

# Research Through Unearthed Epitaphs: The Tuyuhun People's Sinicization During the Northern Dynasties

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In the middle and late Northern Wei Dynasty, Tuyuhun people gradually entered political field of Central Plains Dynasty, and cultural merging came with the interaction of the crowd. Although Tuyuhun Kingdom located in the northwestern area, Tuyuhun people's epitaphs whose unearthed places were known so far were all found in the Central Plains, which shows that Tuyuhun was closely linked with the Central Plains Dynasty in politics and culture. Taking epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji as the center, this thesis analyzes the political and cultural phenomenon reflected in the epitaph, on the basis of reorganizing his genealogy and official career. At the same time, combining with unearthed epigraphs of other Tuyuhun people in the Northern Dynasties, the thesis analyzes the sinicization elements in the cognitive identity of tomb owners and their images reflected in inscriptions, and further discusses the transformation of the concepts of national, ethnic, and cultural identity of Tuyuhun people who lived in the Central Plains.

*Keywords:* Tuyuhun, epitaph, sinicization, national identity, ethnic identity

## Historical Background of Tuyuhun and the Literature Review

Tuyuhun was originally a branch of the Murong Xianbei ethnic group in Eastern Liaoning, and made a living as nomads. In the last years of Yongjia period of the Jin Dynasty, they moved westward to Northwest Linxia in Gansu, then ruled areas including Qinghai, Southern Gansu, Northwest Sichuan, etc. Started from Achai, who was the first Tuyuhun king to be awarded official positions by Northern Wei, Tuyuhun regime began to keep close contacts with both the countries of the Southern Dynasties and the Northern Dynasties, so that Tuyuhun was directly influenced by the Central Plains Dynasties in the use of characters, housing and palaces, and official system. Under this situation, the cultural communication between them and changes in individual cultural attribute are worth thinking.

The earliest study about Tuyuhun could be dated back to *History of Tuyuhun* (Zhou, 1985a) and *Data Collection of Tuyuhun* (Zhou, 1992) written by Weizhou Zhou, which elaborate the rise and fall process and existing historical materials about the politics, society, and culture of Tuyuhun respectively, and establish the foundation for the research of Tuyuhun. However, later researches hardly achieve paralleled breakthroughs. Moreover, researches that are specifically about the culture of Tuyuhun in Northern Dynasties are relatively rough, and the sinicization during this time period has not draw enough attention. Specifically, scholars' discussion with regard to Tuyuhun people's sinicization mainly focuses on two kinds of subjects: one is about

Tuyuhun people's identification with the culture of orthodox Central Plains Dynasties, which could be seen in the articles of Wu (2013), Pu (2020), etc.; the other is about the culture, faith, and religion of Tuyuhun, including works done by Yao (2001), Yuan (2013), Zhou (2019), etc.

