

The Death of a Language? The Xianbei Language after Emperor Xiaowen's Ban

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that despite Emperor Xiaowen's ban on speaking the Xianbei language, many non-Chinese and some Chinese people continued to use the language during the Northern Wei period in Luoyang. Xiaowen's policy had two key loopholes: first, the prohibition was applied only within the court, *chaoting* 朝廷 in Chinese, and second, the ban on the Xianbei language was limited to officials under the age of thirty. In other words, the ban was specifically defined as a prohibition on using non-Chinese languages in court or government by Xianbei officials under the age of thirty. As a result, the ban had a limited scope, meaning that a significant portion of Xianbei people could still speak their native language in practice. Many Xianbei people, including Emperor Xiaoming, the grandson of Emperor Xiaowen, as well as some Chinese officials, spoke Xianbei and other languages of nomads. This indicates that Emperor Xiaowen's ban on speaking the Xianbei language was unsuccessful in achieving its goal.

Keywords

Emperor Xiaowen's ban on speaking the Xianbei language, Emperor Xiaowen's campaign against the Southern Qi, Emperor Xiaowen, Emperor Xiaoming, The Xianbei Language

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Introduction

Chinese researchers have argued that the Xianbei people must have been Sinicized following Emperor Xiaowen's (孝文帝) series of so-called Sinicization policies implemented in the latter half of the Northern Wei dynasty. The theory of Sinicization, which posits the assimilation of the Xianbei people into Chinese culture, has circulated widely among Chinese historians. Specifically, it has been argued that the Xianbei people were assimilated and began speaking Chinese following Emperor Xiaowen's edict prohibiting the use of *huyu* 胡語, or the Xianbei language.¹ Some scholars, however, have opposed this Sinicization theory. For ex-

¹ It is not certain exactly what language the Northern Wei rulers spoke due to the shortage of historical and linguistic sources. Peter A. Boodberg argued that Tuoba 拓跋 rulers must have spoken Turkish. For details, see Peter A. Boodberg, "The Language of the T'o-Pa Wei," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1-2 (1936): 170, 167-85. On the contrary, some researchers regarded the Xianbei language as Mongolic or proto-Mongolic. For instance, Shiratori Kurakichi 白鳥庫吉, "Tōko minzoku kō" 東胡民族考, *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 24 (1913): 17-45; Zhu Xueyuan 朱學淵, "Xianbei minzu ji qi yuyan (shang)" 鮮卑民族及其語言 (上), *Manyu yanjiu* 滿語研究 30 (2000); Wuqilatu 烏其拉圖, "Nanqishu zhong bufen Tuoba Xianbeiyu mingci de fuyuan kaoshi" 南齊書中部分拓跋鮮卑語名詞的復原考釋, *Neimenggu shehui kexue (hanwenban)* 內蒙古社會科學 (漢文版) 23-6 (2002); Luo Xin 羅新, *Zhonggu beizu minghao yanjiu* 中古北族名號研究 (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2009).

ample, the Japanese researcher Akimine Koga argued that Emperor Xiaoming (孝明帝)—the grandson of Emperor Xiaowen—as well as officials, guards, eunuchs, and court ladies in the imperial palace in Luoyang—the capital of the Northern Wei dynasty—continued to speak Xianbei. According to Koga, the Xianbei language remained the official language at least within the imperial palace.² Some Chinese scholars acknowledged that Emperor Xiaowen’s edict prohibiting the use of the Xianbei language was not effectively implemented due to the emperor’s death just four years later and the loopholes in the regulation, which allowed Xianbei individuals over the age of thirty to continue speaking their native language. As a result, both the Xianbei and Chinese languages were spoken concurrently in Luoyang.³ Hanje Park, a Korean historian, also argued that there were bilingual Xianbei speakers in Luoyang.⁴

This article argues that two exception clauses in Emperor Xiaowen’s edict prohibiting speaking the Xianbei language allowed the Xianbei people to continue to use their mother tongue freely. Consequently, Xianbei and Chinese civil officials both spoke the Xianbei language in Luoyang and the northern frontier regions of the Northern Wei. This research also demonstrates that many Xianbei and a few Chinese people continued to speak the Xianbei language even after Emperor Xiaowen’s ban. Some Chinese historians, who champion the theory of Sinicization of the Xianbei people, would disagree with the arguments of this article. Yet, some researchers outside the Chinese academia, whom I met at academic conferences, agreed with my perspective. Encouraged by their agreement, I hope this paper could contribute to a productive debate on the actual enforcement of Emperor Xiaowen’s ban and the process of Xianbei’s Sinicization.

² Koga Akimine 古賀昭岑, “Hokugi no buzoku kaisan ni tsuite” 北魏の部族解散について, *Tōhōgaku* 東方學 59 (1980): 64-65.

³ Zhu Dawei 朱大渭 et al. eds., *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shehui shenghuoshi* 魏晉南北朝社會生活史 (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998), 550.

⁴ Park Hanje 박한제, “Dongwi-Bukje sidae-ui hohancheje-ui jeongae: Hohangal deung-gwa ijung gujo” 東魏-北齊時代の胡漢體制的 전개: 胡漢 葛藤과 二重構造, in *Bunyeol-gwa tonghap: Jungguk jungse-ui jesang* 分裂과 統合: 中國 中世의 諸相, edited by Seoul daehakgyo dongyangsahak yeongsul 서울大學校 東洋史學研究室 (Jisik sancopsa, 1998), 140.

Analysis of the Ban on Speaking the Xianbei Language

There are two historical records regarding the ban on speaking the Xianbei language. One is Emperor Xiaowen's prohibition edict issued on July 9, 495, and the other is the biography of Prince of Xianyang (咸陽王) in *Weishu* 魏書, the official dynastic history of the Northern Wei.

