

# ***A Brief Description of the Main Features of National Intermingling in the Northern Wei Inscriptions***

## ***- The Epitaph of Yu Shen'en as an Example***

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**Abstract:** The Northern Wei was a powerful and unified dynasty in the history of the Wei, Jin and North-South dynasties and a representative multi-national dynasty in ancient China. Its abundant and well-preserved inscriptions have provided an important reference for future generations to study the history of the Northern Wei; national integration, as one of the remarkable trends in the development of China's history, was also fully reflected in the Northern Wei period. Based on the documents of the Northern Wei inscriptions, this paper draws on the research results of Wang Zhongluo's History of the Northern and Southern Dynasties of the Wei-Jin Dynasty and other previous works, and uses the interdisciplinary research methods of history and ethnography to sort out and summaries the main features of the intermingling of nationalities during the Northern Wei period, such as the joint development of multi-national fusions and the spread and recognition of the concept of 'great unity'.

**Keywords:** Northern Wei Dynasty, inscriptions, national fusion, Great Unification, the epitaph of Yu Shen'en

## **1. Introduction**

The Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties, comprising the Three Kingdoms, the Eastern and Western Jin, the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, were mostly a period of war and division for more than 350 years, From 220 A.D. to the downfall of the Southern Chen dynasty in 589 A.D. However, the Northern Wei, founded by the Xianbei Tuoba clan, was the unifying dynasty in northern China, which not only brought stability and development to the area north of the Yellow River but also made China as a whole 'strong in the north and weak in the south'. Although the Northern Wei did not escape the fate of disintegration, the ruling class of the Northern Dynasties was mostly Hu and Huhua Han Chinese, which was important for building a unified multi-national country and forming a common Chinese psychological identity. However, because of the long period of time and the frequent wars, very few documents of the Northern Wei have been handed down to the present day, including only a handful of works such as the Wei Shu,

while some minority historical materials are no longer available because of the loss of their language and script. The Northern Wei was the next peak of inscription production after the Qin and Han dynasties, and traces of it can be found in inscription literature, whether it be the system of officials, the system of grassroots governance, the rise and fall of the great families, or the spread and development of religion. The Epitaph of Yu Shen'en is one of the representatives of the many inscriptions of the Northern Wei. In recent years, books have been published by the Japanese "Unearthed text data group of The Three Kingdoms Period" Selected Notes on Stone Inscriptions of the Wei and Jin Dynasties [1], and by the Chinese scholar Mao Yuanming, who edited the Annotations on the Inscriptions of the Six Dynasties of the Han and Wei Dynasties, which have provided a great source of information on the content, language and calligraphic forms of the Wei inscriptions. This has been a great help in the study of the content, linguistic expressions, and calligraphic forms of the Wei steles. With the help of inscriptions and the integration of the disciplines of frontier history, national history and the history of the Northern Wei dynasty, this paper will clarify the political construction of the Northern Wei dynasty amid the division between the Hu and the Han, the development of multi-national integration of minority and religious cultures, and the psychological identity of the Hu people with the "Chinese nation". There should be definitions of some terms in this article. First is Hu, which means to the Western regions and peoples living in the west, the Han, Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties were called Hu. Correspondingly, Hua means in ancient times, China was known as "Huaxia", which later became synonymous with the Han nation. Another one is Huhua, also Hu-ization, which refers to the convergence of Han Chinese or Han Chinese authorities with foreigners in terms of surnames, ways of thinking, behavioral traits, production patterns, customs and culture, and more, as a result of the long-term influence of foreigners.

## **2. Clarification of the Concept of "Northern Wei" and Definition of the Scope of "Inscriptions"**

From the Han dynasty to the unification of the Sui dynasty, contact between the Hu and the Han was maintained for a longer period, which drove a shift in the historical outlook of the time and made national integration a mainstream part of history. The Weishu argues that the ancestors of the Xianbei tribe, who founded the Northern Wei, were one of the twenty-five sons of the Huangdi, the ancestor of the Chinese nation, and were so named because they had lived for generations in the area of the Great Xianbei Mountains. It is easy to see that the Weishu describes the Xianbei as a branch of the civilization of the Central Plains, both to justify the Northern Wei regime's management of the Central Plains and to show that the fusion of the Hu and the Han had already become a major trend of the time.