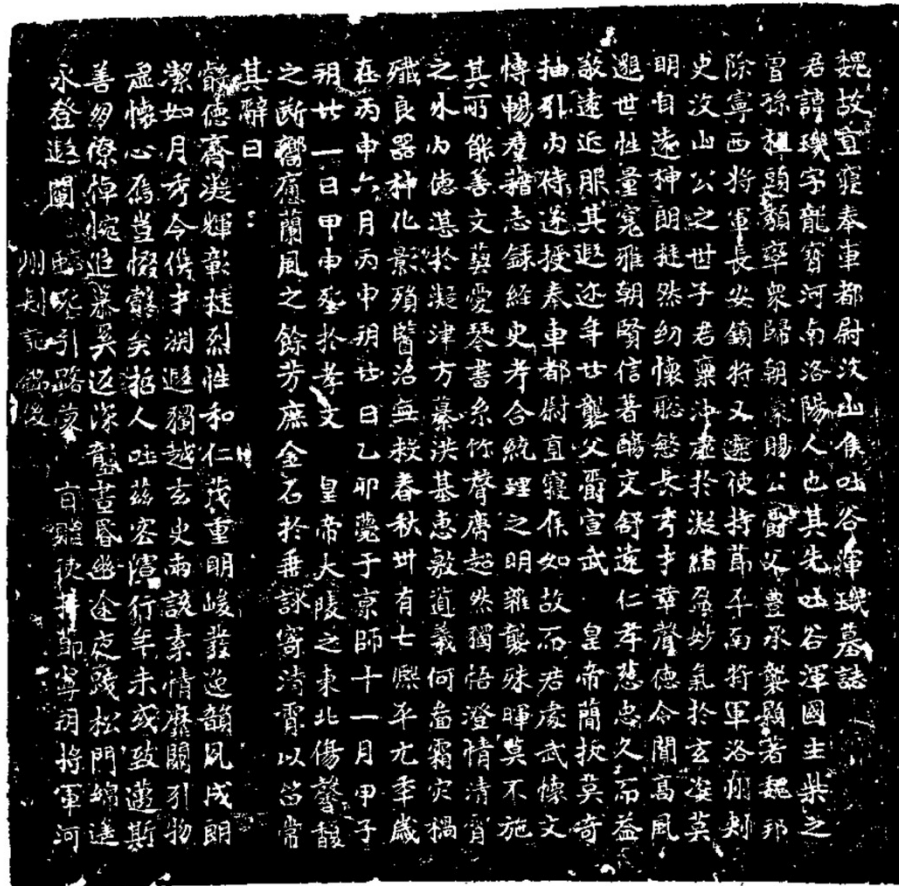


Figure 1. The epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji.

Source: Wanli Zhao: *Collection of Epitaphs in Han, Wei, Southern, and Northern Dynasties*, plate 220.

Currently, there are only four epitaphs of Tuyuhun that belong to the Northern Dynasties. The earliest epitaph of Tuyuhun discovered is the one named as *The Epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji, Who is the Zhiqin [the bodyguard of the emperor], Fengche Duwei [military official in charge of the sedan chair of the emperor], and Wenshan Hou [second-level title of nobility] in the Wei Dynasty* (or “Epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji” for short). This epitaph was excavated beside Yaoao Village, 11 km from Luoyang Old North Town in 1929. The gravestone is 48.6 cm long and 51.3 cm wide. The epitaph is regular script with 23 lines and 21 words each line. After the stone was unearthed, it was collected by Youren Yu, and now it is in Xi'an Beilin Museum in Shaanxi Province. Rubbings and recorded texts are published (Figure 1). The others are three female epitaphs. One is *The Epitaph of a Tuyuhun Consort of Wuchang Wang (Named Yuanjian) of the Wei Dynasty* (or “Epitaph of Tuyuhun Consort” for short), which can also be seen in Wanli Zhao's collection of epitaphs (1986). The other two were obtained in archaeological excavations (Ci County Cultural Center, 1984b; Shaanxi Institute of Archaeology, 2019): *The Epitaph of Tuyuhun (Jingmei), the Wife of a General Named Yaojun Who is Kaifu Yitong Sansi [first-rank official], Kaiguo Hou [second-level title of nobility] of Zhengqiang County* (“Epitaph of Jingmei”

for short), and *The Epitaph of Huihua Princess, the Wife of Qiquanxiaoda Who is Ruru's Piaoqi Great General, Qilimohe, Duzhi Shangshu, Jincheng Wang* ("Epitaph of Huihua princess" for short).

The four epitaphs have been interpreted in articles (Ma, 2002; Li, 2017; Zhou, 2020; Zhou, 1985b; Li, 2021), which focus on the research on genealogy and the supplement of ethnic relations to historical facts, and have not yet investigated the cultural characteristics and cultural tendency of Tuyuhun people who entered the Central Plains. Due to the reason that the genealogy part of previous study of Tuyuhun Ji in the article *On the Epitaph of Tuguhun Ji* (Ma, 2002) is mostly inconsistent with other widely accepted studies, this paper will take epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji as an example, combining with other epitaphs of Tuyuhun in the Northern Dynasties, to reorganize his genealogy and official career, and further interpret the overall sinicization situation of Tuyuhun people during Northern Dynasties shown in the extant epitaphs.

### **Genealogy and Official Career of Tuyuhun Ji**

#### **Genealogy**

As for Tuyuhun Ji, neither his grandfather Tui nor his father Feng mentioned in his epitaph could be found in official historical records. Luckily, the epitaph of Tuyuhun Jingmei unearthed later could provide additional information about the recent genealogy of Tuyuhun Ji's family.

