AN ORDEAL AMONG THE T'O-PA WEI

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It is all too seldom that the staid Chinese historians have interrupted their long lists of imperial progresses, victories, defeats, promotions, and demotions to record some interesting custom that immediately strikes our heart-strings and reminds us again that we are listening to the annals of people who actually lived and breathed — people who were of the earth earthy. It is to one of these oases in the Chinese history of the northern nomadic tribes, especially the T'o-pa Wei who controlled varying portions of northern China between the years 399 and 534 of the Christian era, that we would now direct the reader's attention.

The practise which is described in these quotations focuses itself upon the choice by ordeal of a ruler and his consort. Chin Shu 110.1b records a conversation between Ch'ang Wei 常煒, the emissary of Jan Min 再閉 (who was the last ruler of the Hou Chao 319—353 and changed its name to Wei 魏), and Feng Yü 封裕, the representative of Mu-jung Chün 慕容儁 (founder of the Ch'ien Yen 349—370). Feng Yü said “... Moreover, I have heard that when [Jan] Min cast gold to make a statue of himself, it broke and was unsuccessful. How can it be said that he has the mandate of heaven?” 又聞閉鑄金為己象，壞而成。奈何言有天命。1)

1) V. also Omura Seigai, History of Chinese Art, Sculpture, 大村西崖, 支那美術史, 彫塑篇 text p. 136 where the 七 must be corrected to 己.
Upon the death in 528 of the emperor Su-tsung of the Northern Wei, the succession was disputed. Resort was then had to the casting of bronze statues, and only the statue of the third son of Yuan Hsieh, Prince of P’eng-ch’eng, was a success. This young man then was acknowledged emperor, and is known by the posthumous title of Hsiao-chuang.

It was also in 528 that Erh-chu Jung, desiring to succeed to the throne of the Northern Wei, cast a gold statue of himself four times, but failed each time.

These facts permit us to assume that the Turkish or Mongolian nomads, known to us as the T’o-pa Wei, did not themselves recognize the principle of primogeniture. Among them it was necessary to know the will of the gods in order to name the chief or ruler.

On the other hand, I have found nothing to indicate that once sinized, the Wei, as long as the succession was clear (according to Chinese custom) and undisputed, resorted to their more primitive habits to determine succession. In times of stress, however, it is not at all strange that they should have reverted to the older

1) Wei Shu 74. 3a: “[Erh-chu] Jung mobilized at Chin-yang, and, since he still hesitated whom to put on the throne, bronze statues were cast of the sons and grandsons of Kao-tau and of the six princes Hsi, Prince of Hsien-yang, etc. The one [whose statue] was a success should be acknowledged chief. Only Chuang ti was successful.”

2) Wei Shu 74. 3a: “Since [Erh-chu] Jung was plotting a revolt, he then cast gold to make an image of himself, and was unsuccessful.”