A. You must not speak the northerners' language in the court (朝廷). *I will dismiss all the officials who violate the edict prohibiting the use of the Xianbei language.*⁵ (emphasis added by the author)

B. Gaozu (the temple name of Emperor Xiaowen) said to courtiers, "How can we practice *li* (禮, meaning ritual propriety) without *zhengming* (正名, rectification of names) according to the ancient traditions and all the Chinese classics? I must prohibit my subjects from speaking the language of northern people and ensure that Xianbei people speak *zhengyin* (正音, righteous sound). Xianbei individuals over the age of thirty will not be required to change the language they speak. Thus, they do not need to be forced to speak Chinese. However, officials under the age of thirty *in the court* (朝廷) will not be permitted to speak the Xianbei language. If they violate the ban and speak Xianbei, they will be dismissed, and their rank and titles will be revoked."⁶

In passage A, "the northerners' language" refers to the Xianbei language, which was presumably similar to the ancient Mongolian or Turkic language. During the period of the Sixteen States and the Northern Wei dynasty, non-Chinese rulers instructed their Chinese subjects not to use the terms *hu* (胡, meaning barbarians) and *Xianbei*. Instead, the Chinese were to utilize such terms as *beiren* (北人, northerners) and *beiyu* (北語, northern languages) in official documents when referring to the Xianbei

⁵ *Weishu* 魏書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1974; hereafter *WS*), 7 xia/177.

⁶ *WS*, 21 shang/536.

people and their language.⁷

Passage B is a record of a conversation between Emperor Xiaowen and several high-ranking officials, including Yuan Xi 元禧—Prince of Xianyang—and Li Chong 李冲. According to this passage, the emperor permitted Xianbei individuals over the age of thirty to continue speaking the Xianbei language, ordering that only Xianbei individuals under thirty years old must speak Chinese.⁸ Changru Tang, a renowned Chinese scholar specializing in the history of the Wei, Jin, and Nanbeichao periods, commented: “Individuals over the age of thirty were not required to switch their language to Chinese and were not punished for defying the ban. Yet, Xianbei individuals under thirty who did not transition from speaking Xianbei to Chinese would face demotion in their official titles and ranks.”⁹ Other Chinese historians concur with Tang’s view.¹⁰

As detailed in the quoted passages, Emperor Xiaowen’s edict prohibited speaking the Xianbei language. However, there were several loopholes in the decree. First, the prohibition was effective only inside the court (朝廷), meaning that only officials who spoke Xianbei within the court would be punished and dismissed.

Moreover, the Chinese term *chaoting* 朝廷 means an imperial court, while the word *chaotang* 朝堂 refers to a central government in medieval Chinese contexts. Sun Tongxun, a Taiwanese historian, and Kenichi Matsushita argued that the Chinese term *chaotang* should be construed as a specific government building within the court. According to their interpretation, Xiaowen’s ban meant that Xianbei officials were prohibited from speaking Xianbei only within a particular building of the central

⁷ Kawamoto Yoshiaki 川本芳昭, “Hokugi ni okeru mibunsei ni tsuite” 北魏における身分制について, in *Gishin ‘nanbokuchō jidai no minzoku mondai* 魏晋南北朝時代の民族問題 (Kumiko shoin, 1998), 345-52.

⁸ Choi Jin Yeoul 최진열, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo geumji jaeron” 北魏後期 胡語 금지 再論, *Yeoksa-wa gyooyuk* 역사와 교육 19 (2014): 209.

⁹ Tang Changru 唐長孺, “Tuobazu de hanhua guocheng” 拓跋族的漢化過程, in *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi luncong xubian* 魏晋南北朝史論叢續編 (Sanlian shudian, 1959), 145.

¹⁰ Zhu et al. eds., *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shehui shenghuoshi*, 550.

government.¹¹ According to a map that shows locations of court buildings in Luoyang,¹² the *chaotang* was located in a building of the Department of State Affairs (尚書省) and was to the southeast of *Taiji Dian* 太極殿, where Northern Wei emperors held audiences.¹³ Thus, Emperor Xiaowen's ban effectively meant that most Xianbei and a few Chinese officials could still speak the Xianbei language, given that the prohibition of the Xianbei language was applied only within a specific building, likely within that of the Department of State Affairs. As a result, the ban had a limited impact on the use of the Xianbei language among the Xianbei people.¹⁴

If the term *chaotang* refers to the central government in general, then the ban would mean that officials working in the court and government buildings in Luoyang were prohibited from speaking the Xianbei language. In any case, many Xianbei individuals who did not attend the court could continue to speak their native language in Luoyang and other regions within the Northern Wei territory. Only a few Xianbei officials were required to speak Chinese in one or several government buildings in Luoyang.

Second, according to passage B, Xianbei officials over the age of thirty were permitted to speak the Xianbei language while working in the court or government buildings in Luoyang. Many Chinese scholars argued that Xianbei officials over the age of thirty must have been required to speak Chinese, despite the exception clause allowing them to use the Xianbei language.¹⁵ Yet, the Xianbei and Chinese languages differed sig-

¹¹ Sun Tongxun 孫同勳, *Tuobashi de hanhua ji qita* 拓跋氏的漢化及其他 (Daoxiang chubanshe, 2006), 125-26.

¹² Sagawa Eiji 佐川英治, "Kan Gi Rakuyōjō" 漢魏洛陽城, in *Kan Gi Shin Nanbokuchō tojō fukugenzu no kenkyū* 漢魏晉南北朝都城復元圖の研究 (Heisei 22-Heisei 25 nendo kagaku kenkyūhi hojokin kibān kenkyū (B) kenkyū seika hōkokusho 平成22~平成25年度科學研究費補助金基盤研究(B)研究成果報告書), edited by Sagawa Eiji et al. (2014), 69.

¹³ Qian Guoxiang 錢國祥, "Wei Jin Luoyang ducheng dui Dongjin Nanchao de yingxiang" 魏晉洛陽都城對東晉南朝的影響, *Kaoguxue jigān* 考古學集刊 18 (2010): 394; Sagawa, "Kan Gi Rakuyōjō," 69.

