His Life, Times, and Legacy

Victor Cunrui Xiong

Emperor Yang
of the Sui Dynasty

SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture

Roger T. Ames, editor

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Weights and Measures

Length

	Sui		Tang
	pre-607	post-607	
1 *cun* 寸 =	2.951 cm	2.355 cm	3.11 cm
10 *cun* = 1 *chi* 尺	29.51 cm	23.55 cm	31.1 cm
5 *chi* = 1 *bu* 步 (Tang)			1.555 m
6 *chi* = 1 *bu* (Sui)	1.7706 m	1.413 m	
10 *chi* = 1 *zhang* 丈	2.951 m	2.355 m	3.11 m
2 *zhang* = 1 *duan*[a] 段	5.902 m	4.71 m	6.22 m
4 *zhang* = 1 *pi* 疋	11.8 m	9.42 m	12.44 m
5 *zhang* = 1 *duan* 端	14.76 m	11.78 m	15.55 m
360 *bu* = 1 *li* 里 (2160 *chi*)	0.637 km	0.509 km	
1 *li* (1800 *chi*)			0.56 km

Area

	Sui		Tang
	pre-607	post-607	
1 *mu* 畝 = 1 square *bu* × 240	752.4 m^2	479.17 m^2	580.33 m^2
100 *mu* = 1 *qing* 頃	75,240 m^2	47,917 m^2	58,033 m^2

Capacity

	Sui		Tang
	pre-607	post-607	
1 *sheng* 升 =	594.4 ml	198.1 ml	594.4 ml
10 *sheng* = 1 *dou* 斗	5.944 l	1.981 l	5.944 l
10 *dou* = 1 *shi*/*hu* 石/斛	59.44 l	19.81 l	59.44 l

Weight

	Sui		Tang
	pre-607	post-607	
1 *liang* 兩 =	41.76 g	13.92 g	37.3 g
16 *liang* = 1 *jin* 斤	668.19 g	222.73 g	596.82 g

Sources: Wu Chengluo 1937, 64–98; Liang Fangzhong 1980, 542–46.

Dynastic Powers in the Han-Tang Period

Western Han (206 BC–AD 8)
Xin (AD 9–23)
Eastern Han (AD 25–220)
Three Kingdoms (220–280)
Wei, Shu, and Wu
Six Dynasties (229–589)
Wu, Eastern Jin, Liu-Song, Qi̱, Liang, and Chen
Western Jin (265–316)
Eastern Jin (317–420)
Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589)

Southern Dynasties	**Northern Dynasties**
Liu-Song (420–479)	Northern Wei (386–534)
Qi̱ (479–502)	Eastern Wei (534–550)
Liang (502–557)	Western Wei (535–556)
Later Liang (555–587)	Northern Qi̱ (550–577)
Chen (557–589)	Northern Zhou (557–581)

Sui (581–618)	**Tujue** (552–)			**Koguryŏ** (37 BC–)	**Gaochang** (497–)	**Tuyuhun** (329–)
	Eastern		Western			
	Main	Abo branch				
				P'yŏngwŏn (559–590)	Qu Qiangu 麴乾固 (561–601)	Kualü 夸吕 (540–591)
	Tuobo (572–581)		Datou (576–603)			
Wendi (581–604)						
(Kaihuang: 581–600;	Shabolue (581–587)	Abo (581–587)				
	Mohe 莫何 (587–588)	Nili (587–603)				
	Dulan (588–599)			Yŏngyang (590–618)		Shifu 世伏 (591–597)
Renshou: 601–604)	Bujia/Datou (599–603)*					Fuyun (597–635)
	Qimin (599–611)				Qu Boya (601–613)	
Yangdi (604–618)		Chuluo (603–611)†	Duliu 都六 (603–605)			
(Daye: 605–618)	Shibi (611–619)		Shegui (605–617)		Qu ? (614–619)	
Gongdi (617–618)			Tongyehu 統葉護 (617–628)			

*Datou declared himself Bujia qaghan in 599 and supposedly extended his power over entire Tujue territory.
†In 611, Chuluo submitted himself to Yangdi.

Tang (618–907)

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Part I

From Prince to Sovereign

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Introduction

When Emperor Yang, commonly known in the sources as Yangdi 煬帝, ascended the throne of the Sui in 604, he held dominion over a vast, populous, and prosperous Chinese empire. The Sui dynasty (581–618), in which Yangdi grew up and spent his entire adult life, was a dynamic, transitional period, and one of pivotal importance. Since scholars past and present have often treated it as a prelude to its successor dynasty, the Tang (618–907), it is a very underrated period in Chinese history.

Indeed, the Sui, a comparatively ephemeral regime, seems to pale before the splendor of the Tang, the pinnacle of medieval Chinese civilization.[1] Enduring for almost three centuries, the Tang extended its political power and military might into Central Asia, the Korean Peninsula, and northern Vietnam. Considered by many as China's golden age of medieval arts and literature, the Tang is notable for its unsurpassed poetic tradition and its spectacular achievements in calligraphy, architecture, painting, and craftsmanship. Occupying a crucial position in the history of philosophy and religion, the Tang heralded the renaissance of Confucianism, and witnessed epochal developments in both Buddhism and Daoism. Symbolic of the material achievement of the Tang age, its capital Chang'an, at the center of an extensive urban network, was, at its height, the most populous and civilized metropolis on the face of the earth, and a magnet for traders, pilgrims, and students from as far as Sasanian Persia, Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan.

Nonetheless, the brilliance of the Tang civilization was essentially founded on the bedrock of the Sui legacy. The most significant Sui contributions to that dynasty were the sophisticated political, economic, legal, and military institutions. At the center of the Tang political system were the top echelon Three Departments—the Department of State Affairs with its Six Boards, the Secretariat, and the Chancellery—as well as the second-tier central government agencies of the Nine Courts. All these were adopted in toto from the Sui. The local administration of the Tang was a two-tier, prefecture-county system, which had evolved during the Sui when the first Sui sovereign, Wendi, streamlined the cumbersome three-tier system of the prior regimes. The pre-

dominant land-tenure system during the first half of the Tang was that of equal fields, which the Tang took over from the Sui with little alteration. Among extant primary sources, the *Tang Code* stands out as a milestone in Chinese legal history. Yet the Tang legal system as recorded in the *Tang Code* was modeled on its Sui predecessor. Furthermore, the organization of the military forces in the first half of the Tang was characterized by a unique garrison system, known as *fubing* 府兵 (militia), a system that had its roots in the Sui and earlier dynasties. The great metropolises of the Tang—Chang'an and Luoyang—and the great transportation network—the Grand Canal—were among the most valuable tangible assets the Sui bequeathed to posterity. Built at tremendous cost to the Sui, they contributed substantially to the flourishing of the Tang economy.[2]

Whatever sense of indebtedness the Tang may have owed its predecessor, the Sui, it is usually given (if at all) to the first Sui emperor, Wendi, to the point of completely ignoring the contributions of his successor, Yangdi. Nevertheless, as the second Sui ruler, Yangdi played a significant part in shaping the Sui legacy the Tang inherited. After being on the throne for more than thirteen years, Yangdi died a violent death at the hands of his minions in Jiangdu 江都 (Yangzhou, Jiangsu) in the third month of 618 as his mighty empire crumbled. Traditionally considered a tyrant, Yangdi was blamed for the decline of the Sui empire's fortunes and the eventual fall of the dynasty. Ascribing his incompetent rule to his debaucheries and extravagances, scholars are inclined to compare Yangdi to the most notorious sovereigns in Chinese history, such as King Jie 桀 of Xia and King Zhou[a] 紂 of Shang.[3] But unlike King Jie and King Zhou[a], Yangdi, for all his vices, can lay claim to a number of great achievements.