Table 1

*The Genealogy Recorded in the Epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji and Epitaph of Jingmei*

Great-great grandfather	Not mentioned	Chai (a monarch of Tuyuhun)
Great-grandfather	Achai (a monarch of Tuyuhun)	Tou ( <i>Wenshan Gong</i> )
Grandfather	Toutui (granted a title of <i>Gong</i> which is the first-level title of nobility in Northern Wei Dynasty)	Feng ( <i>Wenshan Gong</i> )
Father	Feng (the heir of <i>Wenshan Gong</i> )	Zhongbao
Owner of the epitaph	Tuyuhun Ji (also known as Longbao)	Tuyuhun Jingmei

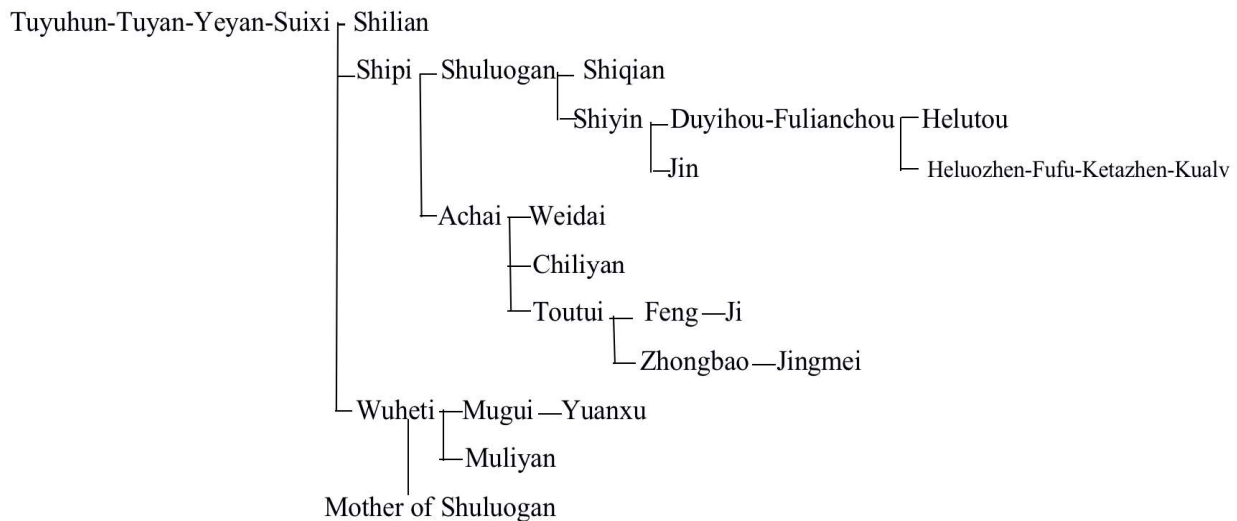
These two epitaphs well indicate the name and titles of their family members are shown above in Table 1. According to the high overlap in their name and titles, it can be deduced that the Jingmei's great-grandfather Tou is precisely Tuyuhun Ji's grandfather Toutui, and her grandfather accords with Tuyuhun Ji's father, so Tuyuhun Ji and Zhongbao are brothers, and Jingmei herself is Tuyuhun Ji's niece.

The genealogy from Tuyuhun Ji to Jingmei has reached a consensus in past researches, but there are still two competing opinions about the identity of Tuyuhun Ji's great-grandfather Achai. On the one hand, according to a study of Tuyuhun Ji by Ma (2002), Achai is believed to be a Tuyuhun monarch named Shiyin, because the character "Chai" literally means firewood, which is similar to the meaning of "Shiyin" in ancient Chinese language which means picking up the wood. In this case, Tuyuhun Ji would be the eldest son of Fulianchou accordingly as the genealogy graph shows below. However, the official position of Tuyuhun Feng recorded in epitaph is far from that of Fulianchou recorded in the official history book (Wei, 1997). In addition, since both Feng and the second son of Fulianchou had been granted the position of "General Ningxi", Ma (2002) asserts that this position of the latter could be inherited from Feng, which gives credit to Feng's identity as Fulianchou. Admittedly, the title of the five-class ranks of nobility was bound with the title of generals with the same rank, and these titles could be passed on together by generation in the early Northern Wei Dynasty. However, this system was abolished in the 16th year of Xiaowen Emperor's Taihe period (492) (Liu, 2015).

