"TA CHIN" (GREAT GOLDEN): THE ORIGIN AND CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE JURCHEN STATE NAME

BY

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Introduction

The proclamation of the name or title of a ruling regime, a state or an empire has been regarded as a serious and sacrosanct event in the political history of human civilization. Such an action established a powerful symbol of identity and thereby the legitimacy of the organized state, and the choice was often rooted in the sociopolitical and religious-cultural heritage of the ruling class, if not also of the predominant social group of that polity. In China’s millennial history, which saw the maintenance of a continuous political tradition marked by the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires until the revolution in the twentieth century, the designation of a state or dynastic name was the most important and sacred task of the founder of the new reign. This tradition, which began with the semilegendary sage-kings of high antiquity, was followed not only by the rulers of the indigenous Han people, but also by the non-Han seminomadic conquerors who came to rule over part, or all of the Chinese empire. It had important political and ideological repercussions.1

As an independent polity on its own right, whatever its historical affinity, spatial and temporal import, each of the scores of ruling regimes in Chinese history should be properly called "state" or "kingdom." The Chinese term is kuo. However, since the inception of a linkage scheme of succession of rulerships or regimes as early as the first century A.D., and individual state was also called a "dynasty" (wang-ch’ao 王朝) throughout the imperial period. This linkage scheme is traditionally ascribed to Liu Hsin 劉歆 (d. A.D. 23), adviser to the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23 A.D.). Invoking the authority of the cyclical pulsation formula of the cosmic forces in the ancient Five Agents theory, Liu offered a mystical explanation of the succession of rulerships in the premodern era. This theory was not only consciously accepted by many founders of new regimes as a major source of political legitimation, but was also tenaciously upheld by didactic Confucian historians in deference to the continuity and longevity of Chinese history. In this context, a state was also a dynasty in the dynastic chain that reached back to high antiquity, and the name or title of the state was therefore synonymous with that of the dynasty in the Chinese tradition.

Discussing the origin of the official name of the Mongol-Yüan state in his Nien-erh-shih cha-chi (Miscellaneous Notes on the Twenty-two Histories), the eminent Ch’ing historian Chao I 趙翼 (1727–1814) noted several criteria upon which the title of a state or dynasty was chosen in Chinese history. His essay, entitled: "The Use of Literary Ideas to Establish the State Name Begun by the Yüan" (元建國號始用文義), reads:

Ever since the Three Epochs (san-tai 三代), the rulers who designated the state name mostly used the old name of its capital. Wang Mang established the name Hsin 新 (9–23 A.D.) because he was initially enfeoffed the Marquis of Hsin-tu新都, Kung-sun Shu 公孫述 (r. 25–36 A.D.) adopted the title Ch’eng-chia 成家 because he started his cause from Ch’eng-tu成都 (Szechwan). Li Hung

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