CHAPTER FIVE

THE NORTHERN ZHOU CASE

The reign of the Northern Zhou monarch, Xuandi (r. 578–580; he retired in early 579), is accorded little attention in the secondary sources. When noticed, there is a tendency to label this individual as a bloodthirsty, sybaritic ruler who brought his dynasty to ruination.¹ The fact that Xuandi did succeed in alienating important segments of his court is attested to by his early and sudden demise. Nevertheless, it is possible to make Xuandi’s political actions understandable within their proper historical context. The task of this chapter will be to delineate the political legacy which informed the decisions made by Xuandi.

The political actions of this monarch suggest he was striving to make the throne into a direct and functioning extension of his political will as opposed to a consensus creating institution. Xuandi sought to create a tight inner cabinet, eschewing the kind of elite inclusivity, or at the very least the impression thereof, that his father, Wudi (r. 561–578), the 577 conqueror of the Northern Qi went to great lengths to create. Much of the stability of Wudi’s relatively long reign rested on his ability to make enduring political compromises without jeopardizing the authority of the throne. Xuandi, by contrast, was rigid and uncompromising in his efforts to secure independence of action for the throne—a goal which he attempted to accomplish in an impatient and overly rapid fashion.

Xuandi’s major concerns were related to diminishing—or sometimes eliminating—the political roles of his close senior agnates, particularly his uncles, and the high advisors of his deceased father. Xuandi’s attitude toward the foregoing individuals was also closely related to his concerns regarding the stabilization of the imperial succession, especially given the recent past history of the Northern Zhou monarchy, which we will discuss below. The tactics used by the throne to accomplish its goals were murder, heavy-handed, even outré, use of imperial prestige symbolism, and transparent divide and rule tactics designed to keep his senior courtiers off balance. Imperial retirement was part of this of

this overall course of action designed to secure maximum freedom of movement for the throne. Indeed, in the Northern Zhou case imperial retirement as a means of manipulating imperial prestige symbolism was an extraordinarily prominent component of the process. Of all the the retirement cases discussed in this book the Northern Zhou case is the most sparsely documented, though the concerns motivating the actions of this monarch can be readily deduced from the history of the regime. This chapter will present a survey of Northern Zhou political history, with the goal of constructing a historical perspective from which vantage point Xuandi’s motivations will become apparent to the reader.

In the detailed discussion below, the text will point to a political style of compromise and cooptation that was initiated by Yuwen Tai—one of the key founders of this regime—and continued into the reign of Wudi. This political approach was initiated by Yuwen Tai as a means of exercising control over the complex political situation that prevailed during the early years of the regime, when it was still called the Western Wei. Xuandi is notable for making an abrupt and clear break with this political approach. After Yuwen Tai died in 556, his nephew, Yuwen Hu became the formal regent and de facto ruler of the newly founded Northern Zhou, while the children of Yuwen Tai who ascended the throne functioned as monarchical figureheads. This ongoing regency over late adolescent emperors capable of ruling in their own right added a new level of tension to the political situation, and put a strain on the willingness of the throne and its close associates to act in a flexible, compromising fashion. This tension was reflected in the efforts by the first three Yuwen monarchs, operating under the watchful eye of their cousin, a generational equal, to form tight conspiratorial cliques around themselves in a series of unsuccessful efforts to throw off the Yuwen Hu tutelage. Hu was finally murdered by Wudi, the third Northern Zhou emperor, in 572. This tendency to form tight cliques around the throne was not fully abandoned by Wudi and was significantly accentuated by Xuandi in his more radical approach to court politics.

This chapter will also demonstrate that the tensions created by Yuwen Hu’s long and uncomfortable period of political tutelage made the imperial succession a very sensitive issue. Before he was killed in 572, Hu had, somewhat reluctantly, executed two of his emperor-cousins for ‘disobedience’ and ended up dictating a series of fraternal successions from among the children of his deceased uncle, Yuwen Tai. When Wudi freed himself from his elder cousin’s domination, he dealt with the succession issue by keeping his proclaimed heir apparent under a very