



# An Analytical Study of the Transition of the Gui-Yi Circuit Administration in the Early Tenth Century

CHEN Siliang    JI Xiaowen

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China

Received: May 6, 2025

Accepted: June 3, 2025

Published: September 30, 2025

**To cite this article:** CHEN Siliang & JI Xiaowen. (2025). An Analytical Study of the Transition of the Gui-Yi Circuit Administration in the Early Tenth Century. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 170–176, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.019

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.019>

**Abstract:** The transition of power from Zhang Chengfeng to Cao Yijin marked a significant milestone in the history of the Gui-Yi Circuit. Evidence indicates that this transition of power occurred without large-scale conflict and enabled the Gui-Yi Circuit to remain relatively stable internally. This paper argues that Zhang Chengfeng's lack of successors and his flawed foreign policies after proclaiming himself emperor led to Zhang's downfall. At the same time, Cao Yijin entrenched his influence in the Dunhuang region and gained deep trust from Zhang Chengfeng, which facilitated his takeover of the Gui-Yi Circuit administration. Zhang Chengfeng, considering the internal circumstances within his family and the state, yielded his position to Cao Yijin. This transition ensured the internal stability of the Gui-Yi Circuit and further promoted the peaceful development of Guazhou and Shazhou for over a century during a specific historical period.

**Keywords:** The Gui-Yi Circuit; early 10<sup>th</sup> century; political transition

**Notes on the contributors:** CHEN Siliang is an undergraduate student majoring in English. Her email address is 2215010103@st.usst.edu.cn. JI Xiaowen holds a Ph.D. and is a lecturer at the College of Foreign Languages.

## 1. Historical Analysis of the Handover of Political Power Between Zhang and Cao

The historical records provide few words about the transfer of power between Zhang Chengfeng and Cao Yijin. The *History of the Song Dynasty* mentioned that: “In the Later Liang Dynasty, the Zhang family didn't have any descendants, so the people in Shazhou promoted Cao Yijin to be the general.” (Tuo, 1985) It can be seen that after Zhang Chengfeng died or stepped down, the nobles in Shazhou elected Chief Secretary Cao Yijin as the leader of the Gui-Yi Circuit.

### ***1.1 The historical reasons for Zhang Chengfeng's downfall***

Based on the records in *History of the Song Dynasty* and the analysis of Zhang Chengfeng's political actions after assuming personal rule, this paper argues that Zhang Chengfeng's lack of successors and the failure of his foreign policy ultimately led to his downfall.

#### ***1.1.1 Zhang Chengfeng's lack of successors***

As far back as when Zhang Chengfeng declared himself Emperor Baiyi, he had established a crown prince. Dunhuang Manuscripts P. 3405 "Miscellaneous Ritual Documents of Golden Mountain Kingdom" records that: "The Crown Prince, in accordance with the will of Heaven, dutifully performed his responsibilities in the court. The princesses and concubines were favored by the king and shared in the blessings of eternal longevity." (YAN, 2009) However, the Prince most probably fell ill and passed away in the following years. According to the Dunhuang Manuscripts P. 3405 "Miscellaneous Ritual Documents of Golden Mountain Kingdom", when the war between the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han and the Ganzhou Uyghur was at its peak in the year of Xinwei (911), a large-scale epidemic broke out in Dunhuang city, which plunged the people into misery and suffering, and even the imperial family was plagued by the epidemic (YAN, 2009). According to the inscription in the Dunhuang Manuscripts S. 0980 "The Golden Light Sutra", the Prince of Zhang Chengfeng, named Zhang Geng, was also infected with dysentery in the year of Xinwei (911) (LIU, 2005). To sum up, it is very likely that Prince Zhang Geng passed away from the plague. As a result, there was no successors remaining in Zhang Chengfeng's lineage, which provided a certain possibility for Cao Yijin to take the throne.

#### ***1.1.2 Zhang Chengfeng's failure in foreign policy***

Zhang Chengfeng overstepped his authority of imperial title with a certain strategy to strengthen defense and promote the status of Guazhou and Shazhou along the Silk Road. However, declaring himself emperor in the fourth year of Kaiping (910) and being forced to cancel the state and imperial titles in the year of Xinwei (911), Zhang Chengfeng only held power for less than two years. This paper argues that Zhang Chengfeng's erroneous foreign policy was the main reason for his downfall, as detailed below.