In spite of his enormous impact on the Sui, Yangdi has received woefully inadequate attention in terms of biographical coverage in primary literature. To be sure, biography figures very prominently in the rich tradition of Chinese historiography.[4] But the standard histories, the mainstay of that tradition, in most cases, only summarily chronicle the life of the sovereign in his *benji* 本紀 or "basic annals." As a substitute for imperial biography, the main function of the basic annals in medieval times was to provide a chronological framework for the entire period of the reign in question. Consequently, as expected, Yangdi has no proper biographical entry in the standard history for the period, *Sui shu* (History of the Sui dynasty).

Serious modern studies of Yangdi and his reign are surprisingly few. The most influential work in English on the Sui period is a book-length study by Arthur Wright of Yale, the leading Sui scholar in the West: *The Sui Dynasty: The Unification of China, A.D. 581–617*, which provides the basis for the Sui chapters in volume three of *The Cambridge History of China*. While it is a brilliant, lucid survey of Sui history, with many profound insights, it gives rela-

tively little coverage to the second emperor. Moreover, as is pointed out by its Japanese translators, Nunome and his collaborator, the book suffers from numerous factual errors and textual misinterpretations.[5]

In China, the small number of modern biographies on Yangdi reflect the diverse views of the Yangdi scholarship. Some of them join traditional scholars in chastising Yangdi as a tyrant while others endeavor to rehabilitate him. For example, the short biography by Han Guopan of Xiamen University, a leading Sui-Tang historian in China, essentially accepts the traditional condemnatory view.[6] Much of its analysis is couched in the Marxist terminology of class struggle due to the ideological limitations of the 1950s. At the other end of the spectrum is the revisionist biographical study by Hu Ji. As an apologist work, it is driven by a mission to set the record straight for the "great tyrant," rather than the need for impartial reassessment.[7] A third approach is found in the recent biography by Yuan Gang, which is aimed at the general readership, and attempts to present a more balanced view.[8]

In Japan, Yangdi, as the object of biographical research, has attracted little serious academic attention. Perhaps the best-known Japanese work on Yangdi is *Zui Yōdai* written by the leading sinologist Miyazaki Ichisada. Though intended as popular history, it contains a number of perceptive insights, especially regarding the rise of the Yang house. The lack of the academic apparatus is its main drawback, which makes further pursuit of various topics in the book difficult.[9] Another Japanese work worthy of note is the book on the Sui-Tang transition by Numome Chōfū, a top scholar of Sui-Tang China. Although its coverage of Yangdi is brief, it is more academically oriented, and offers a long-term perspective through a comparative study of Yangdi and Tang Taizong 太宗.[10]

While academic interest in Yangdi persists, a serious monographic study of Yangdi and his reign based on both primary and secondary literatures has yet to be written. This book represents an attempt to fill that lacuna. In view of the scant attention given to Yangdi as a biographical subject in modern and traditional literatures, it is essential to reconstruct his life with an aim to revealing his personality. Since Yangdi is inseparable from the Sui empire he reigned over, and vice versa, it is crucial to closely examine his impact on and interaction with the world around him—the political, economic, military, religious, and diplomatic aspects of a fascinating but poorly understood age of medieval China. Consequently, this book adopts a hybrid approach, one which focuses on the story of Yangdi as much as on the age he lived in.

In this study, I avail myself of all the modern works cited above, in addition to other secondary studies on Yangdi and in related fields in the Chinese, Japanese, and Western languages. But the main focus of my research is on early traditional sources that contain abundant primary information, notably, the *Sui shu* and the *Zizhi tongjian* (Comprehensive mirror for aid in government). As

the standard history of the Sui, the *Sui shu* constitutes the most important source for Yangdi studies. Its three component parts—the basic annals, biographies, and treatises—all contain vital information relating to Yangdi and his reign.[11] The *Sui shu* project was first proposed to the Tang court in 621 by Linghu Defen 令狐德棻, a court official who had witnessed the tumultuous Sui era of Daye and the fall of the Sui dynasty. In the following year, court historians were commissioned to compile the *Sui shu* together with the histories of five other pre-Tang dynasties, namely, the Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, Liang, Northern Qi, and Chen. In his edict on the project, Gaozu 高祖 (Li Yuan; r. 618–626) not only gives his endorsement, but also underscores the didactic function of official historiography: to "penalize the wicked and encourage the kindhearted, to learn a great deal about the past and use it as a mirror for the future."[12] This emphasis on didacticism is rooted in an age-long historiographical tradition dating back to the times of the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn annals). But within the same tradition, didacticism is balanced by another characteristic that values professional honesty. So Gaozu concludes his edict thus: "[Those assigned to write the histories] must meticulously verify their findings, make extensive references to the past sources, aim at creating the definitive work, and write with candor."[13] This latter characteristic is brought into focus by the progenitor of the standard histories, Sima Qian 司馬遷 of the Western Han, who was applauded by later historians for his courage to comment candidly and unflatteringly on the Han court.[14]

Failing to come to fruition under Gaozu, the *Sui shu* project was revived in very much the same spirit under Taizong (r. 626–649), and its basic annals and biography chapters were brought to completion under the general editorship of Wei Zheng 魏徵. Its ten treatises (*zhi* 志) in thirty *juan*, popularly known as *Wudai shi zhi* 五代史志 (Treatises of the Five Dynasties), were completed and incorporated into the *Sui shu* much later, after the death of Wei Zheng and Taizong.[15]

