

A Chronological Review of the Transition of the Gui-Yi Circuit Administration

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Zhang Chengfeng governed the Gui-yi Circuit in the late ninth century. However, the circuit experienced a gradual decline by the early tenth century. Cao Yijin consolidated political power as his successor and brought about the stabilization and further development of the Gui-yi Circuit. Through a close analysis of historical sources, this article reconstructs the nearly twenty-five-year rule of Zhang by dividing it into three distinct phases: the restoration and personal rule period, the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han period, and the Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han. It then investigates the political strategies employed by Cao Yijin to consolidate power, including marriage alliances, diplomatic rapprochement with Central Plains dynasties, and the integration of local bureaucratic elites. Ultimately, these efforts enabled him to break free from the dominance of the Ganzhou Uyghur and to restore stability and prosperity in Guazhou and Shazhou.

Keywords: The Gui-yi Circuit, historical analysis, political transition

In the autumn of the year of Jiayu (914), Cao Yijin, the Chief Secretary of Shazhou, replaced Zhang Chengfeng and took over the Gui-yi Circuit, making the complete end of the Zhang family's 66-year rule over the Gui-yi Circuit. The Dunhuang academic has conducted a detailed analysis and discussion on the transition between the Zhang and Cao authorities, with a general consensus that the process was a relatively peaceful, bloodless political change. (Yang, 1999; Rong, 2001; Feng, 2013; Du, 2014). However, due to the lack of relevant historical sources, there has not been a systematic analysis of the transition between the Zhang and Cao. Building on existing research, this paper intends to outline Zhang Chengfeng's rule over the Gui-yi Circuit and the transition between Zhang and Cao, analyze the historical reasons behind and further explore the historical details of this process.

Overview of the Process of Zhang Chengfeng's Rule over the Gui-Yi Circuit

Zhang Chengfeng assumed office in the first year of Dashun (890) and stepped down in the year of Jiayu (914), serving nearly 25 years. This paper comprehensively analyzes the historical process of Zhang Chengfeng's rule over the Gui-yi Circuit and divides it into three historical stages.

The Restoration and Personal Rule

In the first year of Dashun (890), a coup occurred within the Gui-yi Circuit. Jiedushi Zhang Huaishen (nephew of Zhang Yichao) and his family were killed and Zhang Huaiding (son of Zhang Yichao) ascended to power. Two years later, Zhang Huaiding passed away in the first year of Jingfu (892). Suo Xun (son-in-law of Zhang Yichao) came into power and was officially appointed as the Jiedushi of the Gui-yi Circuit by the Tang court. After taking power, Suo consolidated authority and gradually provoked dissatisfaction and jealousy from the Li family of the Dunhuang clan, who were also relatives of Zhang Yichao. According to an inscription “Longxi Li’s Re-Repair of Merit and Virtue Monument in Tang Dynasty” in Cave 148 of Mogao Grottoes, in the first year of Qianning (894), Zhang Yichao’s daughter, the Fourteenth Lady of Zhang who married Li Mingzhen, led the sons of the Li family along with external allies such as the Qiang people to stage a coup. They killed the Gui-yi Jiedushi Suo Xun, and acclaimed Zhang Chengfeng (son of Zhang Huaiding) new Jiedushi (Rong, 1989; Liu, 1997).

Although Zhang Chengfeng regained the authority as a descendant of the Zhang family, the real power in Guazhou and Shazhou fell into the hands of the Li family. In the third year of Qianning (896), Zhang Chengfeng overthrew the circuit and restored personal rule with the support of the Dunhuang clan. According to the Dunhuang Manuscripts S.1177 “The Golden Light Sutra”, after the coup, the Fourteenth Lady of Zhang was imprisoned, with her three sons brutally killed after being demoted (Zhang, 2009).

As recorded in “Volume 20 Annals 20: Zhaozong”, *Old Book of Tang*, in August of the third year of Guanghua (900), Zhang Chengfeng was formally appointed as the Gui-yi Jiedushi and the Provincial Governor of Shazhou by Emperor Zhaozong of the Tang Dynasty (Liu, 1975).

Through years of efforts, Zhang Chengfeng gradually consolidated his position in political conflicts and gained recognition from the Tang.

The Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han

In the fourth year of Tianfu (904), Emperor Zhaozong of the Tang Dynasty was killed by Zhu Wen. The ninth son of Emperor Zhaozong, Li Zhu, was enthroned as Emperor Aizong of the Tang Dynasty by Zhu Wen, with the reign title changed to Tianyou. However, according to Dunhuang Manuscripts, Zhang Chengfeng insisted on using the title Tianfu of Emperor Zhaozong rather than the “false title” Tianyou introduced by Zhu Wen. In the fourth year of Tianyou (907), Emperor Aizong was forced to abdicate to Zhu Wen. The Tang dynasty was declared downfall and replaced by the Later Liang administration. In response to this, Zhang Chengfeng adopted a stance of denial. During the Kaiping years of the Later Liang, Zhang openly established a kingdom named the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han and declared himself Emperor Baiyi. Scholarly discussions suggest that Zhang’s founding of the state occurred in the fourth year of Kaiping (910) (Lu, 1999; Yan, 2009; Ron, 2015; Bao & Zheng, 2015). The Historical Records of the Five Dynasties records Zhang Chengfeng’s founding of the kingdom and his reign as emperor as follows: “In the middle of the years of Kaiping, Shazhou was under the command of Jiedushi Zhang Chengfeng who called himself the Emperor Baiyi of the Golden Mountain Kingdom” (Ouyang, 2013). In the *Huang Ji Jing Shi*, the event is recorded that: “Zhang Chengfeng created a rebellion in Shazhou” (Shao, 2012). From “called himself the Emperor Baiyi of the Golden Mountain Kingdom” to “created a rebellion in Shazhou”, it is evident that Zhang Chengfeng and the Later Liang

administration had been in a constant state of opposition. The former refused to acknowledge the Later Liang as the legitimate ruler, and the latter didn't recognize Zhang's Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han.

Although Zhang Chengfeng established his state and declared himself emperor, the territory of the Gui-yi Circuit was continuously encroached with the rise of minority forces in Hexi. After ascending to the throne, Zhang Chengfeng claimed that he had "inherited the rule of the Five Liang administration and commanded the land of the eight provinces of China" (Yan, 1989). However, the Gui-yi Circuit only effectively controlled Guazhou and Shazhou. Under the threat of strong enemies surrounding Hexi, the strength of the Gui-yi Circuit was far from remarkable.

After establishing the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han, Zhang Chengfeng ambitiously attempted to expand his territory on both the east and west fronts to restore the vast dominion of his grandfather Zhang Yichao, which had once spanned Helong and the western region (Feng, 2013). The Grand Chancellor Zhang Wenche charted the blueprint of the Kingdom at length:

To the east, we aim to capture Guangwu City in Helan. To the west, we aim to capture the Hanhai Circuit in Tianshan. To the north, we will sweep Yanran Mountain. To the south, we will pacify all the tribes. The army is strong and the warhorses are prosperous. We will forge ahead with unwavering resolve. (Yan, 1994)

Both the eastern and western sides of the Golden Mountain Kingdom were encroached by the Uyghur administration, while the southern side was occupied by the Tibetan administration and the northern side was dominated by Tatar (Feng, 2013). Therefore, Zhang Chengfeng had to wage war against the two Uyghurs, Tibet, Tatar and other authorities to achieve his strategic objectives.

Shortly after declaring himself emperor, Zhang Chengfeng was thinking of opening up the southern Silk Road route to Khotan and saving the Qiwei Kingdom. According to the Dunhuang Manuscripts S.4654 "Preface of the Miaozenzan of Luo Tongda", Zhang Chengfeng appointed Prime Minister Luo Tongda as a general and launched a successful campaign eastwards against the Xizhou Uyghur (Feng, 2013).

After defeating the Xizhou Uyghur and successfully rescuing Khotan and Qiwei, Zhang Chengfeng elatedly married the Princess of Khotan (Qian, 1987), thereby realizing his strategic objective of forming distant alliances while attacking nearby enemies. Blinded by the current victory, Zhang Chengfeng failed to recognize the approaching danger. The Ganzhou Uyghur, which had formed friendly terms with the Later Liang soon launched a war against the Golden Mountain Kingdom. According to the Dunhuang Manuscripts P.3633v "Song of Longquan Divine Sword" and P.3633 "A Written Explanation from Ten Thousand People of Shazhou to the Khagan of the Uyghur in July of Xinwei Year (911)", there were four major battles between the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han and the Ganzhou Uyghur:

The first battle was the Battle of Jinhe in Suzhou, where the Ganzhou Uyghur army invaded and plundered Guazhou and Shazhou. The Golden Mountain Kingdom forces defeated the raiding enemies and then took advantage of the victory to attack Suzhou (modern-day Jiuquan) which was under the command of Ganzhou Uyghur. On the east bank of Jinhe in Suzhou, they clashed with the Ganzhou Uyghur army (Yan, 1994).