¹⁴ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo geumji jaeron," 202-3.

¹⁵ For example, see Ma Xiaoli 馬曉麗, Cui Mingde 崔明德, "Dui Tuoba Xianbei ji Beichao hanhua

nificantly in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, making it difficult for Xianbei individuals to learn and speak Chinese. Therefore, if Xianbei officials over the age of thirty were not forced to learn and speak Chinese, then there was no reason for them to do so.

Third, penalties for violating the ban were dismissal or demotion in rank, rather than imprisonment, banishment, or the death penalty. In other words, the punishment was relatively light, and thus Xianbei individuals—especially officials over the age of thirty or commoners without official titles—would not have been overly concerned about speaking their native language despite the ban. Also, the government had limited means to enforce the ban, as the penalties were applied only to officials, not the majority of Xianbei commoners without official titles.

To sum up, Emperor Xiaowen's prohibition on speaking the Xianbei language was specifically applied and limited to Xianbei officials under the age of thirty serving in the court (*chaoting*), namely in one or several government buildings in Luoyang. The Xianbei individuals who had to adhere to Xiaowen's ban included officials within the nine-rank official system, known as *pin'guan* 品官 or *liuneiguan* 流內官, court ladies or female officials with government posts,¹⁶ eunuchs, royal guards in the palace, and soldiers in the capital city.¹⁷ In other words, the phrase “ban on the speaking of non-Chinese languages at court by officials under the age of thirty”¹⁸ accurately reflects the scope of the prohibition. Thus, the Xianbei officials were permitted to speak Xianbei in their homes and other private places outside the official buildings where they worked.¹⁹ As opposed to the myth of the Sinicization of the Xianbei, Emperor Xiaow-

 wenti de zongti kaocha” 對拓跋鮮卑及北朝漢化問題的總體考察, *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 中國邊疆史地研究 22-1 (2012): 9, 14.

¹⁶ During the Northern Wei period, women of the ruling class were appointed to various government positions, such as female palace attendants. Court ladies were also appointed to official posts with the nine ranks (九品).

¹⁷ Choi Jin Yeoul, “Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeconsang-gwa geu baekyeong” 北魏後期 胡語 사용 현상과 그 배경, *Jungguk gojungsesa yeongu* 中國古中世史研究 23 (2010): 199.

¹⁸ David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (Routledge, 2001), 98.

¹⁹ Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho'eo geumji jaeron,” 204.

en's ban did not pursue a complete prohibition of the Xianbei language among the Xianbei people. The following section will provide examples of Xianbei individuals speaking the Xianbei language.

Cases of Speaking the Xianbei Language after Emperor Xiaowen's Prohibition Edict

1. Cases of Xianbei and a few Chinese People

Advocates of the Sinicization theory might argue that Emperor Xiaowen's ban was effective, and thus all the Xianbei people must have spoken Chinese without considering the existence of the two loopholes. To rebut the Sinicization theory, this section will provide examples of Xianbei individuals and Chinese officials speaking the Xianbei language.

The first example is Yu Jin 于謹 (493-568), who was likely born in Luoyang and later became a distinguished member of the Eight Generals of State Pillar (八柱國) families during the Western Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties.²⁰ His family, known as the Wuniuyu 勿忸于 clan, was a prominent meritorious lineage that contributed to the foundation of the Northern Wei dynasty, ranking among the top class only second to the imperial house. He became a staff member of the Prince of Guangyang (廣陽王) and participated in the campaign to suppress the Six Garrisons Rebellion. He was skilled in speaking many non-Chinese languages, and thus he was able to go to the rebel military camp and persuade them in the Xianbei or other non-Chinese languages.²¹ The languages Yu Jin could speak included Xianbei and other languages that nomads such as Xianbei, Xiongnu, and Gaoche 高車 spoke, and these were most likely proto-Mongolic or proto-Turkic languages. If Emperor Xiaowen's ban on speaking the Xianbei language had been fully enforced since 495 when Yu Jin was barely three years old, Yu would not have been able to learn

²⁰ *Zhoushu* 周書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1971; hereafter ZS), 15/234.

²¹ ZS, 15/244.

and speak the non-Chinese languages. Yet, he was fluent in several non-Chinese languages, including Xianbei. His grandfather and father were local officials and likely served in central government offices as well. Thus, while they were required to speak Chinese in public, they spoke their native language, not Chinese, at home and in private settings; hence, their son or grandson spoke Xianbei fluently.²² Yu Jin likely spent his childhood and youth speaking his native language, surrounded by Xianbei speakers. Despite this, he also learned and studied the Five Classics (五經), Chinese historical texts, and *Sunzi Bingfa* 孫子兵法, becoming fluent in Chinese and proficient in reading Chinese literature. This demonstrates his multilingual abilities.²³

The second example is Yuan Wenyao 元文遙, who served as an official in the periods of the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, and Northern Qi dynasties. He sent administrative and military orders of Gao Yang 高洋—the first emperor of the Northern Qi dynasty—to officials after hearing Gao Yang's Xianbei speech.²⁴ Thus, Yuan Wenyao was presumably able to speak the Xianbei language.²⁵ His birth and death dates are unknown, but according to records, he resigned from his official post and retreated to Mount Linlü (林慮山) after an uprising.²⁶ This uprising likely occurred during the internal disturbance between 524 and 528 following the Six Garrisons Rebellion. As a member of the Northern Wei imperial family, he probably began working in government offices at around the age of twenty, which suggests he was born in around 500. Thus, he would have

²² According to the biography of Yu Jin in *Zhoushu*, Yu Jin's ancestors—from his great-grandfather down to his father—were appointed as governors of Huaihuang 懷荒, Gaoliang 高涼, Gaoping 高平, and Longxi 隴西, where the Xianbei, Gaoche, Di 氐, and Qiang 羌 peoples lived. This shows that the Yu family were appointed as governors of the regions where the Xianbei people lived speaking the Xianbei language. Therefore, Yu Jin could easily learn the Xianbei language from his family.

