CHAPTER TWO

RETIRED EMPERORSHIP:
THE NORTHERN WEI INNOVATION

The broad issue to be addressed in this chapter is the politics of succession in medieval China, as reflected in the institution of the retired emperorship (taishang huangdi 太上皇帝) of the Northern Wei, 386–534. This chapter will argue the hypothesis that the retired emperorship was first successfully utilized by the Northern Wei and then imitated by the immediately succeeding Northern Dynasties (Northern Qi, 550–577 and Northern Zhou, 557–580) and then the Tang as a means of stabilizing the imperial succession. The position presented here is, in part, inspired by the arguments laid out by G. Cameron Hurst, III regarding the Japanese institution,1 and in part, by the specific reasons offered for the later Northern Qi retirement of 565.2

Retired Emperorship

The appearance of the retired emperorship in the Northern Dynasties and its extension into the early Tang is strongly correlated with succession difficulties encountered by these regimes. This early use of imperial retirement as a tool to stabilize imperial successions is also strongly correlated with regimes attempting to institute a vertical male primogenital

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1 The term retired emperor is borrowed from G. Cameron Hurst’s discussion of the later Japanese institution from the Nara and Heian Periods. Hurst argued for a strong correlation between the Japanese use of imperial retirement in the 600’s and 700’s with the existence of an imperial succession that vacillated between a horizontal and vertical primogenital mode, with the horizontal mode appearing much more frequently than the vertical mode. Retirement was designed to stabilize the succession in the direction of the vertical primogenital mode. See Hurst, Insei, Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan, 1086–1185 (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976).

2 Perhaps a more accurate term would be ranked co-emperorship. In the Chinese Northern Wei and Northern Dynasties’ cases the junior emperors were all minors and did not exercise significant political power beyond serving as the living symbol of the stability and continuity of the primogenital imperial succession.

Zizhi Tongjian [ZzTj], (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), 169.5251.
form of succession over against an earlier tradition of horizontal succession. This is particularly true of the cases from the Northern Dynasties, however, the later Tang period cases seem to represent a developmental variation that was less concerned with the existence of competing forms of succession.

In the case of the Northern Dynasties’ emperors, the utilization of retired emperorship represented a positive move by the mature imperial incumbent (at least sixteen years of age) to ensure that his young son would not encounter a legitimacy crisis upon the demise of the former. Quite simply, the reigning monarch announced his ‘retirement’ and (often) removal to a separate palace complex. The young heir designate was then formally installed as emperor. In the Northern Dynasties, all the boy emperors were under ten years of age at their ascension. Under such conditions, the young heir was formally and legitimately ensconsed upon the throne long before the death of his father, while the latter continued to manage all affairs of state until his death. Needless to say, the boy emperor would be under an intensive on the job training regimen. In the precedent setting Northern Wei retirement the boy emperor was required to pay a formal court visit to his father once a month. The later Tang cases are distinctive in that the retired emperors seemed to have actively shared power with their already mature son. The first Tang case of imperial retirement, occurring in 626, will be discussed in later chapters.

In this introductory discussion of Chinese retired emperors, it is necessary to distinguish between nominal and active retired emperors, which is a distinction also implicitly made by the Qing scholar, Zhao Yi. To understand why such a distinction should be made we must quickly review the historical development of the Chinese institution.

Prior to the establishment of the Western Jin dynasty (265–317), retired emperorship was a strictly honorific appellation. Qinshi Huangdi

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1 Wei shu [Ws], (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1984), 7.138.
2 Zhao Yi 趙翼 also made this distinction. Nianershi Zhaji 廿二史削記 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963), 14.255.