The second battle was the Battle around Dunhuang, where the Golden Mountain Kingdom's army was likely to suffer a heavy defeat in the Battle of Jinhe in Suzhou. The army of the Ganzhou Uyghur swiftly launched a counterattack on the outskirts of Dunhuang City. The entire city was on full alert, and even Emperor Baiyi Zhang Chengfeng personally led the defense. Eventually, they barely repelled the army of the Ganzhou Uyghur.

The third battle was the Battle of Bianqiao. The troops of the Ganzhou Uyghur invaded again and marched to Bianqiao under Dunhuang City. Military Officer Zhang Xibao and Jinwu General Yin Rengui personally took to the battlefield and engaged in combat. Under the command of the Great General Luo Tongda, the army of the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han narrowly repelled the Ganzhou Uyghur's army.

The fourth battle was the Battle of Dunhuang City. Prince Di Yin of Ganzhou Uyghur led the main forces to invade Dunhuang again. Unable to resist, the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han sent high-ranking monks and officials as representatives of Buddha and secularity to negotiate with Di Yin outside the city. They were forced to sign a humiliating agreement.

Although the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han won several local battles in the military conflicts with the Ganzhou Uyghur, it was ultimately defeated due to the strong national power of the Ganzhou Uyghur. The two sides then negotiated peace and formed a father-son relationship.

The Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han

After suffering a disastrous defeat in the conflicts, Zhang Chengfeng's domestic reputation plummeted. He abolished the title of the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han and changed the state title to the Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han, as well as called himself Heavenly King of the Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han instead of Emperor Baiyi (Yan, 2009).

Dunhuang Manuscripts Ch.00144, "A Written Explanation from Deng Qinglian of Shazhou to Li, a monk of Suzhou for Blessing in the year of Jiaxu (914)" records that:

(Deng) also asked the monk Li to assist, saying: "My younger brother was captured by bandits in Ganzhou. If you stay in Ganzhou for an extended period, please make every effort to search for and redeem him. Whether you find him or not, please kindly send a reply to inform me. (Ning, 1995)

From the point that Deng called the Ganzhou Uyghur bandits, although formed a father-son relationship with the Ganzhou Uyghur, the Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han was still an independent administration rather than a dependency of the Ganzhou Uyghur.

Cao Yijin Took Over the Gui-Yi Circuit

After Cao Yijin ascended the throne, he immediately abolished the state title of Dunhuang Kingdom of Western Han and the central officials such as the Chancellor and the Minister. At the same time, he canceled the title of Heavenly King and instead adopted the title of the Military Commissioner (Jiedushi) of the Gui-yi Circuit (Tang, 1987). The Zhang authority which had ruled over the Gui-yi Circuit for 66 years declared its demise, and Guazhou and Shazhou once again returned to the era of the fanzhen system. In diplomacy, Cao Yijin's initiative fostered good relations with the Ganzhou Uyghur and the Central Plains. In domestic affairs, he united his subordinates and won the hearts of the people. Under the leadership of Cao Yijin, the social situation in Guazhou and Shazhou gradually stabilized and the economy became prosperous.

Marrying the Daughter of the Uyghur Khagan

According to Feng Peihong's research, in the autumn of 914, Cao Yijin took power and rebuilt the Gui-yi Circuit. He strategically adopted a diplomatic policy of marrying Princess Li, the daughter of Khagan, and thus inherited the father-son relationship from the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han. In this way, he changed the humiliating political state of the past (Feng, 2013). That is to say, the father-son relationship between

Khagan Tianmu of the Ganzhou Uyghur and Cao Yijin was based on marriage, which prevented the intergenerational transmission of such a relationship. Without this marriage, after the death of Khagan Tianmu, Cao Yijin would have to refer to Tianmu's successor as "father". However, with this marriage, the new Khagan could not let himself be addressed "father" by Cao Yijin, since Cao's legitimate wife was the new Khagan's sister.

Dunhuang Manuscripts P.2992v-3 "A Written Explanation from Cao Yijin, Jiedushi of the Gui-yi Circuit to Khagan Renyu in June of Changxing Year (931)" records that:

Since you became Khagan last year, you have come to Ganzhou to discuss with me face to face about the people's livelihood, and it has been very peaceful so far. You should arrange a second emissary to the court as soon as possible. (Rong & Zhu, 2014)

It can be seen that after the death of Khagan Tianmu of the Ganzhou Uyghur, the father-son relationship between the Gui-yi Circuit and the Ganzhou Uyghur transformed into a brotherly relationship. In the letter, Cao Yijin referred to Khagan Shunhua, the son of Tianmu Khan, as the Younger-Brother Emperor and himself as the Elder-Brother King, indicating that the two sides were generally on an equal footing.