From that time, the general's title was different from the rank of nobility which could be inherited by son, and seemed to be only related to the location of field and power of Tuyuhun.

The other opinion with regard to the identity of Achai is from Weizhou Zhou. He thinks that this "Achai" is the ninth monarch of Tuyuhun named "Achai" recorded in the *Book of Wei* (Zhou, 1985a). One problem of this perspective is that although these two names have the same pronunciation, they are written in different Chinese characters. To figure out the problem, official history books of Southern Dynasties like the *Book of Jin* and the *Book of Song* were checked (Fang, 1974; Shen, 1974). It turns out that these two names could be interchangeably used. According to the *Book of Wei*, a nephew of the monarch of Tuyuhun named Weidai was killed in domestic political struggle, and his young brother Chiliyan escaped to the Northern Wei accompanied with seven people (Wei, 1997). Zhou (1985a) thinks that these seven people might include Ji's grandfather Toutui.

According to the historical records and the analysis above, the genealogy from Tuyuhun to Kualv can be concluded as follows:



### Official Career of Tuyuhun Ji

According to the epitaph, Tuyuhun Ji was 37 years old when he died in the first year of Xiaoming Emperor's Xiping period (516), so he was supposed to be born in the fourth year of Xiaowen Emperor's Taihe period (480).

As the epitaph records, Tuyuhun Ji inherited his father's rank of nobility at the age of twenty in the first year of Xuanwu Emperor's Jingming period (500), and he was assigned positions as imperial bodyguard by Xuanwu Emperor. Xuanwu Emperor just started the charge of government affairs in January of this year, so his appointment may occur after this event. In the epitaph, his father Feng was the heir of *Wenshan Gong*, the first-level title of nobility inherited from Toutui. However, Tuyuhun Ji was demoted to *Hou*, the second-level title of nobility after inherited his father's title. This phenomenon accords with the historical record of Xiaowen Emperor's imperial edict in the sixteenth year of Taihe period, saying that the nobility with a surname different from Tuoba royal family should be lowered by one rank when inheriting the title of nobility (Wei, 1997). Though Feng was the nobility with different surnames, he might inherit his father's title before the reform of rank of nobility system in Taihe period, while Ji was after that.

At the beginning, Ji's official position was *Fengche Duwei* (an upper sub-fifth rank official who was in charge of the sedan chair of the emperor and served around the emperor) and *Zhiqin* (the bodyguard of the emperor, a position set in the late Northern Wei Dynasty), which could have a close relationship with the emperor. According to Liu's (2015) study on the official position of the imperial clan in the Northern Wei Dynasty, even though these military positions gradually became extensive in the late Northern Dynasties, these seem to be nominal and honorable positions that were originally set up for people in the imperial clan who were trustworthy, and starting with such a position could indicate a promising future, because the highest official position one could achieve was usually four ranks higher than his original official position. As shown in epitaphs, both Tuyuhun Ji and his brother Tuyuhun Zhongbao started their official career with a position of imperial guard. Thus, it can be seen that Tuyuhun people in the Northern Wei regime had almost equal status with Northern Wei imperial clan. According to Liu (2015), starting official career with positions above the fourth rank was monopolized by imperial clan, and officials with a surname different from emperor's could not be selected. Thus, for nobles who are not imperial clan but start with a position of upper sub-fifth rank, it is already a glory, and it is how the emperor shows his preference and grace to the nobles.