²³ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu backyeong," 210-11.

²⁴ *Beiqishu* 北齊書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1972; hereafter *BQS*), 38/503.

²⁵ Zheng Qinren 鄭欽仁, "Yiren yu guanliao jigou" 驛人與官僚機構, in *Beiwei guanliao jigou yanjiu xupian* 北魏官僚機構研究續篇 (Daohe chubanshe, 1995), 236.

²⁶ *BQS*, 38/503.

spent his childhood and youth after Emperor Xiaowen's ban in 495. Yuan Wenyao's case indicates that the Xianbei elite was likely to continue to speak Xianbei with their families, relatives, friends, and neighbors even after Emperor Xiaowen prohibited the language.²⁷

Changsun Jian 長孫儉 was also born in Luoyang, and his family was one of the ten branches of the imperial clan (帝室十姓) of the Northern Wei dynasty. He was appointed as Extra Gentleman of Cavalier Attendant (員外散騎侍郎), a lower-ranking official of the Department of Court Advisers (集書省), holding the seventh official rank. He participated in suppressing the rebellion in the Guanlong 關隴 region under the command of Erzhu Tianguang 尔朱天光 and later became an aide to Yuwen Tai 宇文泰, the founder of the Western Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties, serving as his adviser.²⁸ He spoke the Xianbei language,²⁹ which he likely learned in Luoyang. He communicated with his family, relatives, friends, and neighbors in his native language, just as Yu Jin and Yuan Wenyao did. He used his native language, even when he met an envoy from the Liang dynasty (梁) in South China. When Changsun Jian served as a prefect in the Western Wei dynasty, he received an envoy from the Liang. On this occasion, he made his subordinate interpret his Xianbei words into Chinese for the Chinese emissary.³⁰ This example indicates that he was not proficient in Chinese but fluent in Xianbei. Furthermore, many other Xianbei officials working in government buildings in Luoyang continued to speak their native language even after Emperor Xiaowen's ban in 495.³¹

In summary, the families of Yu Jin, Yuan Wenyao, and Changsun Jian were Xianbei elites whose ancestors moved from Pingcheng 平城—the former capital of the Northern Wei dynasty—to Luoyang—the new

²⁷ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong," 211-12.

²⁸ ZS, 26/427.

²⁹ ZS, 26/428.

³⁰ ZS, 26/428.

³¹ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong," 212-13.

capital. Their families had served as officials in the Luoyang government for generations. The Yuan family was part of the imperial clan of the Northern Wei dynasty, while the Changsun family was one of the ten branches of the imperial clan. The Yu clan was also one of the eight first-ranking non-imperial Xianbei clans, known as *Xunchen Baxing* 勳臣八姓. They spoke Xianbei fluently, indicating that they and their families never forgot their native language and continued to use it at home and in private situations, despite Emperor Xiaowen's ban.³²

In addition to high-ranking Xianbei elites, Chinese officials were also proficient in the Xianbei language and spoke it fluently. This was especially true for those born in Luoyang and its surrounding areas, including the regions along the Yellow River. For example, Meng Wei 孟威, an ethnic Chinese, was born and lived in Luoyang in the Governor District of Henan (河南尹).³³ According to *Weishu*, he was accustomed to the manners and customs of non-Chinese people and was proficient in the Xianbei language. He was sent to the Gaoche people living in the four garrison towns (四鎮高車) to persuade them not to betray the Northern Wei and submit to the Rouran 柔然, the nomadic empire on the Mongolian Plateau during the fourth to sixth centuries.³⁴ When Anagui 阿那瓌 Qaghan of the Rouran Empire sought refuge in the Northern Wei after being defeated in a succession conflict with his brothers in 520, Meng Wei was sent to the northern frontier region to escort the Qaghan to Luoyang. When Anagui returned to his homeland, Meng also escorted the Qaghan and his subjects. Also, his command of the Xianbei language allowed him to effectively manage and control the Xianbei, Gaoche, and Chinese-speaking populations as the garrison commander at the Woye Frontier Town (沃野鎮). He was a notable example of a few multilingual Chinese officials who learned and spoke non-Chinese languages such as Xianbei, Gaoche, and Rouran. His skills highlighted the administrative

³² Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu backyeong," 213.

³³ *WS*, 44/1005. The Governor District of Henan is the name of the administrative unit in and around Luoyang, the capital city of the Northern Wei dynasty.

³⁴ *WS*, 44/1005-6.

demand for multilingual abilities to manage non-Chinese subjects within the realm and to handle diplomatic affairs.

Sun Qian 孫纂 was also fluent in Xianbei. Born in Le'an District (樂安郡) in Qingzhou 青州, he was appointed as Additional Censor (檢校御史)—an aide in the Directorate of Education (國子助教)—and an official in charge of writing history (修國史) between 522 and 523.³⁵ These roles primarily involved dealing with Chinese characters, so learning and speaking Xianbei was not necessarily required. Surprisingly, he worked as one of the secretaries and later became a favored retainer of Gao Huan 高歡, the supreme power of the Eastern Wei and the de facto founder of the Northern Qi dynasty. Gao Huan was an ethnic Chinese who spoke the Xianbei language. Sun Qian effectively communicated Gao Huan's orders and messages to Gao's subordinates,³⁶ demonstrating his proficiency in the Xianbei language. Given his age and ability to learn the Xianbei language, it is likely that he began to study Xianbei in his twenties or thirties during the 520s. Sun Qian's command of the Xianbei language would have been useful to develop his career considering that the two powerful regents then vying for the imperial throne—Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 and Gao Huan—spoke the languages of Qihu 契胡 and Xianbei respectively.³⁷

Although Meng Wei and Sun Qian were born in Luoyang and Le'an respectively, both south of the Yellow River, they served as high-ranking officials due to their fluency in the Xianbei language. The Northern Wei, which controlled a diverse range of ethnic groups including the Xianbei, Xiongnu, Gaoche, Rouran, and Qihu, as well as the Chinese, Di, and Qiang within China Proper, needed many officials who were fluent in the Xianbei and other non-Chinese languages to effectively manage administrative tasks. Under these circumstances, both Chinese officials—like Meng Wei and Sun Qian—and Xianbei officials—such as Yu Jin,

³⁵ *BQS*, 24/341.