From 398 AD, when Tuo Ba Gui set his capital at Pingcheng and assumed the throne, to 534 A.D, when he split into the Eastern and Western Wei, the Northern Wei Dynasty formed a short-lived unified dynasty amidst the chaotic struggles of the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern Dynasties with nearly 150 years of rule. Although the Tuo tribes were still in the stage of disintegration of the clan commune and the immature development of the slave-use system before Tuoba Gui entered the Central Plains, through the implementation of measures such as the 'settlement of the land', the Northern Wei rapidly transitioned from a society dominated by slave production relations to a feudal society in a short period of time. The feudal relations of production took over the soil on which slavery had developed, and the ruling group of the Northern Wei, which had once roamed the vast grasslands, was transformed from enslavers to feudal lords. The impact of this great change was extensive and far-reaching, and in addition to the traditional history books, later scholars have used a large number of surviving inscriptions from this period to explore the emerging art of calligraphy resulting from the fusion of national fusions in the Northern Wei, and to

interpret their texts to understand the experiences of Han Chinese officials and the rise and fall of Han families under the rule of the Hu, in an attempt to get a glimpse of the whole social picture of the Northern Wei.

It should be noted that, as the Northern Wei was still an era of active religious thought, there were also a large number of religiously related stone carvings, and there were many commonalities between 'stone carvings' and 'stele carvings', which have been discussed in conjunction with each other by scholars over the ages. However, due to space constraints, this paper only refers to recent studies of Northern Wei inscriptions, and the rest of the non-stela stone inscriptions, which do not have a standardized form or production technique, are excluded from the discussion.

There were many national fusions in the Northern Wei period, and the main ones referred to in this paper are the Xianbei, Southern Xiongnu, Jie, Di, and Qiang tribes, which were already integrated into the Chinese community or had close ties with the Han, while the Western tribes, which were farther away and had less contact with the ruling areas of the Northern Wei, and the peoples of Korea, Japan, India, and Funan, which were not integrated, are also outside the scope of this paper.

### **3. The Main Features of the Issue of National Intermingling in the Northern Wei Inscriptions**

#### **3.1. Multi-national Integration and Development**

China has been a multi-national country since ancient times. Only the national fusions that existed and the ways in which they interacted differed from period to period. The national integration of the Northern Wei period was not a matter of economic trade exchanges or political and military contacts between the Han and one or two minority groups but rather a broad and deep penetration and exchange that arose in all aspects of society and existed between all classes, a relationship that came from both the more developed and powerful cultural appeal and appealed that the Han already had, and the growing political and military power of the minority groups. Two main manifestations of this stand out.

The first was the policy of ruling by a mixture of Hu and Han. Although there was a broad integration of national fusions during the Northern Wei period, the actual policy of separation between the Hu and the Han during a certain period of time cannot be ignored. Both partition and hybridization were attempts to solve the problem of the zeitgeist of national integration, i.e., to weaken or eliminate the negative influence of the new minority regimes on the Han living areas.

The establishment and implementation of the political policies of the Northern Wei and the formation of minority regimes were closely linked: Tuoba Gui marched into the Central Plains after the death of Murong Chui and, in 398 AD, set up his capital at Pingcheng and assumed the throne; by the time his grandson, Emperor Taiwu Tuoba, destroyed the Xiongnu Helian clan's Daxia dynasty, the Beiyuan Feng clan and the Juqu clan's Beilang dynasty, unified the Yellow River basin and confronted the Liu Song regime in the east of the river, becoming the North-South dynasty. Four hundred fifty years later, the Northern Wei In 450, Emperor Tuoba Tao advanced his troops to the area around Jianghuai to Guabu. In the course of the Northern Wei management's gradual rise through conquests, there were profound exchanges between the Xiongnu, Han, Xianbei, Turkic and other major northern peoples.