However, unlike most epitaphs which would record later promotions, Tuyuhun Ji's later official career was absent in his epitaph. Perhaps his position had not changed throughout his life. After Tuyuhun Ji passed away, he was awarded titles including *Shichijie* (an official with a special permission to represent the emperor), *General Ningshuo*, and prefectural governor of *Hezhou*. It is an unstated but common rule to grant important departed officials with a title of General and a nominal prefectural governor together, and to promote their official positions in 1~2 ranks compared with that when they were alive (Watianqingwen, 1993). As for Ji, promoting from *Fengche Duwei* (upper sub-fifth rank) to *General Ningshuo* (lower sub-fourth rank) is in line with this rule. However, there is no direct historical material recording the rank of the prefectural governor of *Hezhou*. One method to indirectly evaluate this position is to see what other official positions were granted at the same time, because officials are always given equivalent positions that they are qualified. *Book of Wei* (Wei, 1997) records that officials named Muzhi and Kouzhi were both assigned the governor of *Hezhou* simultaneously with a General title of the third rank. Thus, the position of the prefectural governor of *Hezhou* supposed to be equivalent to the third-rank position at least from the era of Xiaowen Emperor (467-499) to the era of Xuanwu Emperor (483-515) when Muzhi and Kouzhi were recorded.

His stagnation in official career for nearly 16 years could accord with the overall politics at that time. According to the record in the eighteenth year of Xiaowen Emperor's Taihe period, officials were supposed to be examined for every three years. Those who got a high comment would be promoted, while those who got a negative comment would be demoted, and others would stay the same at current official position (Wei, 1997). Moreover, a member of imperial clan named Yuanyong once proposed that even officials with official titles but no actual duty should have opportunities to promote for every four years (Wei, 1997). However, Yuanyong also proposed that the opportunity for imperial guards and other military officials to promote was deferred in different extents at the time of Xuanwu Emperor (483-515), giving rise to a bunch of complaints from these people. This broad phenomenon might explain Tuyuhun Ji's individual experience.

Overall, Tuyuhun Ji's official position was inferior to his father Feng's. Admittedly, similar to the posthumous treatment of Tuyuhun Ji, Feng's titles of *Shichijie*, *General Pingnan*, and prefectural governor of *Luo Zhou* might be granted after his death as well. However, when Feng was alive, he had been appointed as *Nan Zhonglangjiang* (a third rank commander who guards the South) and *Chang'an Zhenjiang* (commander

who governs military and civilians in Chang'an) as shown in epitaphs. These two were both important positions in the process of Xiaowen Emperor moving to Luoyang and setting corps in four directions to defend the new capital city.

The downward change in official position of this Tuyuhun family might be caused by the change in the relationship between Northern Wei regime and Tuyuhun Kingdom. There were two common reasons for minorities to enter the regimes in the Central Plains: Some might be forced to stay in Central Plains as hostages and build relationship with them by marriages, while others may refuge here due to the failure in their domestic struggles. Feidoujin, a son of the Tuyuhun King Shiyin, was the former case. Historical books merely record that Shiyin sent him to the Northern Wei as a hostage, but *The Epitaph of Tuyuhun Consort* provides additional information. It turned out that Feidoujin's son Tuyuhun Ren married with the daughter of Yuanpi, the Prince of Dongyang Prefecture in Northern Wei, and the eldest daughter of Tuyuhun Ren later became the consort of Yuanjian, the Prince of Wuchang Prefecture. However, there is no record of any such marriage in the epitaph related to Toutui and his followers. Toutui is more like in the later case. The short-term prominence of Toutui and Feng might merely because the Northern Wei regime could fully trust them under the threat of Tuyuhun. Nevertheless, when Tuyuhun Ji was old enough to be assigned official positions and to be evaluated in promotion, Tuyuhun and the Northern Wei Dynasty had already entered a period of peace, and the political role of Tuyuhun Ji's family was not as important as before.

### **Sinicization of Tuyuhun People in the Northern Wei Dynasty**

#### **An Image of Aristocracy Shaped in Epitaph**

Epitaph is usually placed in the front of the tomb, which could function as building a "public image" of the tomb owner. Before Tuoba Xianbei entered the Central Plains, there were no epitaphs found. After moving to the new capital city Luoyang, influenced by the funeral culture of Han ethnic, epitaphs began to appear in large numbers. Tuyuhun Ji accepted the burial system in the Northern Wei Dynasty, leaving his epitaph for future generations to study.