³⁶ *BQS*, 24/341.

³⁷ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong," 213-15.

Yuan Wen Yao, and Changsun Jian—needed to speak non-Chinese languages.³⁸ According to *Suishu* 隋書, there were thirteen books on the Xianbei language, including *Guoyu* 國語, *Xianbeiyu* 鮮卑語, *Guoyu Wuming* 國語物名, *Guoyu Huling* 國語號令, *Xianbei Huling* 鮮卑號令, and others.³⁹ Presumably, Chinese officials learned the Xianbei language using these books.⁴⁰

The Xianbei and Chinese residents in the Six Frontier Towns (六鎮), located on the northern borderlands with the Rouran, spoke the Xianbei and other non-Chinese languages.⁴¹ Some Chinese people born and living in Pingcheng in North China spoke the Xianbei and other non-Chinese languages as well. For example, Chang Cuan 張篡, born in Pingcheng, and Zhang Huayuan 張華原, born in Dai District (代郡), learned Xianbei to build relationships with non-Chinese people or to serve as officials managing non-Chinese affairs. Like Chang Cuan and Zhang Huayuan, many Chinese people spoke Xianbei in their daily lives.⁴²

Erzhu Rong 尔朱榮—the Qihu 契胡 chieftain living in Xiurong District (秀容郡) and Sizhou 肆州, south of Pingcheng and Hengzhou 恒州, in what is now northern and central Shanxi Province—engaged in livestock herding and hunting. He spoke both the Xianbei and his native languages:

Despite his power and reputation, Erzhu Rong was frivolous, enjoying horseback riding and archery. He neglected national affairs and spent most of his time indulging in these activities. Whenever Erzhu Rong

³⁸ Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong,” 215.

³⁹ *Suishu* 隋書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1973; hereafter *SS*), 32/945.

⁴⁰ Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo geumji jaeron,” 212-13.

⁴¹ Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong,” 215-16; Choi Jin Yeoul, “Bukwi hugi bukbyeon hoin-ui hosok yuji-wa geu yeonghyang: Ansin-gwa Nakyang hosok-ui gwangye-reul jungsimeuro” 北魏後期 北邊 胡人の 胡俗 유지와 그 영향: 雁臣과 洛陽 胡俗의 관계를 중심으로, *Inmunhak yeongu* 人文學研究 22 (2014): 148-52.

⁴² Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong,” 216-17.

hosted cheerful feasts at Xilinyuan 西林園 and enjoyed archery, he invited the empress to observe. He also had princes, imperial concubines, and princesses gather in the pavilion inside Xilinyuan to watch. Whenever the emperor (i.e., Emperor Xiaozhuang 孝莊帝) hit his target with arrows, Erzhu Rong stood up and cheered loudly. ... (1) Whenever he was drunk, he sat down and sang barbarian songs, especially the song of Shulipuli 樹梨普梨. (2) He saw Yuan Yu 元彧, Prince of Linhuai (臨淮王), sitting silently and modestly. Impressed by the prince's appearance and qualities, he compelled Yuan Yu to perform the dance of Chile 敕勒. After the banquet ended at sunset, he sang the music of Huibo 迴波 to the guests in attendance and then left.⁴³

This passage shows that Erzhu Rong and the Northern Wei imperial family enjoyed nomadic leisure activities, such as horseback riding, archery, and singing songs of steppe culture. The non-Chinese songs sung by Erzhu Rong were probably transmitted from the steppe regions of North Asia and Central Asia. “The music of Huibo” was a martial song, beginning with the four-syllable phrase “Huibo’ershi” 迴波爾時. It involved dance and music, with no strict boundaries between the singers and the audience. The Chinese researcher Yifei Lü argued that Erzhu Rong must have sung the music of Huibo in the Xianbei language.⁴⁴

According to the quoted passage, Erzhu Rong ordered Yuan Yu to perform the dance of Chile, which was likely a traditional dance of the Chile people. Here, we can see that Yuan Yu was skilled in the Turkic dance (i.e., the dance of Chile) and familiar with the Xianbei and other nomadic cultures. Presumably, Yuan Yu and other participants at the banquet performed the dance of Chile to the rhythm of Chile music. Erzhu Rong, along with Yuan Yu and other members of the Northern Wei imperial family, understood and enjoyed songs and dances of Xianbei and

⁴³ BS, 48/1762.

⁴⁴ Lü Yifei 呂一飛, *Huzu xisu yu Sui Tang fengyun: Wei Jin Beichao beifang shaoshu minzu shehui fengsu ji qi dui Sui Tang de yingxiang* 胡族習俗與隋唐風韻: 魏晉北朝北方少數民族社會風俗及其對隋唐的影響 (Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1994), 180-82.