Firstly, Zhang Chengfeng broke the relationship with the Later Liang and lost the support of the Central Plains. Against a backdrop of a stabilizing Central Plains and the consolidation of Later Liang, Zhang Chengfeng used the theory of Confucianist divination to create a public sentiment, establish the kingdom, and declare himself emperor, which intensified the conflict between the Gui-Yi Circuit and the Later Liang. Zhang's actions completely precluded his administration from receiving moral or ethnic support from the Central Plains, leaving the Gui-Yi Circuit isolated in the face of surrounding powerful enemies. The enraged Later Liang administration incited the Ganzhou Uyghur to launch a war against the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han (SUN, 1989; YANG, 1999).

Secondly, Zhang Chengfeng was concerned with external expansion, which led to internal disintegration. Since ascending to the throne, Zhang Chengfeng had been obsessed with warfare and honor. The influence of the Golden Mountain Kingdom was limited in Guazhou and Shazhou, but it declared war on the two Uyghurs in the east and west. Even when the Ganzhou Uyghur's army was approaching Dunhuang City, Zhang still fantasized about fighting on multiple fronts and preparing for the emperor's coronation ceremony in a critically urgent situation.



However, years of continuous warfare had withered the economy of Guazhou and Shazhou, and countless families were scattered and disintegrated. Anti-war sentiment was rising across the land. Under the fierce attack of the Ganzhou Uyghur, Zhang Chengfeng's authority within the country plummeted, and he was eventually abandoned. It is recorded that:

The counties, towns, and villages along the way were continuously devastated. The corpses of the deceased were buried in the wilderness, while the living were displaced and forced to scatter in foreign lands. The sounds of sorrowful wailing echoed day and night, with resentment rising to the skies. (YAN, 1994)

Thirdly, Zhang Chengfeng united with Tibet and lost the foundation of public support. In the fourth year of Zhenyuan (788), Shazhou was occupied by Tibet as the last major town of the Tang dynasty in Helong (AN, 1992). It was not until the second year of Dazhong (848) that Shazhou was recaptured by the local noble led by Zhang Yichao (LI, 2007). During the Tibetan rule over Helong, Tibetan rulers imposed ethnic discrimination and enforced assimilation policies on the Han and other ethnic groups in the region, while brutally oppressing and exploiting them economically. However, in pursuit of expanding the war, Zhang Chengfeng didn't hesitate to ally with the Tibetan administration, the enemy of Shazhou, making it difficult for the people to accept. In addition, after the civil strife of Tibet in the second year of Huichang (842), the Tibetan administration fractured into multiple factions scattered in different regions and was weakened in strength (Zhaxidangzhi, 2009). The alliance with Tibet not only failed to provide strong support for the Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han but also exacerbated internal conflicts among the people. Therefore, Zhang Chengfeng's ultimate failure was inevitable.

## ***1.2 The historical reasons for Cao Yijin's takeover of the Gui-Yi Circuit***

In the autumn of the year of Jiaxu (914), Cao Yijin, the Chief Secretary of Shazhou, took over the political power in Guazhou and Shazhou from Zhang Chengfeng. As with the fall of Zhang Chengfeng's authority, historical records provide few accounts. This paper argues that Cao Yijin's entrenched influence in the Dunhuang region and the deep trust from Zhang Chengfeng were the primary reasons for his successful replacement of Zhang.

### ***1.2.1 Cao Yijin's entangled power in the Dunhuang region***

The mainstream view in the current academic is that although Cao Yijin claimed to be from the Cao clan of Qiao County, he was a Sogdian rather than a Han Chinese, belonging to the Nine Surnames of Zhaowu (RONG, 2001; Feng, 2001; Zheng, 2004). Despite not being a Han Chinese in the traditional sense, he actively formed marital alliances with the clans of Xiongnu and Han in Guazhou and Shazhou. Firstly, he married Suo of Julu, the granddaughter of Zhang Yichao and the daughter of Suoxun, thus referring to Zhang Chengfeng as his brother-in-law. Afterward, Cao Yijin remarried a woman from the Song family in Guangping, who was of the same clan as Zhang Yichao's wife, further establishing his position within the Gui-Yi Circuit. Cao Yijin's sisters and daughters were married to local clans in Dunhuang. According to the inscriptions in Cave 98 of Mogao Grottoes, the clans that established marital ties with Cao Yijin accounted for 10 out of 23 prominent local and Tibetan families in the Dunhuang region. Many members of these families held important positions in the

governance of Guazhou and Shazhou. Receiving strong support from local clans, Cao Yijin had a strong foundation of public approval.