Since the *Sui shu* was written by a number of scholars over a long period of time, discrepancies are unavoidable. The historians' comment sections, appended to basic annals and biography chapters, often carry strong moral overtones. Their criticisms of Yangdi's deviant behavior in hyperbolic language reflect Wei's penchant to portray Yangdi in the most negative light, in order to justify his overthrow and to caution the ruling emperor Tang Taizong against following the same road. However, these critical remarks are not always congruous with the contents of the chapters themselves, which are often written with greater detachment. Of the ten treatises, those on food and money (*shihuo* 食貨), and punishment and law (*xingfa* 刑法), are generally more condemnatory of Yangdi than other treatises and the basic annals, showing the authors' bias and the editor's apparent failure to reconcile inconsistencies among chapters. The *Sui shu* is further disadvantaged by the loss of a great

part of the Sui archives and the Sui Imperial Library. Moreover, official historiography in general has its own limitations. Not only is the process of deciding what to include and what to exclude in a standard history often tainted by personal and institutional prejudices, the numerical data cited could be inaccurate. Government censuses inevitably underestimated population sizes due to large numbers of unregistered people. While figures on Sui troops tended to be closer to reality, those on foreign troops and rebel forces are less reliable.[16]

Although suffering from lack of uniformity of style and occasionally exaggerated commentary and other related blemishes, the *Sui shu*, on the whole, is regarded as one of the better written standard histories for the medieval period. The chief authors of the basic annals and biographies, Yan Shigu 顏師古 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, both top Early Tang scholars, are noted for their extraordinary erudition. In spite of imperfections, the ten treatises are especially valued for their thematic coverage of the cultural, socioeconomic, and geopolitical aspects of a long span of five dynastic periods—Liang, Chen, Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and Sui.[17]

Another standard history of interest, which contains a number of biographies of Sui personages and two Sui basic annals chapters, is the *Bei shi* (*BS*), (History of the Northern Dynasties) by Li Yanshou 李延壽, who was also involved in the writing of the ten treatises of the *Sui shu*. Relevant accounts in this work provide contexts of Sui events and can help verify *Sui shu* records. But the *Bei shi* is best used as a supplemental source, since its Sui records are often truncated versions of *Sui shu* accounts.[18]

The great annalist history, *Zizhi tongjian* (*ZZTJ*), completed under the direction of the Song scholar Sima Guang 司馬光, has extensive coverage of the Sui period. The greatest value of this monumental work lies in the fact that, although written even later than the Tang dynasty, its authors, Sima Guang et al., had access to a whole range of primary, traditional sources that are no longer extant. In spite of its didactic commentary, the *ZZTJ* is known for its attention to detail and superb scholarship, and is above all a reliable source of historical information.[19] However, since the most reliable primary source on court events—the court diary—was no longer available for the Daye 大業 period, the task Sima Guang and his associates set themselves of reconstructing Yangdi's life and reign became much more difficult and error-prone.[20] They had to resort to private or miscellaneous histories for primary information, which sometimes contained exaggerations. In view of this, I give particular attention to verifying the veracity of those spurious-looking accounts in the *ZZTJ* by comparing them to other sources.

I also quote (not infrequently) a number of other traditional sources, for example, the *Tong dian*, for information on institutions; pre-Sui standard histories, such as the *Wei shu*, *Zhou shu*, *Bei Qi shu*, *Song shu*, *Nan Qi shu*, *Liang*

shu, and *Chen shu*, for records on the period of division;[21] and Buddhist sources such as the *Fozu tongji* and *Guoqing bailu*, and Daoist sources such as the *Yunji qiqian*, for coverage of religious events and influences. Since these sources are much less significant to the present study, they will not be treated in detail here. Instead, they will be selectively discussed in terms of authorship and style, in individual chapters when the appropriate occasion arises.[22]

Other sources of primary information are archaeological finds. Due to its relatively short duration, the Sui dynasty never attracts much attention from archaeologists. Only occasionally has archaeological information become available for elucidating the socioeconomic history of the Sui dynasty. For instance, the long-term archaeological investigations of Sui-Tang Chang'an and Luoyang provide more accurate layouts of these two capital cities, with which Yangdi was closely associated. Sui and Early Tang epitaphs and other epigraphic materials, either preserved in antiquarian collections or archaeologically excavated, are often invaluable for verifying and complementing the standard histories.[23] The survey of the Sui Grand Canal conducted by Chinese scholars in the early 1980s is a worthy endeavor to explore the historic routes of that transportation network constructed under Yangdi. The economic documents discovered from Turfan and Dunhuang offer a starting point from which to reconstruct the economic life of the Sui.[24] But archaeology does have its own intrinsic limitations. So far, archaeology has not been very helpful in providing evidence of political changes during the relatively short-lived Sui dynasty. Even excavated textual information is extremely limited in its usefulness for studying the age in question. The Turfan documents, indispensable for research on the Tang local economy, offer no direct information on the Sui. Epitaphs, whether from Sui-Tang times or earlier, are similarly constructed eulogies that usually start with the genealogy of the deceased, followed by a chronological account of his bureaucratic career, and end with elegiac remarks. Useful as they are for verifying official titles, dates, and localities, they add virtually no information to the less glamorous side of the deceased. In view of this and of my emphasis on documentary research, archaeology assumes only a minor role in the current investigation.[25]

The present book is composed primarily of two parts. Following a chapter on the Yang family and the rise of Yangdi's father, Part I provides a narrative account of the life of Yangdi: from child to prince, and from heir apparent to emperor. Part II adopts a multifaceted approach to Yangdi and his reign from the perspectives of such diverse aspects as the pursuit of construction projects, the structure of the civil bureaucracy, and the military administration, as well as matters dealing with education, ritual, law, religion, economic policy, and relations with neighboring powers. The book ends with an epilogue that analyzes Yangdi's place in history and reassesses his life, times, and legacy.