Historically, the Wuhuan, which were widespread north of Youzhou and Bingzhou, gradually weakened after the Han dynasties, and during the Wei-Jin-North and South Dynasties periods, they became Han Chinese with the Xianbei and were eventually fully integrated into the Han community, which was a long historical process. Tian Yuqing, in his work Exploring the History of Tuoba, elaborates on the issue of "the symbiotic relationship between Tuoba and Daibei Wuhuan": the

tribes of Xianbei, Wuhuan and Xiongnu, because of the vast geographical environment in the north, had mutated during the long period of division and reorganization, Nevertheless "Ultimately, national differences have an impact in the complex national relations of the North, but the root of the problem lies not in purely national differences and similarities but in cultural differences nurtured by the environment, as well as in the influence of some contingent factors", however, the "national" peoples were not only biologically different, but also culturally distinct, and this was the background that influenced Northern Wei national policy [2]. This is the wider context that influenced the policy of the Northern Wei. During the Wei, Jin and Northern Dynasties, the northern regime created a policy of separation between the Hu and Han, whereby separate Han officials were appointed under the emperor to manage the affairs of the Han (such as the left and right servants), and a great monarch was appointed as a deputy to manage the affairs of the Hu specifically.

Many of the inscribed documents, as a reflection of the owner's experience as an official career, reflect changes in the political ecology in the context of national fusion, as recorded in the late Northern Wei epitaph of Yu Shen'en, a native of Luoyang, Henan province, born in the sixth year of Emperor Xiaowen's Yanxing (476 AD) and died in the third year of Xiaochang (527 AD), whose origins are not recorded in any of the historical books. According to the inscription, "The source of the genesis is far away, the leaves of the vegetation flowing with fragrance, and the ocean is raised with waves, looking at the Yanshan Mountain and waiting for the outstanding" It is presumed that Yu Shen'en was a northern Hu rather than a Han Chinese, and Duan Rui Chao points out in his article "The Interpretation of the Epitaph of Yu Shen'en in the Northern Wei Dynasty" that the phrase "Xuan Yuan Yuan was far away" and "looking at Yan Shan and waiting for Jie" is an obscure expression of the northern origin of the owner, while "a native of Luoyang in Henan Province" indicates that his family settled in Luoyang after moving south with Emperor Xiaowen [3].

The process of changing the official system in the Northern Wei can be seen as the integration of the Xianbei minority into the Han and their feudalization. In contrast to the Southern scholarly clan, which was "the king and the horse, who shared the world", the Northern scholarly clan could be seen as an appendage of the authoritarian imperial power; for example, in the Epitaph of Wei Yu, "Emperor Gaozu Xiaowen set up the Songshui district and made it easy for the people to be there", which was a very arbitrary but efficient feudalization. Both the Hu nobility and the original Han landowners were able to take advantage of this feature of the period to achieve a progression of scholarship. This is exactly what happened to Yu Shen'en and the family to which he belonged ---- "According to the new system of Taihe in the Northern Wei, the family lineage became the yardstick for the integration of political resources and the allocation of social rights and interests, and it was the ruler's credo to follow the flow of goods", i.e., the explanation of the origin of the Yu family in the Epitaph of Yu Shen'en [4].

The second is the spread of minority cultures. The culture of the national minorities embodied in the Epitaph of Yu Shen'en consists mainly of the calligraphic script and the names and surnames in the text, the latter of which is explained below in the section on "The Reform of Emperor Xiaowen". In his article "The Epitaphs of Yu Shen'en in the Northern Wei", Gu Guowei comments that the epitaphs are heavy and strong in calligraphy, using both square and round strokes, much like some of the statue records, which are different from the small, agile, and quite brilliant epitaphs of the epitaphs, and the strokes create a dangerous form that can stand up and break down, which undoubtedly adds to the calligraphy's this certainly adds to the artistry of the calligraphy [5]. As a whole, the Wei stele, as a special product of the Northern Dynasties period, was accompanied by social change in its creation and development, reflecting from the side the social landscape of the time, the changes in people's aesthetic perceptions and the evolution of social mores. It has diverse