### 1.2.2 *Zhang Chengfeng's deep trust in Cao Yijin*

In the first year of Qianning (894), the Fourteenth Lady of Zhang led the sons of the Li family to overthrow the rule of Suo Xun. Although nominally being the Jiedushi of the Gui-Yi Circuit, Zhang Chengfeng was a puppet of the Li family (LI, 2021). To regain his power, Zhang Chengfeng was very likely to utilize Suo Xun's old clout. As the son-in-law of Suo Xun, Cao Yijin was trusted by Zhang Chengfeng. Although being the son-in-law of Suo, Cao Yijin established connections through marriage to large clans and gained intertwined power, which allowed him to be highly valued and given important positions without being implicated in the coup that overthrew Suo Xun. Dunhuang Manuscripts P. 4044 "Documents of the Appointment of a Deputy Commander in the Sixth Year of Qianning (899)" recorded that Cao was the Commissioner for the Acting Ministry of Personal and Grand Imperial Censor (TANG & LU, 1990), indicating that Cao Yijin served as the Minister in the imperial court. The literature piece "Dreaming of the South: Cao's Virtue" in Dunhuang Ci-poems, P. 3128, praised the achievements of Cao Yijin, saying that:

Cao Yijin, renowned for his benevolence and virtue, safeguarded the western frontiers of the state and brought the tribes into the official registers. Defending the He-Long region and pacifying the Qiang and Tuyuhun, his prestige echoed far and wide. Upholding loyalty and filial piety, he rendered outstanding service to the court. Quelling rebellions and strategizing military affairs, he ensured the stability of the realm. He employed wisdom to eliminate turmoil. May he reign for ten thousand generations. (WANG, 1950)

The exact time when the poem was written remains unknown. It can be inferred from the statement "defending the He-Long region and pacifying the Qiang and Tuyuhun" that Cao Yijin suppressed Qiang, Hun, and some other minority forces in the Helong region. "Quelling rebellions and strategizing military affairs" suggest that Cao Yijin led his troops to assist the emperor, which made a vital contribution. After Zhang Chengfeng regained power, he highly valued Cao Yijin and promoted him to the position of the Chief Secretary of Shazhou in return. This explained the reason why the Cao family's position in the Circuit was not high and could only make their fortune through military achievements during Zhang Yichao's rule of the Gui-Yi Circuit, however, during Zhang Chengfeng's time, the Cao family's power swiftly ascended (FENG, 2001).

Overall, after Zhang Chengfeng gained actual power, he fell out with the Later Liang and lost the support of the Central Plains. After ascending to the throne, he was overjoyed in personal ambition and drained financial resources in Guazhou and Shazhou with long-term military wars, which made the local people indignant. Under multiple impacts of natural disasters and man-made misfortunes, Zhang Chengfeng was deserted by his followers. On the other hand, Cao Yijin had a good reputation in the military and won the hearts of the people. He established good relations with the clan through marriages and gained strong public support in Guazhou and Shazhou. It was a foreseeable outcome that Cao Yijin, with the support of the major clans in the Dunhuang region, took over the Gui-Yi Circuit from Zhang Chengfeng.



## 2. Historical Details of the Gui-Yi Circuit's Administration Transition between Zhang and Cao

The historical details of the Gui-Yi Circuit power transition remain unknown due to the lack of historical evidence, but there has been a consensus within the Dunhuang academic that the handover of power between the two was a political change without large-scale conflicts. We can infer that the historical details of the process between Zhang and Cao were highly likely to be one of the following two assumptions.

The first one is that Cao Yijin pressured Zhang Yichao to resign. In the year of Xinwei (911), after being defeated, Zhang Chengfeng's domestic reputation plummeted to the bottom. Cao Yijin, on the contrary, was in a high position and in charge of important troops, and well as gained the support of the major clans in the Guazhou and Shazhou. He launched a palace coup to exert pressure on Zhang Chengfeng, forcing him to abdicate. Noticing that his day had gone, Zhang had no choice but to hand over the position to Cao. As a political transaction, Cao Yijin promised not to crack down on the Zhang family. Zhang Chengfeng stepped down, which preserved the good reputation and status of the Zhang family in Dunhuang for hundreds of years.