Restoring Good Relations with the Central Plains

Cao Yijin timely befriended the Central Plains, thereby reducing the threat to his political administration. Rong Xinjiang pointed out that as early as the second year of the Zhenming (916), Cao Yijin got the permission of the Ganzhou Uyghur and dispatched envoys to send tribute to the Later Liang for the first time as the Military Commissioner of the Gui-yi Circuit. However, the envoys were plundered by Wenmo of Tibet in Liangzhou and returned midway. In the fourth year of the Zhenming (918), the envoys of the Gui-yi Circuit finally arrived at the Later Liang court with the help of the Puye of Liangzhou and the Xiang of Shuofang. Subsequently, the Later Liang sent envoys to Dunhuang and possibly conferred the title of the Jiedushi of Jin on Cao Yijin (Rong, 1993).

With the Later Liang dynasty replaced by the Later Tang dynasty, according to the records in *Rulers and Vassal States' Officials Departments in Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau*, Cao Yijin sent envoys again to the Later Tang and received formal recognition from the Later Tang court (Wang, 2003).

By forming a marriage alliance with the Ganzhou Uyghur and strengthening relations with the Central Plains, Cao Yijin resolved potential concerns in the context of being isolated in the vast desert and surrounded by enemies. Eventually, he was able to rule the western part of Hexi with legitimacy.

Showing Kindness to the Subordinates and Winning Hearts of the People

In the merit cave built by Cao Yijin for himself, which is also known as Cave 98 of the Mogao Grottoes, there are a total of 292 statues of donors, including 236 non-Cao-family benefactors and 200 aides and staff. It is extremely rare in Dunhuang caves to depict such a high proportion of non-family secular officials in family merit caves and give them such high praise (Ning, 2021). As is wished in P.3781 "Cao Yijin's Repair of Merit and Virtue Monument as the Jiedushi and Minister of Hexi", "The generals were loyal to the army, and the subordinate officials were fair and firmly served their masters" (Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

After years of elaborate governance by Cao Yijin, Guazhou and Shazhou finally regained their former prosperity. As for the provocation of the Ganzhou Uyghur, Cao Yijin launched an expedition eastwards at the end of the second year of Tongguang (924) or the beginning of the third year of Tongguang (925) and defeated the

Ganzhou Uyghur at one stroke (Rong, 1991). Cao forced the Ganzhou Uyghur to recognize the Gui-yi Circuit as their “father”, completely changing the humiliating father-son relationship between the Ganzhou Uyghur and the Gui-yi Circuit. In Cave 61 of the Mogao Grottoes, which was built by Cao Yuanzhong (son of Cao Yijin), there is a portrait of “My Elder Sister, The Holy Princess of Ganzhou Khagan” as a sacrifice. That is to say, Cao Yuanzhong’s sister married Ganzhou Khagan Aduoyu, thus establishing a rightful father-son relationship between Cao Yijin and the Ganzhou Uyghur (Rong, 1996). “The Khagan of the Ganzhou Uyghur personally issued a decree, willingly establishing a father-son relationship with the Gui-yi Circuit. From then on, the road to the Central Plains was unobstructed, and interaction between the two was safe and peaceful” (Rong, 1991). After solving the threat from the Ganzhou Uyghur, Guazhou and Shazhou finally achieved the ideal political vision:

All three border regions reported peace, and there were no longer concerns about war at the strategic passes; envoys from all corners of the frontier came to pay their respects, and the sight of treasures being transported along the roads was truly impressive (Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

Conclusion

Zhang Chengfeng’s rule over the Gui-yi Circuit, from restoring to proclaiming himself emperor and founding an independent administration, was a complex process. His governance strategies reflected efforts to manage internal dissent and external threats while maintaining political stability. Although the Gui-yi Circuit briefly realized the ideal of independence under his leadership, military defeats forced Zhang to accept a humiliating relationship with stronger neighboring powers. His successor, Cao Yijin, adopted a more pragmatic approach by stabilizing internal administration and repairing diplomatic ties, reestablishing the region’s relative autonomy and fostering social and economic recovery in Guazhou and Shazhou.

This study’s systematic examination of the Gui-yi Circuit administration under Zhang Chengfeng and Cao Yijin contributes to reconstructing the complex local political landscape of early 10-th century Dunhuang. It also offers valuable insights into the political, ethnic, and cultural interactions between the northwestern frontier regions and the Central Plains. Notably, the integration of Dunhuang manuscripts and cave murals in this research highlights the significant potential of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of regional history.

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