aesthetic qualities, a high degree of integration and a complex cultural background. It combines the ruggedness of the northern minorities with the restraint of the Han Chinese in the central plains, the brushwork of the Official Script with the rigor of the Regular Script, giving a majestic and open psychological experience, and is of great aesthetic value. The Wei stele occupies an important position in the history of Chinese calligraphy, inheriting the tradition of the Han clerical script from above and the new style of the Tang regular script from below, laying some of the foundations for the brushwork and style of modern Chinese characters. Gu Guowei's evaluation in *The Epitaph of Yu Shen'en of the Northern Wei Dynasty* focuses on the penmanship of the Wei steles, grasping the overall development of the Wei steles' penmanship.

### 3.2. Increased Psychological Identity of the "Chinese Nation"

What emerged in the process of national fusion was the common value and identity of the Han and Hu peoples as the "Chinese nation", which in turn contributed to the construction of a "grand unified" state. In this context, "great unity" is not "unification" but a cultural concept that includes the unification of territory, institutions and ideology, i.e., a system of great unity in the context of a great political division. The rulers of both the Southern and Northern Dynasties considered themselves to be the sole legitimate rulers of China, despite the independence of their regimes, and even though the Hu ruling group in the North did not share the same historical origins as the Han, they were still an important part of the multi-national unity that was the "Chinese nation".

An important opportunity for the transformation of the Northern Wei dynasty from a nomadic people outside Guanzhou to a Central Plains regime was the reforms carried out by the Xiaowen Emperor Tuohu Hong. When nomadic culture entered the cultural environment of Han Chinese agricultural culture, it was naturally transformed into a low-potential culture that was incompatible with this environment, while Han Chinese culture rightly became a high-potential culture and fully demonstrated the rationality and superiority of its existence and development [6]. After he came to power, Tuohu Hong overhauled the old Xianbei customs: he made it a rule to follow Han customs in terms of dress, language and surnames, encouraged marriages between Xianbei nobles and Han scholars, and reformed the Northern Wei political system. Many scholars have argued that Emperor Xiaowen's reforms contributed to the political, economic and cultural feudalization of the Xianbei and that the national divide was greatly reduced, which had a positive effect on the development of the times. Some scholars who hold opposing views believe that although Emperor Xiaowen's reforms promoted national integration, most of what the Xianbei had acquired was the dregs of Han culture, and integration did not mean progress.

For example, the Qing dynasty's Zhao Yi was not optimistic about Emperor Xiaowen's reforms, pointing out that "the emperor was superior to literature, and hated the ugliness of this custom, and wanted to change it with the Chinese style, so he was not afraid to do so. However, the decline of the state actually began here, and once it was passed on to Xuanwu, then to Xiaoming, the throne moved on [7]."

In either case, the fusion of national groups that led to the formation of the "Chinese nation" during the Northern Wei period was objective, and this "China", once dominated by the Han Chinese, gradually transformed into a cultural meaning that encompassed several national fusions and went beyond biology and geography. According to the available history, the term "China" first appears in the literature of the two Jin dynasties and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, but there is no mention of it before. *The Huan Wen's Biography in the Records of Jin Dynasty* claims that since the strong Hu's tyranny, China has been overturned, and the power is fortunate to have Yang Yue [8]. Huan Wen was a general of the Northern Expedition in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, so it is clear that the Hu dominion was not yet within the scope of "Zhonghua". As to the circumstances under which the term "Zhonghua" became a concept that encompassed both

Han and national minorities, Shi Shuo discusses the relationship between the Hu and the Chinese in his essay against the background of the massive entry of the Hu into the Central Plains, the Central Plains objectively needed a simple and clear self-designation that would bring together the original Jin-ruled Chinese and the Chinese; to distinguish the Central Plains region under the former Jin dynasty and the political, cultural and social traditions centered on it from the Hu and their culture [9]. This is also explanation in the term "Five Hu Rebellion". During the long confrontation between the Han Chinese in the south and the Hu in the north, both sides considered themselves to be the orthodoxy of the previous dynasty or the "Chinese nation", and gradually the term "Chinese" was extended from a term used for the scholars of the Middle Kingdom to a term used for all people who agreed with the orthodox rule. The "Five Hu Rebellions" pitted the two, which were closely related, against each other, and in the long period of strife and exchange, the original narrow sense of the original "Hu" in the narrow sense collapsed, and a looser, broader, and more inclusive concept of "Hua" grew up, and the "Hu" was no longer opposed to it, but integrated into it, becoming the new "Hua". It becomes an integral and important part of the new concept of "Hua".