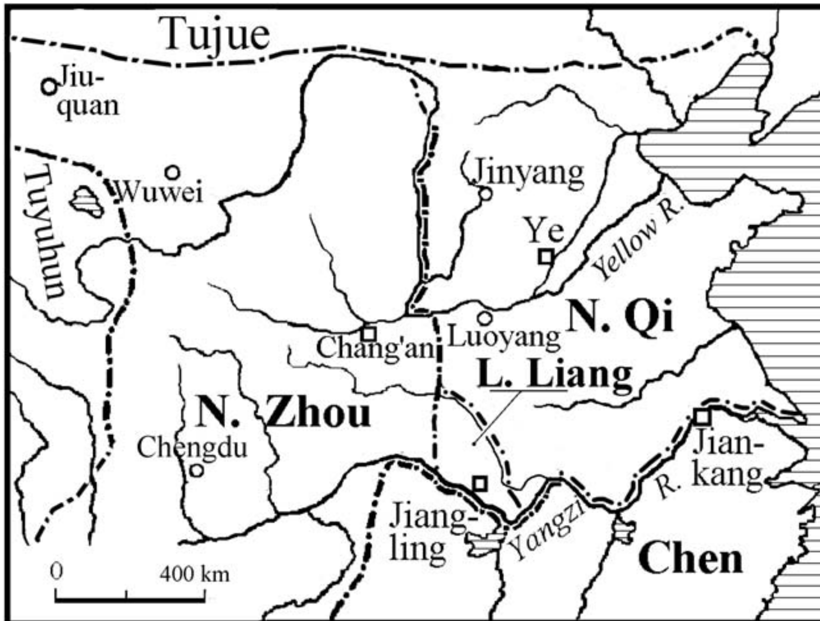
1

The Making of a Crown Prince

Yangdi, né Yang Guang 楊廣, was born in 569 into a powerful aristocratic clan of North China.[1] The sources trace its origin to Yang Zhen 楊震, a most illustrious figure of the Eastern Han, from Huayin 華陰 in Hongnong 弘農 (in Shaanxi). But information on the ancestors after Zhen is murky until the times of Yangdi's grandfather, Yang Zhong 楊忠, who, according to some accounts in the standard histories, once made his home in Wuchuan 武川 Garrison (west of Wuchuan, central Inner Mongolia). As one of the six strategic frontier outposts known as the Six Garrisons in Northern Wei times, Wuchuan is considered the crucial geographical element for the all-powerful Wuchuan clique in Western Wei times. But the traditional genealogy of the Yangs contains erroneous, perhaps fictitious information, and the Yangs' connections with Huayin and Wuchuan are challenged by some scholars. Nevertheless, what matters most is not so much the verifiability of such connections as the assumption the Yangs held of them, and the perception it created. It is in that sense that I treat Huayin as the native place of the Yangs where they located their choronym, and Wuchuan as a key geographical name Yang Zhong was identified with.[2]

Known in his youth for his poise and intelligence, Yangdi was the favorite son of the Yang family. He was endowed with a remarkable talent for literature and loved the pursuit of knowledge. He could have easily succeeded as a career official at court. But the course of events in his lifetime led him to a more important role in history.[3]

The age he lived in was one of extraordinary transformation. Following the breakup of the Han empire in the late second and early third centuries, China had been in a continual state of political fragmentation, with the



Map 1.1 China in 572

exception of a brief period of reunification under the Western Jin during 280–311. By the time of Yangdi's birth, China proper was governed by four separate political entities. Yangdi's home state, the Northern Zhou, was based in Chang'an (Xi'an, Shaanxi). To its east was the Northern Qi, based in Ye 鄴 (southwest of Linzhang, Hebei, and south of Beijing). To the south was the Chen, based in Jiankang 建康 (Nanjing). Sandwiched between was the lesser power of Later Liang 後梁, based in Jiangling 江陵 (Jingzhouqu, Hubei), a client state of the Northern Zhou with some degree of autonomy. In the vast steppes of present-day Inner and Outer Mongolia north of the Northern Zhou and the Northern Qi dwelt the Tujue (Turks), a nomadic people who often came south to raid the settled communities of North China (map 1.1). Starting in the late 570s, however, a unifying process was underway. It was Wendi, Yangdi's father, who was instrumental in setting in motion that process and brought it to completion. Having played a major role in the 577 annexation of the Northern Qi, he officially usurped imperial power to ascend the throne as the founding sovereign of the Sui dynasty in the second month of 581.[4]

Young Prince

While pursuing his dream of unification and conquest, Wendi 文帝 (Yang Jian 楊堅) appointed his sons, including Yangdi, to key administrative and military positions, and conferred upon them princely titles, in an attempt to strengthen the power base of the Yang family. As a young prince, Yangdi, under the tutelage of his appointed mentors, would come of age and gain his initial political experience.

Born into wealth and power, princes were among the most privileged members of society. Concerned that too much material comfort would hinder the development of character and competence, their fathers would deliberately resort to harsh ways to discipline them. In accord with tradition, they often required imperial princes, as part of their upbringing, to reside in principalities or places of assignment far away from the capital. This was intended to toughen them up for survival in the real world in the future, and to shore up imperial authority in the provinces. Wendi happened to be one of the most exacting sovereigns in history who strongly believed that physical discipline and austerity were preconditions for bringing up worthy offspring. Thus Yangdi, though favored by his parents because of his handsome looks and quick intellect, was posted away from the capital as early as 580. It is likely that he was at that time created commandery duke of Yanmen 雁門 thanks to his father's meritorious deeds. Many years later Yangdi still recalled the crucial moment in his life when he was about to be separated from his parents:

> The late emperor (Wendi) set me up in the west audience hall, then ordered Gao Jiong 高熲, Yu Qingze 虞慶則, Yuan Min 元旻 et al. to send Wang Zixiang 王子相 (Shao 韶) to me from the court. At that time, [Wendi] admonished me, "Since you are young and inexperienced, [I] have ordered Zixiang to mentor you. Matters big and small can all be trusted to him. [You] must not get close to mean fellows, nor must you distance yourself from Zixiang. If [you] follow my words, [you] will render a good service to your country, and establish your reputation. If you do not follow my words, [you will] ruin your dukedom (the area he was in charge of) and yourself in no time.

With these stern warnings, Wendi sent his favorite son far away to his place of assignment at the tender age of twelve (eleven). In 581, on the occasion of the founding of the Sui, Wendi upgraded his son's status to that of imperial prince, placing on his shoulders much weightier administrative posts—Bingzhou 并州 area commander and president of the Branch Department of State Affairs of Hebei Circuit. At that time, Yangdi was thirteen (twelve).[5]

Because Yangdi was still a minor, mentoring officials like Wang Shao were constantly on hand to groom and edify him. Once, when Wang was away on a mission, Yangdi created miniature ponds and set up three artificial hills in his princely residence. On his return, Wang locked himself up in chains to remonstrate with Yangdi, who was forced to immediately stop the project. To Yangdi, the kind of prohibitive surrogate parenting provided by the likes of Wang Shao could only add to the trauma of having to live away from his parents at a young age for a considerable length of time. Furthermore, the long distances that separated the princes from their parents offered no physical protection from parental furor. They still had to face severe punishment for their transgressions. Wendi deprived his third son Yang Jun 楊俊 of all his official posts as a consequence of his wasteful and indulgent behavior. When General Yang Su 楊素 tried to persuade Wendi to reconsider his decision, he answered, "I am the father of five sons. If I should follow your suggestion, then why don't we create a different set of legal codes just for the sons of the Son of Heaven?" Wendi took even harsher punitive measures against his fourth son, Yang Xiu 楊秀, for his extravagances and his violation of accepted ritual standards.[6]

From Wendi's severe treatment of Yang Jun and Yang Xiu and from other evidence we can infer that Wendi habitually enforced strict discipline among his sons. Without doubt, Yangdi, like his brothers, lived in constant fear of the imperial wrath. Apparently, Yangdi understood very well that, for the sake of self-preservation, he should suppress his desires for luxury and women. Later, the prospect of becoming heir apparent provided the added incentive to maintain his image as a dutiful, monogamous son living a simple life, an image that would prove decisive in helping him capture the throne.