The second one is that Zhang Chengfeng took the initiative to make way for the virtuous. In the year of Xinwei (911), Zhang Chengfeng suffered from both the failure of foreign wars and the loss of his son. Other sons in the Zhang family were mediocre and unable to take responsibility for the ill-fated nation. As for Cao Yijin, he was more talented and skilled in the military, with outstanding achievements during the battles. At the same time, as Zhang Chengfeng's cousin-in-law, the two shared both a kinship and a close camaraderie in the army. After careful consideration, Zhang Chengfeng turned over his position to Cao Yijin.

This paper prefers the second assumption, that is, Zhang Chengfeng took the initiative to make way. The main reasons are the following three points.

Firstly, internal stability was maintained in the Gui-Yi Circuit. This administration has the characteristic of family rule. Traditional hereditary scholar classes formed since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties were the pillars of the Gui-Yi Circuit. The family groups formed through marriages became the core of the circuit. Not only did they monopolize the military and political power, but they also turned the administration into a situation where "all under Heaven was controlled by the ruling family". After regaining the power, the Zhang family launched a ruthless crackdown on the Suo and Li families with other major clans in Dunhuang, in response to their threat (YANG, 1999). From this, it can be inferred that Cao Yijin may not have pressured Zhang Chengfeng to resign before ascending to power, otherwise, the major families within Dunhuang would have launched an allied execution against the Cao family as well. In addition, after taking over the Gui-Yi Circuit, Cao revoked the state name and the title of Heavenly King. He also abolished the central official positions, such as the Chancellor and the Minister, and restored the original system of the Gui-Yi Circuit. This led to a wide demotion of civil and military officials. However, there were no abnormal incidents within the Gui-Yi Circuit, especially within the military. On one hand, this demonstrates that Cao Yijin received strong public support. On the other hand, it further proves that Cao Yijin's ascendance to the position was legitimate. Otherwise, there would have been dissatisfaction and even rebellions among officials.

Secondly, both Cao Yijin's ascension and his marriage with the Princess of Khotan were completed in the

autumn of the year of Jiaxu (914) at the beginning of his reign. The domestic stability was a requisite for the preparation of the marriage. If Cao Yijin had launched a coup, the internal situation of the Gui-Yi Circuit would have been inevitably unstable for Khagan Tianmu of the Ganzhou Uyghur to marry the Princess. It can be inferred that Zhang Chengfeng had started planning for Cao Yijin to marry the Princess during his lifetime. In the year of Xinwei (911), faced with a humiliating agreement with the Ganzhou Uyghur, the best way for Zhang to handle the situation was to marry the daughter of the Ganzhou Uyghur and restate the father-son relationship through marriage. As a Han Chinese, it was difficult for Zhang to accept such conditions. With his own Crown Prince having passed away in the plague in the same year, Zhang found himself running out of time under immense internal and external pressure. Therefore, between 911 and 914, he began making arrangements for Cao Yijin, the future leader of the Gui-Yi Circuit, to take his place in marrying the Princess of Khotan. As a Sogdian, Cao shared similar marriage customs with the Uyghur. They both practiced a polygamous system in which multiple women could become legitimate wives of a man at the same time. Although Cao had already married Suo and Song, it was not inappropriate for him to have the Princess of Khotan as his legitimate wife as well. In the year of Jiaxu (914), Zhang Chengfeng passed away. Cao Yijin ascended to power as well as completed the wedding ceremony with the Princess of Khotan.

Thirdly, Cao Yijin lived in harmony with the Zhang clan and their former generals. After coming to power, Cao Yijin didn't massacre the Zhang family but kept their positions in the court. Statues in Cave 98 of the Mogao Grottoes show that among the secular officials depicted, there were 15 members of the Zhang family, indicating that the Zhang family still maintained its dominant position as the top local clan in Dunhuang with a significantly largest number of people serving in the court (FENG, 2013). Many former officials from the Zhang Chengfeng region still served as the most trustworthy ministers during the Cao era, and a number of talented members of the Zhang family and former generals were promoted. These actions, to some extent, helped Cao obtain the loyalty of his subordinates and gain public support. However, under the dominant political advantage of the Zhang family, if Cao's position was illegitimate, it would inevitably have provoked the Zhang family, in alliance with other clans, to launch a ruthless attack on the Cao Yijin family, who posed a threat, much like they did on the Suo and the Li families in the past.