Central Asian origins, including those performed in the Xianbei language. In short, Erzhu Rong and his Qihu people were proficient in both the Xianbei and Qihu languages. Other non-Chinese residents in Xiurong District and Sizhou likely spoke both the Xianbei and their native languages, which may have been similar to the former.⁴⁵

Additionally, many Northern Wei soldiers likely spoke the Xianbei language, as noted in the *Treatise on Classics and Books* (經籍志) in *Suishu*:

After the Later Wei (後魏) conquered the Central Plains (中原), they issued all military orders in the barbarian language. (1) Later, influenced by Chinese culture, most military orders could no longer be issued in the barbarian language. (2) Thus, the government recorded the language and made people teach and learn it from each other. They call the language *Guoyu* 國語.⁴⁶

As mentioned above, when the Later Wei (i.e., the Northern Wei) conquered the Central Plains (namely, North China), the Northern Wei forces sent messages in the barbarian language. This barbarian language was Xianbei, so they communicated in the Xianbei language. In the excerpt, Part (1) suggests that the use of the Xianbei language significantly decreased among Northern Wei soldiers because of the increasing influence of Chinese culture. According to Part (2), however, knowledge of the Xianbei language was still necessary for the Northern Wei military; hence, the Northern Wei government recorded the language using Chinese characters and made Northern Wei soldiers with limited command of the Xianbei language study Xianbei. This case indicates that not only did Northern Wei soldiers of Xianbei origin continue to use their native language in sending and receiving military orders, but Chinese soldiers also somehow needed to know the language. Consequently, Chinese sol-

⁴⁵ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong," 219.

⁴⁶ SS, 32/947.

diers had to learn this non-Chinese language.

Moreover, the anecdote of Gao Huan speaking Xianbei in the military camp suggests that Northern Wei soldiers continued to speak Xianbei during the latter part of the Northern Wei period in Luoyang, as well as in the early Eastern Wei dynasty.⁴⁷

In summary, members of the Xianbei ruling class in Luoyang, a few Chinese born in Luoyang and the Yellow River regions, nearly all non-Chinese peoples (e.g., Xianbei, Gaoche, Qihu, and Jihu 稽胡) within the Northern Wei realms, and many Chinese people in the Six Frontier Towns, Hengzhou 恒州, Shuozhou 朔州, Yanzhou 燕州, Fenzhou 汾州, and Sizhou 肆州 continued to utilize the Xianbei language for various reasons even well after Emperor Xiaowen's ban of the language.⁴⁸ In other words, most non-Chinese peoples, including Xianbei, continued to speak their native languages in the various regions under Northern Wei rule.

2. Cases of Emperor Xiaoming

The Japanese researcher Akimine Koga argued that Emperor Xiaoming—the eighth emperor of the Northern Wei dynasty—as well as court officials, court ladies, and eunuchs must have spoken Xianbei.⁴⁹ The present author agrees with Koga's view. This chapter will attempt to reinforce Koga's argument with more details.

Before analyzing Emperor Xiaoming's use of Xianbei, let us first examine his father Emperor Xuanwu's (宣武帝) multilingual ability. Emperor Xuanwu was not the first crown prince of the Northern Wei during Emperor Xiaowen's reign. In 496, Yuan Xun 元恂—Emperor Xuanwu's

⁴⁷ BQS, 21/295; Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo geumji jaeron," 213-14. According to records, Gao Huan spoke and gave orders to his soldiers in the Xianbei language when Gao Aocao 高敖曹 was absent. In the presence of Gao Aocao, however, he spoke in Chinese.

⁴⁸ Hengzhou, Shuozhou, Yanzhou, Fenzhou, and Sizhou were located in the extensive region from the northwest of today's Hebei Province all the way to the western and northern areas of Shaanxi Province.

⁴⁹ Koga, "Hokugi no buzoku kaisan ni tsuite," 64.

elder brother and heir apparent—participated in Mu Tai’s 穆泰 rebellion but was soon arrested. Emperor Xiaowen—Yuan Xun’s father—was so enraged that he beat his rebellious son almost to death and ultimately compelled Yuan Xun to commit suicide by poison. Subsequently, Emperor Xiaowen selected Yuan Ge 元恪—future Emperor Xuanwu—as the new heir apparent. This decision might have been influenced by the belief that the new crown prince, Yuan Ge, would adhere to the ban on speaking the Xianbei language and support other Sinicization policies. Emperor Xuanwu was a multilingual figure who could read Chinese classics and historical texts. He also participated in the study of Buddhist teachings until late at night.⁵⁰ In 508, he took the initiative in the translation of the Buddhist scripture known as the *Shidijinglun* 十地經論 into Chinese.⁵¹ It is not certain to what extent he was involved in the actual translation process. Yet, it is possible to assume that he might have also been fluent in Indian languages such as Sanskrit and Pali or some Central Asian languages, given the fact that the *Shidijinglun* had been translated into Central Asian languages as well. Moreover, he engaged in conversations with Yuan Pi 元丕, a prominent elder Xianbei official from the royal family, who opposed Emperor Xiaowen’s Sinicization policies. He also had conversations with Yu Lie 于烈 and Yu Zhong 于忠, who were granted permission to speak their native language due to their Xianbei heritage and age over thirty. Therefore, it is highly likely that Emperor Xuanwu continued to speak Xianbei fluently. In sum, Emperor Xuanwu was proficient in both Chinese and Xianbei, with the possibility of having significant knowledge of Indian and some Central Asian languages.⁵²

Emperor Xiaoming was the son of his multilingual father. Emperor Xiaoming was educated at the National School (國子堂),⁵³ where he studied Confucian classics, such as the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經) and the

⁵⁰ *WS*, 8/215, 69/1528, 114/3042.

⁵¹ Li Shuji 李書吉, *Beichao lizhi faxi yanjiu* 北朝禮制法系研究 (Renmin chubanshe, 2002), 133.

⁵² Choi, “Bukwi hugi ho’eo sayong hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong,” 220-22.

⁵³ *WS*, 36/835.