The Conquest of the Later Liang

The first significant political event that took place during Yangdi's early life as an imperial prince was the conquest of the Later Liang, brought about by his father Wendi. The Jiangling area in the middle reaches of the Yangzi had been home to the semi-independent state from 555. Although the Later Liang had been subjected to varying degrees of control by the Western Wei and Northern Zhou, it maintained its autonomy. After the founding of the Sui, Wendi selected a princess of the ruling Liang sovereign, Xiao Kui 蕭巋, as Yangdi's consort. Wendi also thought of arranging a marriage between Yangdi's sister, Princess of Lanling 蘭陵, and Xiao Kui's son, Xiao Yang 蕭瑒, although it did not come to pass. The purpose of Yangdi's marriage was, among other things, to infuse Southern aristocratic blood into the Yang lineage. In the light of the intermarriage between the two families, Yangdi's mother Empress

Wenxian 文獻 urged Wendi to relax his vigilance against the Xiao clan. Consequently, Wendi abolished Jiangling Area Command.

The Later Liang began to enjoy greatly increased independence. But politically, Xiao Kui still had to maintain close ties with the Sui. His position can be understood by the treatment he received during his visit to the Sui capital Daxingcheng 大興城 in 584. At a suburban ritual in his honor, he was allowed to wear the crown of celestial connection and the gauze robe in dark purple—the typical regalia for a sovereign. But once he was inside the newly built Daxing Basilica 大興殿, the central structure of the Palace City, for an audience with Wendi, he was placed in a subordinate position, facing north. It is recorded, however, that sovereign and vassal made obeisances together. The Later Liang sovereign's position resembled that of a vassal king, who, despite his dynastic title, acknowledged the overlordship of the Sui sovereign.[7]

In 585, Xiao Kui died. As Wendi was getting closer to executing his plans of a Southern invasion against the Chen, he began to reassess the relationship with the Later Liang. The Liang constituted a key strategic area if a coordinated attack on the Chen was to be launched. Now that Kui's successor Xiao Cong 蕭琮 took power, Wendi was concerned about the Liang's loyalty. So Wendi summoned Xiao Cen 蕭岑, the uncle of the Liang sovereign, to the Sui court where he was kept hostage, while reviving Jiangling Area Command to closely monitor developments in the Later Liang. If the abolition of the area command in 582 was a gesture of goodwill to Xiao Kui, its revival in 585 signified Sui's distrust of his son, Xiao Cong.

In the eighth month of 587, at Wendi's request, Xiao Cong traveled to Daxingcheng for a visit while Wendi dispatched an army under General Cui Hongdu 崔弘度 to the Later Liang area. Wendi's blatant show of force raised fears among the Liang aristocracy, who led a population of more than one hundred thousand to escape to the Chen. Using this as a pretext, Wendi ordered his troops to occupy Jiangling. The Later Liang, a sovereign state for thirty-two years, ceased to exist. With the Liang region firmly under his control, Wendi sped up the preparation for the Southern invasion, an operation in which Yangdi was to play a decisive role.[8]

Wendi had had his sights on the Southern regime of Chen as early as 581 when he appointed two field marshals to lead a military operation against the Chen. But it did not go well. In early 582, the Chen returned Hushu 胡墅 (southwest of Luhe, Jiangsu) north of the Yangzi, a city seized from the Sui a year before, in exchange for an armistice. The death of the Chen sovereign Xuandi 宣帝 (r. 569–582) thereafter provided the Sui with an excuse to call off the whole operation. However, Wendi never gave up his hope of unification. In his 585 letter to Xiao Cong, Wendi subtly implied that, despite the appearance of a cordial relationship between Sui and Chen, their border areas

had yet to be pacified. By 587, it had become clear that the Southern invasion was now Wendi's top priority.[9]

Looking for the right man to lead the Sui expedition, Wendi turned his attention to Yangdi. In spite of his young age, Yangdi seemed to have already gained much administrative experience, having served in a number of key military and civil posts. He was appointed to his first major military position as early as the second month of 581, as Bingzhou area commander (*zongguan* 總管), while receiving the prestigious title, pillar of state (*zhuguo* 柱國), which was later upgraded to superior pillar of state (*shang zhuguo* 上柱國), the highest prestige title in the nation.

The term *zongguan* was a legacy of the Northern Zhou dynasty. It referred to a kind of local military district with some functions of a civil administration, as well as to its commanding officer. Under normal circumstances, a *zongguan* corresponded to a *zhou* 州 (prefecture) in area. However, three *zongguan* (area commands)—Luozhou 洛州 (mainly in present-day Henan), Bingzhou 并州 (in present-day Shanxi), and Yizhou 益州 (the Southwest)—functioned as super area commands; each of them took charge of dozens of area commands. In 582, Wendi replaced these super area commands with the circuit (*dao* 道), with its head office known as the Branch of the Department of State Affairs (*xingtai sheng* 行臺省), and converted Luozhou 洛州, Bingzhou, and Yizhou [Super] Area Commands into Henan 河南, Hebei 河北, and Xinan 西南 Circuits, respectively.

In 583, Wendi converted Xinan Circuit to Yizhou Area Command and abolished Henan Circuit. Prior to the annexation of the Later Liang, in 585, Jiangling 江陵 Area Command was revived. In 588, Huainan 淮南 Circuit was created with its core area in Anhui south of the Huai River. With the conquest of the South in 589, Wendi abolished Huainan Circuit, created Yangzhou 揚州 Area Command, and converted Hebei Circuit back to Bingzhou Area Command. By then, the system of the four super area commands, known also as *da zongguan* 大總管 (superior area commands) was in place. These four superior area commands—Bingzhou (North), Yizhou (Sichuan), Jiangling (later called Jingzhou 荊州) (the middle Yangzi valley), and Yangzhou 揚州 (South)—covered essentially all key areas outside the capital region in China proper. Since most of these superior area commands were placed under the control of Sui imperial princes, it seems that the rationale for setting them up was to greatly extend the Yang clan's control over the provinces while enhancing the military powers of these princes.[10]

Yangdi was the top administrator of the Bingzhou area whether as [superior] area commander of Bingzhou, or president of the Branch Department of State Affairs of Hebei 河北 Circuit (*dao*) until 586 when he officially reached maturity at eighteen (seventeen). In the tenth month of that year, he was appointed to the critical post of governor of Capital Prefecture (Yongzhou *mu*

Map 1.2 The conquest of Chen, 589

雍州牧). In 588, as the war against the Chen was imminent, he was appointed leader of the newly created Huainan Circuit, obviously to prepare for an administrative takeover of Chen territory.

