

What did sixth-century Chinese Emperor Wu look like? Genetic analysis creates 3D face reconstruction

Emperor Wu, named Yuwen Yong (543-578 CE), was a highly influential emperor who reformed the system of regional troops, pacified the Turks, and unified the northern part of ancient China after defeating the Northern Qi dynasty.

He was ethnically Xianbei, an ancient nomadic group that lived in what is today Mongolia and northern and northeastern China.

“Some scholars said the Xianbei had ‘exotic’ looks, such as thick beard, high nose bridge, and yellow hair,” said Dr. Shaoqing Wen, a researcher at Fudan University.

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In 1996, archaeologists discovered Emperor Wu’s tomb in northwestern China, where they found his bones, including a nearly complete skull.

With the development of ancient DNA research in recent years, Dr. Wen and his colleagues managed to recover over one million single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) on his DNA, some of which contained information about the color of Emperor Wu’s skin and hair.

The researchers were also able to reconstruct the emperor’s face in 3D.

Their results show Emperor Wu had brown eyes, black hair, and dark to intermediate skin, and his facial features were similar to those of present-day Northern and Eastern Asians.



The facial reconstruction (left) and the portrait (right) of the Chinese Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou dynasty. Image credit: Du et al., doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2024.02.059.

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