The epitaph shows that Tuyuhun Ji's native place is Luoyang, Henan, which is in line with Xiaowen Emperor's reform of sinicization that coerced everyone from Daibei to change their native place to Luoyang. The same phenomenon happened to most of the second generation of foreigners who entered the Northern Wei regime and were deeply influenced by Central Plains culture, some of whom had lived in Wei for a long time or were even born here. When tracing the identities and resumes of their past three generations, the epitaph emphasizes the identity and status of the tomb owner's family particularly in the Northern Wei regime: Tuyuhun Ji's grandfather Toutui led people to the court of Northern Wei and got a title of nobility rewarded, and his father Feng was also very famous in the Northern Wei Dynasty. It can be seen that they had completely regarded themselves as citizens of the Northern Wei regime after this family lived in Wei for three generations.

A large amount of contents are devoted to praising Ji's temperament, morality, and reputation. Although it might be a bit exaggerated, the cultural concept and value orientation of the tomb owner could still be seen.

On the one hand, the emphasis on temperament shown in Ji's epitaph is in accord with Han culture. Started from the end of Han Dynasty to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, there was a fad arisen among Han nobles to judge and make comments on each other. Specifically, people would be praised if they follow the ideology of the School of Yellow Emperor and Laozi, which encourages people to keep a calm temperament

and be indifferent to the fame and wealth. Accordingly, the epitaph mentions these kinds of qualities of Tuyuhun Ji in order to praise him.

On the other hand, the concept of inheriting shown in Ji's epitaph is also consistent with the writing style of Han nobles' epitaphs. It is common for a Han noble's epitaph to emphasize how early the tomb owner showed his talent and started the career, as well as how many books they possessed and read, which has almost become the stylized words in epitaph writing. Perhaps these could showcase their excellent blood lineage and family heritage in both intelligence and wealth. Accordingly, these are all described in Tuyuhun Ji's epitaph: he was intelligent as a child, and appeared to be talented when he grew up, possessing good qualities such as benevolence, filial piety, loyalty, integrity, and code of brotherhood, so that his name was widely known, and he was able to be selected as an imperial bodyguard at age of twenty. These moral characteristics described above in the epitaph could also form a typical image as a Confucian scholar.

However, probably due to his failure in political field, information with regard to his marriage and his promotion were absent in epitaph. The official positions he began with were all nominal title without real power. When he was stuck on current position, far from the tradition of Xianbei ethnics coming from prairies, he turned to develop the literary talent like a real Han literati, enjoying readings, recording history, studying classics, and playing musical instruments with a leisure and glorious official position. That is why his epitaph has mentioned that he is in a military official position but with high literacy. This description highly reflects the epochal and geographical characteristics of Northern Wei, since only dynasty like Northern Wei that values both military power and literacy would regard this as a compliment. Tuyuhun Ji seemed to accept the new identity, and culturally transformed into a Han scholar with literacy.

Tuyuhun Ji's sinicization is conceivable. He grew up in the period of Xiaowen Emperor in the Northern Wei Dynasty, and the series of sinicization reforms promoted by Xiaowen Emperor should have a direct impact on Ji. Yi (2016) once counted the trend of literati culture of all nobles who moved from the border areas to Luoyang, among whom 70% of epitaphs mentioned cultural accomplishment and showed a certain level of sinicization. Therefore, by scrutinizing the writing of Tuyuhun Ji's epitaph, there was little difference in sinicization between Tuyuhun Ji who went to the Northern Wei Dynasty and those nobles of Tuoba Xianbei who moved from Pingcheng to Luoyang.

### **Female Images Shaped in Epitaphs**

Compared with the epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji, the three epitaphs of Tuyuhun females were written in different ways, not only because the writing style and the contents of describing a success female are distinct from that of male, but also because female in different social hierarchies may reflect diverse perspectives and cognition with regard to their social identity.

In *the Epitaph of Tuyuhun Consort*, it at first pointed out the genealogy of her father's family, indicating she was the granddaughter of *General Anxi*, Prince of Yongan Prefecture named Jin, and she was the eldest daughter of *General Anbei*, Prince of Yongan Prefecture named Ren. It also pointed out the genealogy of her prominent matriarchal family, indicating she was the granddaughter of *Taiweigong* (supreme military governor), *Sanlao* (the officer in charge of enlightenment), *Lushangshu* (chancellor) and Prince of Dongyang Prefecture. This could reflect how she adopted the Han culture, because Han ethnics usually value their marriage relations and wish to expand their family power through matrimonial alliance. However, the other two female epitaphs do not elaborate on the situation of matriarchal family. One possibility is that their matriarchal family may not

be prominent enough. It is also likely that their matriarchal family may belong to social groups or hierarchy that is way different from their own, the marriage of which was banned by Xiaowen Emperor under the influence of Han people's marital ideology (Wei, 1997), so that they chose not to mention these information in epitaphs. Moreover, Tuyuhun Consort's death was only one year away from her husband Yuanjian's rebellion. However, the epitaph did not mention this matter either. Instead, it was cleverly concealed by her long-term lonely and melancholy death, which was also a narrative technique used to treat her as a Han woman.