Later in the same year, Yangdi was put in charge of the Southern expedition. Three men were appointed field marshals to lead the invasion—Yangdi, his younger brother Yang Jun, and the veteran general Yang Su. But Yangdi was made unambiguously the commander-in-chief of the Sui army. Now at age twenty (nineteen), he found himself in command of the largest military force ever gathered under the Sui, an army half a million strong, and the best field commanders in the country, including Han Qinhu 韓擒虎, Heruo Bi 賀若弼, Wang Shiji 王世積, and Yan Rong 燕榮 (map 1.2).[11]

The Southern Expedition

To unite China proper by conquering the rival regime south of the Yangzi was Wendi's main strategic goal. Wendi justified his action by what he believed to be his moral authority. He once said to Gao Jiong, "As the parent of the masses, how can I fail to save them just because we are separated by a narrow band of water?" Prior to the Southern advance of the Sui expeditionary forces, Wendi

issued a denunciatory edict against the Chen regime, in which he characterized the Chen sovereign as an evil ruler who committed murders, oppressed his people, forced women into court service, and squandered money on lavish palatial projects.[12]

In synchronization with his father's propaganda campaign, Yangdi issued his own denunciative document against the Chen.[13] Compared with his father's official edict, Yangdi's piece took the less formal form of a personal letter. As someone who prided himself on his literary talent and achievement, Yangdi may well have personally penned the document.

Both documents served the purpose of providing justification for the Southern invasion. Yet they were distinctly different from each other. Wendi's was a call to arms issued to his generals, in an attempt to thoroughly discredit the Chen sovereign Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 through ad hominem attacks while boosting the morale of the Sui army. Yangdi's piece was addressed to Chen generals and ranking officials, especially, Chief Minister Jiang Zong 江總, one of the most respected among them. It was thus much less personal and never mentioned Chen Shubao by name.

Intended for different audiences, these two documents showed variations in style and content. Wendi's was more down-to-earth, going little beyond a pro forma enumeration of the Chen sovereign's vices. Yangdi's, apart from denouncing the alleged crimes committed by the illegitimate sovereign, stresses the inevitability of destiny, the inauspicious portents for the Chen, and the vast strategic and military superiority of the Sui army. Overall, Yangdi not only brought into focus certain supernatural elements, but also made his arguments logically.

The fact that Yangdi was allowed to write this denunciatory document as a companion piece to that of his father seems to herald the significant role Yangdi would play in the Southern expedition, which provided him with an opportunity to gain political and military experience.

As Yangdi got closer to the center of power, inevitably he began to come into close contact with Wendi's right hand man, Gao Jiong, who became increasingly involved in both his political career and personal life. The Tang historian Du You 杜佑 regards Gao Jiong as one of the Six Sages since antiquity, whose crucial advice to their sovereigns was instrumental in helping them achieve political dominance. Gao Jiong was closely associated with the Wuchuan group, the military elite of the Western Wei which claimed among its members Yang Zhong, Wendi's father, and Dugu Xin, a man of extraordinary political prominence in sixth century China. Gao Jiong's father Gao Bin 高賓 served as a close adviser to Dugu Xin 獨孤信. Wendi married Dugu Xin's daughter (Empress Wenxian), who had close personal ties with the Gao family. At court, Wendi was on intimate terms with Jiong, addressing him as "Dugu," a name shared by his own wife and bestowed upon the Gao family

by Dugu Xin. So thanks to his familial and political connections that went back to earlier generations, Gao Jiong was never considered an outsider by Wendi. In fact, Wendi had an unconditional trust in him, placing him in charge of some of the most important tasks during his reign. On Wendi's orders, Gao Jiong headed a group of high court officials to plan and build the new capital, Daxingcheng, and Wendi acted upon his advice to weaken the Chen's defenses.[14] At the time of the Southern expedition, Wendi appointed Gao Jiong aide-de-camp to the marshal (*yuanshuai zhangshi* 元帥長史) to assist Yangdi in military matters. But key strategic planning of the three armies (i.e., the expeditionary forces) all emanated from Gao Jiong. Clearly, although Yangdi was the de jure commander of the Southern expedition, Gao Jiong was its de facto commander.

The invasion was finally launched in the first month of 589. It proceeded smoothly. Soon the Sui forces stormed into Jiankang, the Chen capital, and captured Chen Shubao, who was hiding in a well within the palace in the company of his favorite concubines. One of these was named Zhang Lihua 張麗華. Bewitchingly charming, she was believed to be the femme fatale who had led the Chen sovereign astray. Defying an order from Yangdi, Gao Jiong had her summarily executed.[15] This is not to suggest that during the Southern expedition Yangdi was merely a figurehead. While there is not much record of his direct involvement in the military operation, once in Jiankang he did appear to be the man in charge. He was a fair-minded administrator, dispensing justice and restoring order, for which he was widely praised. It was on his orders that Gao Jiong and Pei Ju 裴矩, a court official who was to become Yangdi's chief adviser on foreign policy, took over the government archives of the Chen and sealed off its treasury.

In the fourth month of 589, a triumphant Yangdi returned to Daxingcheng. Wendi traveled to Lishan 驪山 in the eastern suburb to greet him and the victorious army under his command. An elaborate ceremony was held at the Ancestral Temple in the Imperial City to present the prisoners. Yangdi was awarded one of the most prestigious titles, defender-in-chief or *taiwei* 太尉. This must have been the proudest moment in his young life of about twenty-one (twenty) years. Proving equal to the organizational and administrative tasks assigned him, Yangdi impressed the rank and file, and won the complete confidence of the emperor. Above all, the expedition of 589 marked his rise as a major political figure at court.[16]

Southern Assignment

After the Southern expedition Yangdi went back north to continue his original post in Bingzhou, while his younger brother Yang Jun was put in charge

of the newly acquired Southern territory as commander of Yangzhou Superior Area Command. But the latter choice could not have been more inappropriate. A devout Buddhist, Jun was benevolent, forgiving, and loving. He had once asked permission to become a monk. Wendi not only refused, but ordered him to assist his brother Yangdi in the Southern expedition. Jun commanded a combined army and naval force of more than one hundred thousand but he refused to attack the Chen forces for fear of killing and harming lives, regardless of General Cui Hongdu's urging. Fortunately for Jun, the enemy forces surrendered anyway. A poor commander of troops, Yang Jun turned out to be an equally disappointing peacetime administrator. Although the Sui treated the surviving court nobles and ranking officials of the former Chen well, maintaining order in their home territory was no easy task. In the eleventh month of 590, numerous rebellions broke out, led by local rebel leaders, such as Wang Wenjin 汪文進 and Gao Zhihui 高智慧. Before long, the entire former Chen territory rose in arms against the central government. The rebel armies, varying in size from several thousands to tens of thousands, savagely attacked county offices and captured county magistrates, disemboweling them and consuming their flesh. The Sui court had to send in its most decorated general, Yang Su, to suppress the rebellions. Unlike Yang Jun, who abhorred killing, Yang Su, notorious for his cruelty, was a perfect match for the rebels.[17]

After all the rebellions were put down, at the end of 590, Yang Jun was ordered to change places with his elder brother, Yangdi. No doubt the decision was based on sound reasoning. Yangdi, who had served successfully as commander-in-chief of the expeditionary army, was more likely to help consolidate central authority in the South and respond decisively to future disturbances. By now, Yangdi had not only come of age, but also had come to admire Southern culture. He must have felt quite comfortable with the new appointment.