#### **4. Overview of the Positive Significance of National Intermingling in the Northern Wei**

Wang Zhong Luo's book History of the Wei, Jin and North and South Dynasties has this to say that during the Wei, Jin and Northern Dynasties, both the Yellow River basin and the Yangtze River basin went through this process of national integration. Only through this process did the Han, the main body of the Chinese nation, absorb fresh blood and grow even stronger. In the national relations in Chinese history, close contact, mutual union, and integration among the peoples are the mainstream and the basic trend of historical development, which should give full recognition to [10].

From ancient times to the present, when some researchers see the ferocious and tyrannical rule of the imperial family in the Northern Wei, they would consider it the darkest moment in history, and the whole society is even like a pool of frozen black stagnant water, and more or less attribute the cruel reality to the backward productivity of the nomads in the north and the imperfect cultural system against the relatively developed Han rule and oppression. In fact, this is inaccurate and incorrect. The darkness of the Northern Wei is certainly a fact, but it does not neglect the significant progress in other aspects of society, especially in the fields of religious belief, poetry and song, painting, sculpture, and calligraphy, which were the basis of the peak cultural era of the Tang Dynasty.

The national intermingling of the Northern Wei provides a rich source of research for today's history, literature, calligraphy, ethnography, archaeology, and many other disciplines, and the forest of Wei monuments is a huge treasure trove of academic research. However, since today's national patterns are the result of the accumulation of time over time and generations, the direct relationship with the national intermingling of the Northern Wei period is not obvious, and thus the positive impact explored in this paper is mainly within the scope of ancient Chinese history.

The impact of national intermingling consists of three main aspects. The first aspect is the interpretation of the orthodoxy of minority regimes. The Northern Wei was the first orthodox dynasty established by a minority in Chinese history. Although it was not as unified as the Yuan dynasty a thousand years later, it was still a major achievement in unifying the north and creating momentum to overpower the southern regimes. As mentioned earlier, the Weishu considered the Xianbei as the descendants of the Yellow Emperor, except for the difference in living environment, and the Han people can be said to have the same root and origin; but in the Southern Song Dynasty, Fan Ye's "HouHanShu", Xianbei is also the branch of the eastern Hu, not depending on the Xianbei Mountain, so because of the name. Its language and customs are the same as Wuhuan [11]. It is easy to see that the northern minority regimes tried to justify their own governance of Han regions and rule over Han subject states through historical interpretation, while the southern Han regimes

still had a clearer sense of dividing nationality, i.e., the Hou Han Shu does not deny the existence of the objective reality of national fusion, but does not identify the Xianbei, who founded the Northern Wei, as the same national fusion as the Han, but still identifies Xianbei with Xiongnu, Wuhuan, and other minority groups in the north.

The second aspect is the policy of ruling in minority areas, which includes the official system and more. As mentioned above, at the beginning of the Sixteen Kingdoms period, the leaders of the minority groups were called kings in imitation of the Han system, and at the same time, they used the title of Chanyu under the Hu system, which is the name given by the Xiongnu to their monarchs. Later, the supreme rulers of the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern Dynasties called themselves emperors or kings and made Chanyu a secondary position, appointing their sons or nobles with the same surname as their sons, with the responsibility of controlling the Hu people; after the reform of Emperor Xiaowen, the Han system was completely changed, and the system of Chanyu was abandoned. After the political form of ancient Chinese feudal society was outlined in the Qin and Han dynasties, it was mostly followed by future generations but still amended, added, and abolished according to the actual situation of the dynasty. The chancellor system of the Northern Wei Dynasty, i.e., the participation of the San gong and Bagong in political affairs and the addition of the six auxiliaries after the reform of Emperor Xiaowen, was different from that of the previous dynasties, especially the collection and deliberation of the public ministers on important matters in the Northern Wei was a significant addition to the chancellor system. In addition, the political status of the Cao Shang Shu and the Cao Lang under them was also gradually completed in the Northern Wei period.