*The Epitaph of Jingmei* is a very long one, which is a typical epitaph of women in a scholar family. Jingmei grew up in a sinicized environment in Luoyang. Compared with the epitaphs of Tuyuhun Consort and Huihua Princess, which only mentioned four virtues and women's virtues stylistically, her epitaph expressed morality in a very detailed and comprehensive way, and even used a lot of allusions in the writing to compare with the outstanding women recorded in historical books. Influenced by the status of her husband Yao Jun, Jingmei's epitaph far exceeds the epitaph of Tuyuhun Ji, and it is even bigger than the epitaph of Princess of Ruru Kingdom, who also died in the Eastern Wei Dynasty and was treated with a funeral already superior than the average (Ci County Cultural Center, 1984a). The epitaph pays more attention to her image displayed in her husband's family, and all the sinicization shown in her epitaph might be attributed to her husband's family either rather than her own identity as a Tuyuhun person.

*The Epitaph of Princess Huihua* is characterized by its emphasis on her international status in different regimes. On the one hand, the family background includes not only her father who is the governor of Tuyuhun Kingdom, but also her elder sister who is the empress of Ruru (Rouran) Kingdom, and her niece who is the empress of the Western Wei regime. On the other hand, her epitaph well records the experience of the couple from one regime to another, the courtesy they received in both Ruru Kingdom and Western Wei, and the scale of her funeral which was able to be treated equally with that of princesses. Moreover, the epitaph also mentions princess Huihua's manners in the diplomatic ceremony, indicating that Tuyuhun and Ruru had already formed the manners of the Han people even before she entered the Wei Dynasty. Princess Huihua who was among palaces could naturally learn the Han culture in the political communication and acted the manner of Central Plains in the expression of noble etiquette.

## Conclusion

To sum up, even though the four Tuyuhun epitaphs in Northern Dynasties have different emphases, they all reflect a certain extent of sinicization. This change in cultural ideology is not only influenced by lifestyle, but also affected more by political environment. It can be seen from the content and expression of the epitaphs above that Tuyuhun Ji, Tuyuhun Consort, and Jingmei not only completely accepted their political identities in the Northern Wei regime or in the Northern Qi regime, but also accepted the regional culture of the places they lived in as well as the Han culture advocated by Xiaowen Emperor after his reform in the Northern Wei Dynasty. Since Toutui was defeated in the domestic political struggle of Tuyuhun and then actively joined Northern Wei, Tuyuhun Ji had been the third generation of Tuyuhun people who lived in Northern Wei, so he was less likely to function as an ally or assistant in international activities any more, and less possible to obtain privilege or political protection on this account. Therefore, the behaviors shown in the epitaph—he chose to record his native place as Luoyang and chose a lifestyle of Han culture—could be explained by an active intent of self-preservation. Similarly, Jingmei and Tuyuhun Consort went with the flow, approving the Northern Wei regime and the Central Plains culture, and almost completely presenting the Han female images. Only the



epitaph of Princess Huihua showed little sense of belonging to the Western Wei regime. Princess Huihua, on the other hand, lived in the Western Wei as an envoy or a guest from Ruru instead of a citizen of Western Wei. Her elaborately treated funeral was more likely due to her role as a bridge of communication between Ruru and the Western Wei, neither because of her identity as a Tuyuhun person, nor because of her approval of the Northern Wei regime and the Central Plains culture per se. Under these situations, it can be seen that these tomb owners all have different cognition and positioning of themselves, which further reflects their inner national identity and ethnic identity—national identity is based on the regime and position they choose, while ethnic identity is based on the cultural traditions they follow.

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