It is highly likely that Yangdi's wife, Lady Xiao 蕭氏 (later Empress Xiao 蕭后), daughter of the Later Liang sovereign Xiao Kui, was at first the main source of his Southern influence. Lady Xiao was born in a second month into the Liang sovereign's family. According to a custom in the South, second-month newborns were bad luck, and should not be raised. So her uncle Xiao Ji 蕭岌 adopted her. Soon both her uncle and aunt died, and she was transferred into the custody of her uncle on the maternal side, Zhang Ke 張軻. While living with the Zhang family, Lady Xiao experienced abject poverty.

When Wendi decided to select a Liang princess as Yangdi's bride, Lady Xiao was the last on his mind. Divinations were conducted on all of Xiao Kui's daughters. Since Lady Xiao was the only one whose results were auspicious, she was chosen. She descended from a genteel émigré family with ancestors hailing from Lanling, in present-day Shandong in the North. In their new

home territory in the South, the Xiaos of Lanling, as they came to be known, became one of the most influential aristocratic clans. When Wendi looked for a bride for his favorite son, aristocratic pedigree, which was Lady Xiao's most valuable asset, was a major consideration. Intermarriage with the first family of Jiangling served a strategic purpose as well. It would help to bring the Later Liang further into the orbit of the Sui.

Born of a Southern aristocratic family of Han descent, Lady Xiao was a woman of gentle disposition who never tried to interfere in her husband's affairs. Later, when she became aware of her husband's immoral conduct, she wrote a critical essay not to remonstrate with him, but to admonish herself. Over the years, Yangdi appreciated the companionship of this exemplary woman of the South, who was dutiful, supportive, and self-effacing, and praised her womanly virtues and self-cultivation. Bright and learned, she was known for her love for literary composition. As a devoted Buddhist, she shared a common religious background with her spouse and his family. Her virtuousness won the respect and favors of Wendi. One of the skills she mastered was divination. Her prediction about the fall of Crown Prince Yang Yong 楊勇 prompted Wendi to discuss, with Gao Jiong, Yong's deposition. Yong would have fallen from favor had it not been for Gao's persistent opposition.[18]

Her unassuming presence notwithstanding, Yangdi's wife must have exerted a strong cultural influence at home. Yangdi himself was a master of divination and physiognomy. But professional diviners were low in the social hierarchy and divination had never been included in the curriculum prescribed for Yangdi either as a young noble of the North or an imperial prince. In all likelihood, Yangdi learned his divinatory skills from Lady Xiao, who had been in close contact with the downtrodden and the poor while growing up in the South, where a strong belief in the supernatural was common. Yangdi also conversed fluently with his wife in the Wu dialect of the South. For a Northerner, a high level of competence in this dialect was no mean feat: It required years of early exposure. Yangdi probably picked it up at an early age from Lady Xiao, whose grandfather Xiao Cha 蕭詧 grew up at the court of Liang Wudi 梁武帝 in Jiankang, a Wu dialect area, before setting up his own court in Jiangling.

However much Yangdi may have been indebted to the popular culture of the South, it was Southern high culture, particularly its literature, that held the greatest attraction for him. The North and the South had followed quite different courses of development in literature since the Luoyang débâcle of the early fourth century. The Northern émigrés like the Xiaos of Lanling had brought their literary and artistic traditions south with them and laid the groundwork for the flowering of Southern literati culture, which reached a much higher level of sophistication than the North. Yangdi showed great admiration for the Southern literary tradition. His poetic style testifies to a

strong influence of the palace style (*gongti* 宮體) of the Liang, which was dominant in Southern poetry. While it is not certain where Yangdi learned his Southern style, the long years he spent with Lady Xiao predisposed him to favor the Southern tradition. Lady Xiao's great-grandfather was the literary giant Xiao Tong 蕭統, the compiler of the authoritative literary collection *Wenxuan* 文選, whose brother Liang Jianwendi 梁簡文帝 (Xiang Gang 蕭綱, r. 549–551) was the progenitor of palace style poetry. Lady Xiao showed herself to be a worthy inheritor of the rich Southern literary tradition through her "Rhapsody on My Wishes" ("Shu zhi fu" 述志賦), the only piece of her writing that has survived.[19]

During his decade-long residence in the South as the highest military commander and civil administrator from the North, Yangdi's affection for the South only grew stronger. He apparently came to admire the architectural style of the Liang and Chen, and would adopt it in his luxuriously built new city Luoyang. Years later, when the courtiers Dou Wei 竇威 and Cui Zujun 崔祖濬 (Ze) unwittingly used disparaging expressions to describe the people of the South in their works commissioned by the court, Yangdi passionately defended Southern culture, calling the South the "famous metropolis under Heaven" where were gathered "learned erudites and accomplished Confucians" with unrivaled scholarship. Yangdi gave vent to his indignation by ordering a good flogging for both Dou and Cui. Eventually, the South became a determining factor in a number of crucial decisions he made after his accession: the building of the second capital; the completion of the Grand Canal; and the shifting of the center of his activity from the North to Jiangdu in the last years of his reign. But, despite his attachment to the South, Yangdi was destined to return to the capital in the North, where the stage was set for a succession battle.[20]

The Koguryŏ Interlude

It is not known for sure when Yangdi began to covet the post of crown prince. But a key military event—Wendi's campaign against Koguryŏ in the Northeast—greatly improved his odds for appointment to that post. The main obstacle to the appointment, Gao Jiong, was to fall in the aftermath of the campaign.

Sui-Koguryŏ relations had been deteriorating after the 589 Sui conquest of the Chen. Fearing that a similar fate might befall him, King P'yŏngwŏn 平原 of Koguryŏ (r. 559–590) started to strengthen his country's defense and build up grain reserves. Thereupon, Wendi sent him an intimidating letter to express his displeasure, in which Wendi criticized Koguryŏ for expelling the

Mohe and encircling the Qidan 契丹 (Khitans), another nomadic people west of Koguryŏ with customs similar to those of the Mohe. The relations among these powers were marked by frequently shifting alliances, and at times all had tributary ties with the Sui court. Recent events, however, indicate that Koguryŏ was becoming a dominant power in Manchuria. Before Wendi took any military action, P'yŏngwŏn died, and his son Yŏngyang 嬰陽 (Won 元) (r. 590–618) succeeded him. Through his envoy, Wendi conferred on Yŏngyang the hereditary title of commandery duke of Liaodong 遼東郡公, and at Yŏngyang's request Wendi appointed him king of Koguryŏ. But Yŏngyang was already the de facto sovereign of Koguryŏ even without Wendi's endorsement. By requesting a Sui investiture, Yŏngyang apparently intended to construct a harmonious relationship with the Sui. However, despite his professed desire for peace, in 598, Yŏngyang led an army of warriors from Mohe 靺鞨 (Malgal), a nomadic power north of Koguryŏ, to raid Liaoxi 遼西 (in southern Manchuria), which was within the boundaries of the Sui. What Yŏngyang hoped to gain in encroaching upon Sui territory is not clear, but his aggressive action triggered a violent response from Wendi, who not only invalidated Yŏngyang's official titles, but also threatened military action. Probably, because of its refusal to accept the major political change in East Asia politics—the Sui conquest of Chen—Koguryŏ had to face the military might of a united Chinese power.[21]

With almost unanimous support at court Wendi launched the Liaodong 遼東 campaign with a two-pronged attack on Koguryŏ in the sixth month of 598. A ground and naval force of three hundred thousand was mobilized under the command of Prince of Han 漢王 Yang Liang 楊諒 and Gao Jiong. Ironically, Gao Jiong had been the main opponent of the operation.

