. 84 – 8.

41) *Ibid*, pp. 68 – 96.

“Chinese” families of similar or greater political standing. Thus Feng Ling-shao 馮靈紹 took the post of Gentleman in the Board of Revenue; his son, Feng Tzu-tung 馮子琮, married to a relative of the Chinese Empress-dowager Ling 靈, became an official of the second class; and his granddaughter was married to Kao K’uo 高廓, a Northern Ch’i prince.⁴²

Like the Feng, the Kao family were originally of non-Chinese stock. After their entry into T’o-pa politics, they settled in Hsiu 脩 Prefecture, Po-hai 勃海 Commandery – the home of other Kao clans – and began to adopt some of the trappings of a Chinese literati family of the north-eastern plain.⁴³ Kao Huan 高歡 (d. 547) and his son, Kao Yang 高洋, who became the first emperor of Northern Ch’i, both had concubines from the Feng clan.⁴⁴ Such was the position of the family when Wei Shou was commissioned to edit the national records in 551.

The collapse of Northern Wei and rise of Northern Ch’i in the great plain was brought about by political and economic tensions which had plagued the relations between court and province, T’o-pa and Chinese, since the latter part of the fifth century.⁴⁵ Attempts by non-Chinese leaders to wrest power from the Chinese aristocracy through patronage of officials from low-status Chinese and mixed ethnic backgrounds led to a backlash in the Chinese community which stressed the most conservative and traditional features of the Chinese aristocratic heritage.⁴⁶ The obsession with birth, rank and status, so evident in the records of this time, is only one manifestation of Chinese anxieties about the survival of their world-order. The bitter complaints about Wei Shou’s treatment of their ancestors in the Northern Wei history is another.⁴⁷

42) *PCS* 40, pp. 528 – 9.

43) Yao Wei-yüan, pp. 134 – 7.

44) *PCS* 10, p. 131; *PCS* 12, p. 156.

45) See J. Holmgren, “Empress-Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T’o-pa Sinicization Question,” *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18 (1978): 138 – 49.

46) See J. Holmgren, “Women’s Biographies in the Wei-shu,” pp. 178 – 278 for a study of the development of conservative attitudes towards women and the family in Chinese society during the sixth and seventh centuries.

47) See Chou Yi-liang 周一良, “Wei Shou chih shih-hsüeh” 魏收之史學, *Wei-*

The phenomenon of lineage and ethnic falsification among low-status Chinese and sinicized families at the northern courts was both a natural outcome, and further cause, of this state of siege between Chinese and non-Chinese, aristocrat and commoner, in the sixth century. As such, its presence tends to deny the thesis of rigid social and political stratification in the north during the period of division. The obsession with birth and rank among the great families of the north-eastern plain reflects their political and social insecurity in the face of the ambitions and achievements of low-status Chinese, and mixed ethnic groups, typified by the Feng family of Northern Yen. Concern about birth, rank, and status within the Chinese aristocracy was thus a reflection of desired rather than actual social conditions in the northern courts in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Chin nan-pei ch'ao shih lun-chi 魏晉南北朝史論記 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1963), pp. 236 – 72.