

# Negotiating Boundaries: Defectors, Buddhist Monks and Envoys in Early Medieval China, 386-589 CE

Wenyi Huang McGill University

## Introduction

My research centers on cross-border migrants and travelers between the fourth and sixth centuries. At that time, the geographical area we now call China was divided between the Northern Wei (386-534 CE) in the Yellow River basin and three successive dynasties based to the south of the Yangtze River: Song (420-479 CE), Qi (479-502 CE), Liang (502-557 CE).

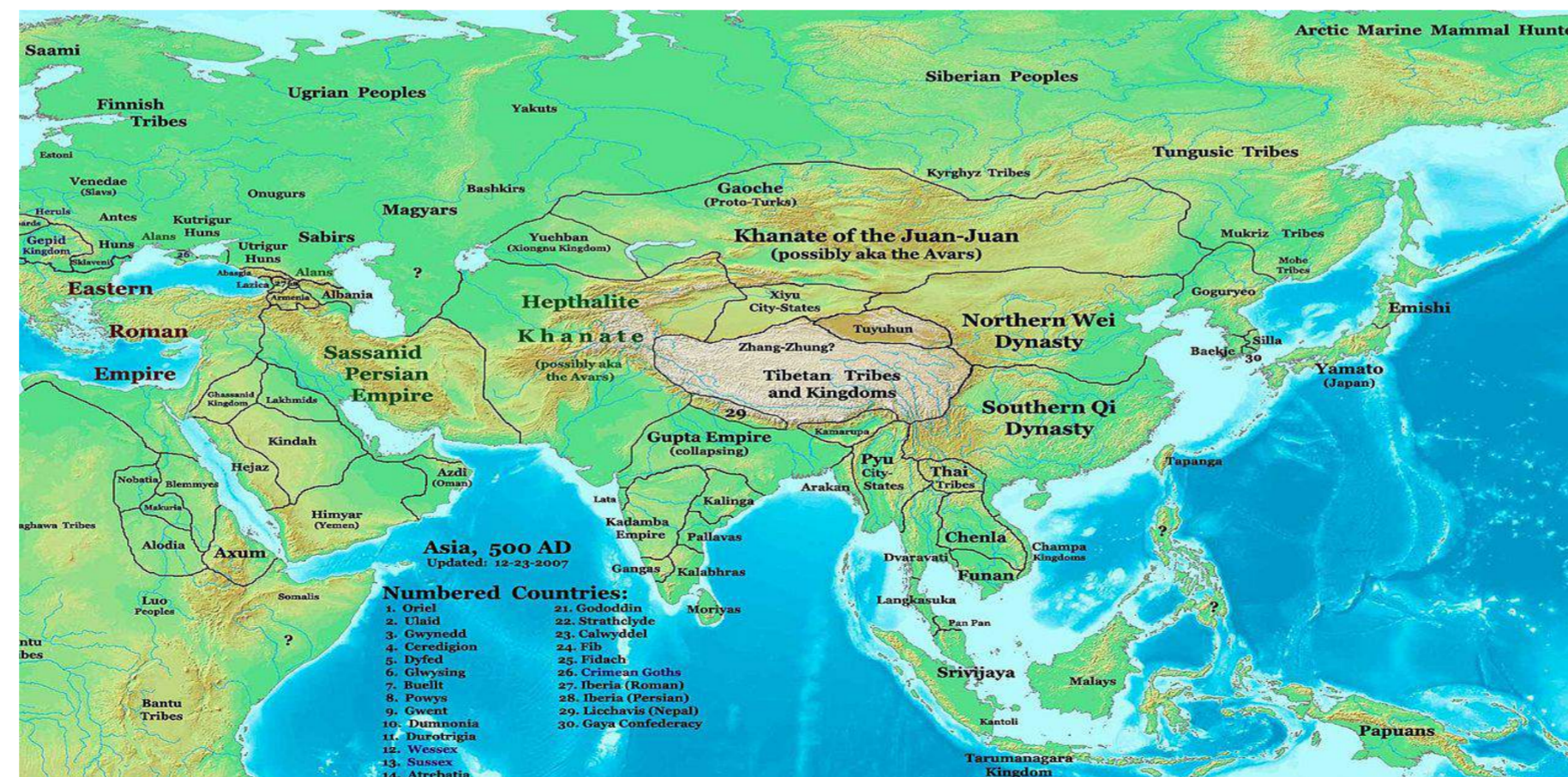
My dissertation investigates the political defectors, envoys and Buddhist monks who physically crossed the frontier from the southern regimes to the Northern Wei, and their roles in making and reshaping inter-state relations between the Northern Wei and its southern neighbours.

## Materials and methods

- Bibliographic research  
A close reading of received textual sources in the form of dynastic histories, religious texts, literary works, and epigraphic evidence
- Field research
- Material culture

## Research Questions

1. People: who were “frontier crossers” in the period 386-534 CE? What were their reasons for and motivating factors behind moving from the southern regimes to the Northern Wei? Where did they live after entering the Northern Wei and what did they do for a living? How did they relate to other frontier crossers from the south?
2. Rules: How did the Northern Wei government regulate immigrants in general and frontier crossers from the south in particular? How did inter-state politics and ethnographic stereotyping influence policy-making on frontier crossers?
3. Culture: To what extent were these frontier crossers integrated to the host society? And to what extent did they contribute to cultural interaction between the Northern Wei and its southern neighbouring regimes?
4. Rhetoric: How were frontier crossers talked about and written about in the received texts? What vocabularies are deployed in speeches and stories on frontier crossers and why?



## Potential Benefits of Digital Tools

- To display the information on frontier crossers known to have entered to the Northern Wei between 386 and 534 CE, especially their origin of residence, time of crossing frontier, their itineraries, and their social networks in the Northern Wei, and in so doing to show how visualization may aid in textual analysis
- To visualize the epistolary networks of early Chinese Buddhist monks

See [Wenyi Huang, “The Porous Frontier: Buddhist Monks’ Epistolary Networks in Early Medieval China,”](#) paper presented at the 2015 [Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, March \(Panel: Building Difference: Frontiers and the Construction of Identity in Early Medieval China\)](#)

## Contact Me

[wenyi.huang@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:wenyi.huang@mail.mcgill.ca)  
<http://earlychinasinology.blogspot.ca/>