The movement of the Sui land forces was hampered by inadequate food supplies and widespread disease. The naval forces under the ex-Chen general Zhou Luohou 周羅睺 suffered crippling losses in heavy storms while attempting to cross the Yellow Sea from the Shandong Peninsula to invade Pyongyang. Between its departure in the sixth month and its humiliating retreat in the ninth, the Sui expeditionary army lost 80–90 percent of its men. The failure of the campaign must have left an indelible mark on the mind of Yangdi. A decade later, it would provide him with a key rationale for starting his own campaign of conquest against Koguryŏ.[22]

Meanwhile, the campaign, in conjunction with other developments, sowed the seeds of dissension between Yang Liang and Gao Jiong. This led to an unexpected outcome: the downfall of Gao Jiong himself. The irony is that although the Yang Liang-Gao Jiong conflict resulted in the latter's removal and paved the way for Yangdi's rise, Yang Liang himself later became Yangdi's most dangerous enemy.

The Succession Controversy

Until the tenth month of 600, Yang Yong stood directly in the way of Yangdi's career path. The rivalry between these Yang brothers evolved into a life and death struggle that over time led to Yong's downfall. But the undoing of Yong was a long and complex process that resulted from the interplay of a number of factors: Yangdi's cunning maneuvering; Empress Wenxian's petty jealousy; General Yang Su's denigration; Wendi's paranoiac suspicion; and Yang Yong's own recklessness.

Wendi's decision to select Yang Yong as crown prince was based on careful considerations. Like his younger brother Yangdi, Yang Yong was known for his love of learning. Moreover, he was generous, benevolent, simple, and honest. Wendi began to groom him for the position very early. As soon as Wendi assumed regency over the Northern Zhou sovereign, he assigned Yang Yong to govern the former Northern Qi area. After the founding of the Sui, Wendi intentionally allowed him to get involved in major decisions on political and military affairs of the state. When Yang Yong offered his critical suggestions, Wendi always listened carefully and often acted upon them. The blood bond that existed between Yong and his brothers—all of whom were born by the same mother—seemed to prevent the brothers from challenging his position. The same bond would oblige Yong to treat his brothers decently after their parents were gone.[23]

But Wendi's trust in the crown prince began to erode. It started with a minor event that roused Wendi's suspicion. At the time of a winter solstice, court officials had an audience (*chao* 朝) with the crown prince. For Wendi, *chao* was an exclusive term reserved for the sovereign. In the case of the crown prince, the proper term should have been *he* 賀 (to congratulate). What Yang Yong had done was a breach of the ritual code and a transgression against imperial authority. In a separate event, Wendi ordered a select number of officers of the Guards of the Crown Prince's Residence (*zongwei* 宗衛) to be transferred to the Palace City, and Gao Jiong, whose son was married to Yang Yong's daughter, responded by expressing concern that the security of the Eastern Palace, the crown prince's residence, might be compromised. Wendi was furious because he regarded the Eastern Palace as a competing center of power that potentially posed a threat to the Palace City, his own residence.

The process of Yang Yong's downfall accelerated when he fell out of favor with his mother, Empress Wenxian. Of Northern non-Han extraction, she was strong-willed, meddlesome, and domineering. As befitted her role as the family matron, she had arranged the marriage between Yang Yong and Lady Yuan 元氏. But, much to the chagrin of the jealous empress, Yang Yong kept a large number of concubines, and was particularly infatuated with one of them, Lady Yun 雲氏. After Lady Yuan's death, Yun began to take her place, a practice

not only frowned upon in Northern culture but abhorred by Empress Wenxian, because of a deep-rooted prejudice against concubines in Northern society.[24]

Meanwhile Yangdi became aware of the rift between his mother and the crown prince, and it whetted his desire to replace his older brother. To win over his parents, Yangdi carefully cultivated his image as a monogamous husband. He allowed a few concubines in his entourage, but only cohabited with Lady Xiao. All the children he fathered by his concubines were given away. He would show up with simply dressed servants at court in carriages drawn by plainly harnessed horses. When he intimated to his mother that he had inadvertently incurred the wrath of the crown prince, he won her sympathy.

Yangdi's exemplary behavior, his deference and obedience to the empress, and the fear that the crown prince's brothers would be in harm's way after the empress died—all this provided the rationale Empress Wenxian needed to replace the crown prince. Yangdi, meanwhile, with the help of his underling Yuwen Shu, secured the crucial assistance of General Yang Su, whose opinion carried much weight with the emperor.[25]

Like Wendi, Yang Su was from a Huayin choronym. Despite his many literary accomplishments, Yang Su was best known as a soldier. His rise to fame began during the Northern Zhou campaign against the Northern Qi in 577. Now as vice president of the right of the Department of State Affairs, Yang Su was sharing power with the most influential figure at court, Gao Jiong, vice president of the left of the same department. For the tripartite alliance of Wenxian, Yangdi, and Yang Su to succeed, Gao Jiong, Yang Yong's perennial protector at court, had to be removed first. But the task was difficult if not impossible, so long as Wendi continued to trust him. Previously, officials attempting to malign Gao had incurred Wendi's wrath and lost their own positions. The opportunity came when Gao Jiong's wife died. At Empress Wenxian's urging, Wendi offered to find Gao Jiong another wife. Gao Jiong politely turned him down, citing his advanced age and devotion to Buddhism as two main reasons not to remarry. Soon, Gao Jiong's favorite concubine gave birth to a boy. Wendi became displeased with Gao when Empress Wenxian reminded him that by declining the imperial recommendation for a wife while keeping in semisecret his own concubine, Gao had deceived the emperor.

Then came the ill-fated Liaodong campaign of 598, in which Gao time and again overruled Yang Liang's suggestions. When the empress heard Yang Liang's grievances, she disclosed them to the emperor. In the process, Wendi went through a perception change regarding his most trusted minister. Now he became increasingly wary of the prospect of a Gao Jiong-Yang Yong alliance. Convinced of his criminal intent, Wendi punished Gao by stripping him of all his official positions. Later as more evidence of Gao's conspiracy was discovered, he was disenrolled and reduced to commoner status.[26]