Du-Tradition Commentaries of the Spring and Autumn Annals (杜氏春秋). His instructors included Chinese scholar-officials like Cui Guang 崔光, Wang Zunye 王遵業, Wang Yanye 王延業, Jia Sibō 賈思伯, and Feng Yuanxing 馮元興.⁵⁴ Additionally, he also engaged in conversations with Chinese officials, such as Xin Xiong 辛雄, Dong Zhao 董昭, and Xu He 徐紇.⁵⁵ If he learned from or conversed with such Chinese scholar-officials without interpreters, this fact would indicate that he was fluent in Chinese.⁵⁶ According to *Weishu*, he was so fluent in Chinese that he even composed a seven-character poem (七言詩) in Chinese in response to his mother's poem during a banquet at Hualin Yuan 華林園.⁵⁷ Emperor Xiaoming was born in 510, sixteen years after his grandfather's ban on speaking the Xianbei language. Based on these facts, some scholars could assume that Emperor Xiaoming was Sincized completely and only spoke Chinese.⁵⁸ The reality, however, was quite the opposite. According to *Weishu*, Emperor Xiaoming indeed spoke the Xianbei language.

Empress Dowager Hu (胡太后) misbehaved herself and thus was afraid of being disliked by the imperial family. Therefore, she gathered her political partners, prevented her son from meeting his confidants, and killed close aides of his favorites. A Mithra monk called Miduo Daoren 蜜多道人 who was fluent in *huyu* 胡語 supported Emperor Xiaoming. Fearing that the monk might reveal her scandalous behavior to her son, Empress Dowager Hu had him killed on a street in the southern section of Luoyang on the third day of the third lunar month in 528.⁵⁹ She pre-

⁵⁴ *WS*, 38/879, 72/1615, 79/1760.

⁵⁵ *WS*, 77/1694, 79/1759.

⁵⁶ Choi Jin Yeoul, *Hyomunje-ui 'hanhwa' jeongchaek-gwa Nakyang hoin sahoe: Bukwi hugi hosok yuji hyeonsang-gwa geu baekyeong* 효문제의 '한화' 정책과 낙양 호인사회: 북위 후기 호족 유지 현상과 그 배경 (Hanwul Academy, 2016), 39.

⁵⁷ *BS*, 13/504.

⁵⁸ It has been common wisdom in academia that Emperor Xiaoming was Sincized because he learned Confucian classics and was proficient in Chinese.

⁵⁹ A similar passage is also found in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Zhonghua shuju, 1974; henceforth *ZZTJ*), 152/4737.

tended to search for the assassins by offering a bounty for their capture and killed Gu Hui 谷會, Commander of Imperial Guards (領左右) and Deputy Minister of Tributaries (鴻臚少卿), Gu Shaoda 谷紹達, and all of Emperor Xiaoming's close aides.⁶⁰

Empress Dowager Hu regained absolute power as regent in 525, having previously held the position of regent from 515 to 520. During both periods, she had sexual relationships with several officials and prevented his son from receiving unfavorable information about her misbehavior.⁶¹ Akimine Koga argued that Empress Dowager Hu feared the Mithra monk might inform the emperor of her misdeeds in Xianbei; hence, she had the monk assassinated.⁶² At this point, let us examine this argument further.

First, the term *daoren* 道人 in the excerpt can refer to a monk or priest in both Buddhism and Daoism. However, the word *miduo* in *Miduo Daoren* is not a Buddhist name but rather a translation of “Mithra” that corresponds to “Mihir” in ancient Iranian languages, indicating that he was a Mithraic or Zoroastrian.⁶³

Second, what language was *huyu*? In *Weishu*, the terms Tuoba 拓跋 and Xianbei were not transcribed as *hu* or *xianbei* in Chinese characters but transcribed as *beiren* 北人 or *jiuren* 舊人.⁶⁴ The Chinese character *hu* referred to Central Asian people during the Tang dynasty.⁶⁵ Thus, the

⁶⁰ BS, 13/505; WS, 13/339-40.

⁶¹ Choi Jin Yeoul, “Hotaehu-ui imjochingje-wa gwonryeok giban: Munmu gwanryo jipdan-gwa cheukgeun jipdan-ui bunseok-eul jungsimeuro” 胡太后的臨朝稱制와 권력기반: 文武 官僚集團과 측근집단의 분석을 중심으로, *Daedong munhwa yeongu* 대동문화연구 99 (2017): 175-80; Choi Jin Yeoul, “Bukwi Nakyang sidae Hotaehu-ui hohwa-wa geu baekyeong” 北魏洛陽時代 胡太后的胡化와 그 배경, *Immunhak yeongu* 人文學研究 25 (2016): 146-53.

⁶² Koga, “Hokugi no buzoku kaisan ni tsuite,” 64.

⁶³ Liu Cunren 柳存仁, “Tangdai yiqian Baihuojiao Manijiao zai Zhongguo zhi yihen” 唐代以前拜火教摩尼教在中國之遺痕, in *Hefengtang wenji (shang)* 和風堂文集 (上) (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), 495-554; Shi Anchang 施安昌, “Beiwei Fengyongqi yuanshi muzhi wenshi kao” 北魏馮邕妻元氏墓誌紋飾考, *Gugong bowuyuan yuangan* 故宮博物院院刊 1997-2 (1997): 75.

⁶⁴ Kawamoto, “Hokugi ni okeru mibunsei ni tsuite,” 345-52.

⁶⁵ See Moriyasu Takao 모리야스 다카오, “Dangdae bulkyojeok sekyejiri-wa ‘ho’-ui siltae” 당대 불교적 세계지리와 ‘호’의 실태, in *Silk Road-ui sam-gwa jongkyo* 실크로드의 삶과 종교, edited by Jun-

term *huyu* could likely mean the languages spoken by Central Asian people during the Tang and Song dynasties.

