The Northern Wei retired emperorship established an important precedent which the subsequent Northern Qi regime would utilize for its own purposes in the retirement of its monarch, Wuchengdi in 565. We will discuss the Northern Qi retirement in the context of the military and political developments leading to the complete military collapse of the regime in 577. It is ironic that the successful retirement of 565 may have been indirectly responsible for the political gaffes committed by the overconfident young monarch, Houzhu, following the death of his father in 569. In the end, of course, the successful and significant political maneuvers of 565 were overshadowed by the collapse of 577.

The Northern Zhou victory is surprising because this was a regime that was materially so much poorer than its Northern Qi competitor. In classical China, as in much of the ancient world, manpower and agricultural resources (or, in the case of nomads, their flocks of animals) were the material bases for creating a powerful political/military structure. Tang Changru roughly estimates that the Northern Qi had close to a three to one advantage in population. This same author also notes that during the later Sui dynasty, population figures from the 605–607 time period for the North China Plain (north of the Huai River) indicate that slightly more than 53% of the entire imperial population lived in this part of the empire.⁴ Before the development of South China, the North China Plain was the population and agrarian heart of the China based classical empires. This same region was solidly controlled by the Northern Qi during its political existence. The Western Wei/Northern Zhou conquest of the Chengdu basin in 553 could not alter these unfavorable resource disadvantages due to the extreme difficulties in overland transport across the Qinling Mountains to the Wei River valley. The Chengdu Basin could serve as a defensive redoubt of last resort, as in the case of Tang Xuanzong during the An Lushan Rebellion, but it

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contributed little to altering the material balance of power between the Wei River valley and the North China Plain. The population and agrarian core of the Northern Zhou regime was a relatively narrow band on both banks of the Wei River. Huang Yongnian provides a general description of the material and cultural backwardness of the Northern Zhou regime and argues that one consequence of this poverty of resources was a fiscal dependence on acquiring and distributing war plunder, both wealth and human captives, in large quantities to maintain its armies and its court establishment.²

The defeat of the Northern Qi was premised on poor political leadership over an extended period of time which crippled the throne and the court as effective leadership institutions. This long term political morass was exacerbated by equally poor tactical military leadership by the throne in the 476–477 military face off with the Northern Zhou. The Northern Qi collapsed with extraordinary rapidity (within the space of a month) and suffered large scale defections on the part of court and military personnel.

In exploring the political factors behind the collapse, this chapter will argue that the first five monarchs of this dynasty (covering the years 534–571) made conscious use of its Chinese and sometimes Central Asian courtiers as a means of keeping its own Altaic military elite and royal agnates, most of whom came from a Northern Garrisons background, off-balance and thus creating a space for the throne to dominate both groups as a divide and rule tactic. The term Altaic elites does not refer to surviving members of the Northern Wei Tuoba royal family or non-Chinese households descended from long serving families in the previous Northern Wei court. The Qi elite seemed to view these individuals as almost Chinese, or at any rate as members of an overly refined urban elite.³ Generally, these rulers carefully cultivated a stable clique

² Huang Yongnian 黃永年, *Liu zhi jiu Shiji Zhong’guo Zhengzhishi* 六至九世紀中國政治史 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian chubanshe, 2004), 41–47.
³ See the remark of Gao Anahong to Yuan Shi 湯師, “You damned Chinese really know your astrology,” *Bei Qi shu* [BQs] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 50.690. Yuan Shi was a descendent of a high ranking Tuyuhun Xianbei family that began serving the Northern Wei in the 430’s. See *Bei shi* [Bs] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 28.1023 for Yuan Shi’s family biographies. Huang Yongnian argues that the epithet haner 漢兒 can refer to all literate elites regardless of ethnicity. See Huang Yongnian, *Wenshi Tanwei* 文史探微 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 64–5. In 569 He Shikai, a confidante of both Wuchengdi and Houzhu said to Yuan Wenyao 元文耀, a descendent of the Tuoba royal family, “…let a damn Yuan family member hold high executive court posts and he disgraces the court,” *BQs* 38.504.