In summary, this paper contends that Zhang Chengfeng took the initiative to step aside in favor of Cao Yijin. It was precisely because of the peaceful transition of the administration that the political and military strength of the Gui-Yi Circuit was preserved, and both internal and external pressures were alleviated.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the transition process of Zhang Chengfeng and Cao Yijin and makes a conclusion that the lack of successors and flawed foreign policy were the main reasons for Zhang Chengfeng's downfall. It can also be inferred that the transition of the administration was likely that Zhang Chengfeng took the initiative to make way for Cao Yijin, thereby maintaining political stability within the Gui-Yi Circuit.

The peaceful transition of power between the Zhang and the Cao clans played a certain role in safeguarding peace and stability in Guazhou and Shazhou for 116 years during a specific historical period. Furthermore, it also promoted the development of the Silk Road. It enables continued prosperity in commodity trade and cultural



exchange between the East and the West, further consolidating the importance of this international trade route. The trajectory of history clearly demonstrates that this peaceful transition was undoubtedly a correct decision in response to the needs of the times. Regardless of whether the transition of the Gui-Yi Circuit administration to Cao Yijin was in line with Zhang Chengfeng's true wish, history has proved that this handover was the right choice.

This study, on the one hand, helps deepen the understanding of the historical drivers behind the ethnic integration and cultural evolution in Guazhou and Shazhou, clarifying its developmental context and providing a key perspective for understanding the region's unique cultural landscape. On the other hand, within the broader context of the Belt and Road Initiative, it provides insights into promoting the integration of China's economy with the global economy and advancing the development of diplomatic relations between China and neighboring countries.

### References

- ① 安忠義:《吐蕃攻陷沙州城之我見》,《敦煌學輯刊》,1992年第Z1期,頁21-24。
- ② 馮培紅:《敦煌曹氏族屬與曹氏歸義軍政權》,《歷史研究》,2001年第1期,頁73-86。
- ③ 馮培紅:《敦煌的歸義軍時代》,蘭州:甘肅教育出版社,2013年版。
- ④ 李軍:《控制、法定與自稱:唐宋之際歸義軍轄區變遷的多維度考察》,《中國史研究》,2021年第4期,頁110-127。
- ⑤ 李正宇:《張議潮起義發生在大中二年三、四月間》,《敦煌學輯刊》,2007年第2期,頁25-28。
- ⑥ 劉永明:《論敦煌佛教信仰中的佛道融合》,《敦煌學輯刊》,2005年第1期,頁45-55。
- ⑦ 榮新江:《敦煌歸義軍曹氏統治者為粟特後裔說》,《歷史研究》,2001年第1期,頁65-72。
- ⑧ 孫修身:《五代時期甘州回鶻和中原王朝的交通》,《敦煌研究》,1989年第3期,頁65-69+90。
- ⑨ 唐耕耦、陸宏基:《敦煌社會經濟文獻真跡釋錄(第四輯)》,全國圖書館文獻縮微複製中心,1990年版。
- ⑩ 脫脫:《沙州傳》載《宋史》,北京:中華書局,1985年版。
- ⑪ 王重民:《敦煌曲子詞集》,上海:商務印書館,1950年版。
- ⑫ 顏廷亮:《〈沙州百姓一萬人上回鶻天可汗狀〉新校並序》,《蘭州教育學院學報》,1994年第1期,頁3-9。
- ⑬ 顏廷亮:《敦煌西漢金山國文學考述》,蘭州:甘肅人民出版社,2009年版。
- ⑭ 楊秀清:《敦煌西漢金山國史》,蘭州:甘肅人民出版社,1999年版。
- ⑮ 鄭炳林:《張氏曹氏歸義軍政權的胡漢聯姻》,《中國史研究》,2004年第1期,頁63-72。
- ⑯ 紮西當知:《吐蕃末代贊普歐鬆贊身世辨》,《中國藏學》,2009年第1期,頁142-146。

(Editors: Derrick MI & Joe ZHANG)