The truth is, however, quite different. Emperor Xiaowen issued an imperial edict on January 13, 459, ordering to change the clothing style (*yifuzhizhi* 衣服之制).⁶⁶ Regarding this edict, *Weishu* never used such words as barbarian clothes. Yet, the author of the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (資治通鑑) changed the phrase from “*yifuzhizhi* 衣服之制” to “*hufu* 胡服,” which means barbarian garments. Therefore, according to the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, Emperor Xiaowen prohibited the ruling class and his subjects from wearing barbarian garments.⁶⁷ Given the context of the Northern Wei dynasty, the term *hufu* in the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* refers to Xianbei-style clothing. Considering this aspect, the Chinese character *hu* could mean Xianbei in the Northern Wei dynasty. Thus, the *huyu*, the barbarian language spoken by the Mithraic or Zoroastrian monk *Miduo Daoren*, was probably Xianbei. The monk would have had to learn Xianbei in order to engage effectively in Mithraic or Zoroastrian missionary work targeting the emperor, the imperial family, and the ruling class of the Northern Wei. In other words, Emperor Xiaoming likely spoke Xianbei in private situations with Mithraic or Zoroastrian monks and his favorites, including the Gu Hui and Gu Shaoda brothers.⁶⁸

In short, Emperor Xiaoming indeed spoke the Xianbei language, even though he was a grandson of Emperor Xiaowen who issued the edict of the ban on speaking the Xianbei language. This fact clearly shows that Emperor Xiaowen's prohibition of the Xianbei language was unsuccessful after all.

gang asia hakhoe (Sakyejeol, 2006).

⁶⁶ *WS*, 7 xia/176.

⁶⁷ *ZZTJ*, 139/4370.

⁶⁸ Choi, *Hyomunje-ui hanhwa jeongchaek-gwa Nakyang hoin sahoe*, 37-38.

Conclusion

Emperor Xiaowen's ban on speaking the Xianbei language included two important loopholes: first, the prohibition was applied only within the palace, and second, it only affected Xianbei officials under the age of thirty. Thus, the ban was effectively a restriction on the use of non-Chinese languages in court or within the central government by Xianbei officials under the age of thirty. This means that the impact of the ban was limited. A significant portion of the Xianbei population could still speak their native language.

Many scholars have misinterpreted Emperor Xiaowen's ban as a complete prohibition of speaking the Xianbei language. Despite the ban, however, many Xianbei elites—such as Yu Jin, Yuan Wenyao, and Changsun Jian—and Chinese officials—for example, Zhang Huayuan, Meng Wei, and Sun Qian—continued to speak Xianbei from the latter half of the Northern Wei dynasty onward. Emperor Xiaoming also spoke the Xianbei language that his grandfather, Emperor Xiaowen, had banned. These cases indicate that Emperor Xiaowen's ban of the Xianbei language was not so successful that the use of the language was still widespread among the Northern Wei ruling elite. While a few Xianbei officials could read and write official documents written in Chinese characters, most Xianbei officials, military officers, and soldiers could not. A letter that Cui Liang 崔亮 sent to his maternal cousin Liu Jing'an 劉景安 reveals the Xianbei people's general illiteracy and poor proficiency in reading and writing Chinese.⁶⁹

This paper demonstrates that most Xianbei and some Chinese people continued to speak the Xianbei language even after Emperor Xiaowen's edict banning its use. Despite the official prohibition, why did most Xianbei and a few Chinese people continue to speak the Xianbei language? Several reasons could be pointed out. First, the exception clauses in the ban allowed Xianbei officials over the age of thirty, as well as their

⁶⁹ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo geumji jaeron," 221-22.

families, friends, and colleagues, to continue to learn and speak the Xianbei language. Since Xianbei individuals over thirty conversed with others and Chinese people in Xianbei, the Chinese people also had to understand and speak the same language. This would encourage many people to speak Xianbei in the court, government, military camps, and marketplaces.⁷⁰ Next, even though Xianbei individuals under the age of thirty spoke Chinese, they never forgot their native language. This was especially true in light of the examples of Emperor Xuanwu—son of Emperor Xiaowen—and Yuan Xi.

Moreover, Emperor Xiaowen issued the edict that prohibited the Xianbei people from speaking the Xianbei language just sixteen days after his first expedition to the Southern Qi dynasty (南齊).⁷¹ The military campaigns against the Southern Qi and frequent imperial tours by the emperor did not allow enough time to enforce the ban on speaking the Xianbei language. The Xianbei and other non-Chinese soldiers who participated in the prolonged war against the Southern Qi had little time to learn Chinese, as they were busy completing combat training and moving to the southern frontier regions until Emperor Xiaowen's death.⁷² These Northern Wei forces were called Warriors of the Feathered Forest (羽林軍) and Warriors Swift as Tigers (虎賁軍). Approximately 150,000 Xianbei men moved from Pingcheng to Luoyang, and most of them likely participated in the war against the Southern Qi.⁷³ They spent 534 days fighting against Southern Qi soldiers during the second and third campaigns from 497 to 499, allowing them only a little time and opportunity to learn Chinese. The Xianbei language, one of the proto-Mongolic languages, significantly differed from Chinese in terms of grammar and sentence structure. Therefore, it was difficult for the Xianbei people to learn and speak Chinese within a year before the second campaign against the

⁷⁰ Choi, "Bukwi hugi ho'eo geumji jaeron," 204-10.

⁷¹ *WS*, 7 xia/178-79.

⁷² Choi Jin Yeoul, *Bukwi hwangje sunhaeng-gwa hohan sahoe* 북위황제 순행과 호한사회 (Seoul National University Press, 2011), 447.

⁷³ Choi, *Bukwi hwangje sunhaeng-gwa hohan sahoe*, 449.

Southern Qi.⁷⁴ Most of the Xianbei soldiers had little time to learn Chinese, except for a few who remained in Luoyang.

Lastly, according to some linguists, it takes about three generations, or ninety years, for a people to forget their native language. The Northern Wei, however, collapsed only in about forty years after Emperor Xiaowen's ban. Forty years were too short a time for all the Xianbei people to forget their native language and fully adopt Chinese as their new language. Therefore, the Xianbei people could continue to speak their own language even during the periods of the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou, which were established after the fall of the Northern Wei.

⁷⁴ Choi, *Bukwi hwangje sunhaeng-gwa hohan sahoe*, 449-50.

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