At the local level, from Emperor Taiwu's implementation of the suzerain governor system to Emperor Xiaowen's implementation of the three-level administration system, the characteristics of national intermingling more prominent: after the unification of the north, Tuotuo appointed the cut-off self-defence of the dock owners, powerful people as the suzerain, to supervise the people, that is, the suzerain governor system. For a certain period, the suzerain played a role in stabilizing the place, but the drawbacks of hiding the population and evading taxes were exposed. In 486, Emperor Xiaowen accepted the suggestion of Li Chong, a Han landlord courtier, and ordered the abolition of the suzerain system and the implementation of the three-level administration system. The implementation of the three-level administration system cracked down on the power of landlords and powerful people, increased the tax revenue of Northern Wei, and strengthened the court's rule over the grassroots.

The third aspect is the issue of cultural interchange and intermingling. The Wei, Jin and Northern Dynasties were a period of great division and turmoil in China's history, but even in this environment, national integration did not weaken but gradually increased due to frequent migration and interaction under the influence of war. Whether it was the ruling policies of the central government, or the religious beliefs and customs of the people, the history and culture of different nationalities were plastic and stable in the process of intermingling, and the commonality of the "Chinese nation" was greatly enhanced. The traditional Chinese culture of loyalty, tolerance and other ideological concepts and spiritual pursuits were formed during the exchange and increasingly influenced the social development and cultural style; the Hu people brought with them from the vast northwest region dietary habits, medical techniques, poems, songs and dances that were very different from those of the plains, thus greatly enriching the culture of the Chinese nation and activating its vitality, which provided the basis for the later collective cultural outreach.

## 5. Conclusion

Using the Epitaph of Yu Shen'en as an example, this article uses inscriptions and other documentary and historical sources as a basis for a glimpse into the basic features of ethnic integration in the

Northern Wei period. In addition to the richness of the inscriptions and the numerous previous research findings, recent interdisciplinary studies have also yielded novel macroscopic insights into the Northern Wei from a more comprehensive and holistic perspective. It is clear from this analysis that ethnic integration in the Northern Wei was characterized by multi-ethnic and multi-faceted intermingling and that it was a period of formation and development of the pursuit of common values for the 'Chinese nation', with distinctive characteristics of the 'Great Unification' era. It was also a period of the formation and development of the common values of the 'Chinese nation', with the distinctive characteristics of the 'Great Unification' era, and the intermingling of peoples at this time, although dominated by the Han Chinese and dominated by the ethnic minorities (especially the Xianbei), was active and positive and had a profound impact on later generations.

However, the study found that there are still shortcomings in today's research on the ethnic issues of the Northern Wei; for example, the Northern Wei, as one of the dynasties of the Wei-Jin-North and South Dynasties periods, has not formed a mature independent break in history, the field of historical studies has paid insufficient attention to the Northern Wei, even below its historical importance, and the study of the Northern Wei is still subsumed under the Northern Dynasties or dependent on the study of the Southern Dynasties; secondly, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of the language and writing, ideology and culture of the ethnic minorities. Most of the studies are still based on the position of the Han or the Chinese regime, and the rulers of the Northern Wei are still being explored as 'foreigners'. Therefore, there is a need to specialize in the study of the Northern Wei as a separate research category and to increase the attention given to the Northern Wei in the field of historical research; there is a need to strengthen the study of minority languages, scripts and cultural thought, and to study in depth the content of Hu-Han, East-West, North-South and cultural exchanges in the inscriptions from multiple perspectives, in order to explore in depth the characteristics and role of the intermingling of various ethnic groups from multiple perspectives.

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