

*From Warhorses to Ploughshares:  
The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong*

by Richard L. Davis

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This volume is not simply a chronicle of a historical figure who left a significant legacy in the medieval history of China, but it is also an effective introduction to a relatively unknown historical time period. The Five Dynasties 五代 (*wudai*) Period has long been viewed merely as one of several periods of disunion in Chinese history, and one which lasted relatively short and was extremely chaotic. Even until recently, historians have treated this period as an intermediate period between the two great dynasties of the Tang and the Song. Since it has recently turned out that the birth of a new society and culture which had been generally recognized as a unique phenomenon of the Song dynasty already existed in embryo during the Five Dynasties Period, the perspectives of historians should be reconsidered.

Actually, there were significant changes in the attitudes of the five different regimes toward the legacy of the Tang dynasty. This was also a time of conflict between the two rival military cliques, the Shaanxi military clique which upheld the Tang legacy and the Henan military clique which tried to establish a new tradition. While the Shaanxi military clique defeated the Henan military clique in 923, the successors to these

cliques did not look backward and began to prepare for a new period. In particular, Li Siyuan (李嗣源)'s reign during the late Tang period, upon which this volume centers, was a period of great change.

This book consists of six chapters, and includes a preface and an epilogue. Chapter 1, "People and Places," is an introduction to the history of the Shatuo (沙陀) people's history, their family relations, and the main figures of this book. Chapter 2, "Royal Passage," explains the process by which Li Siyuan ascended to the throne. Chapters 3 and 4, "Political Events," use accounts of the significant events that happened during the period of his reigns, Tiancheng (天成) and Changxing (長興), to determine the characteristics of his regime. While Chapter 5, "Institutions, Reforms, and Political Culture," deals with the domestic topics of the regime, Chapter 6, "Volatile Periphery," mainly explains the foreign policies in dealing with the Khitan, with the state of Nanping, and with Sichuan. Finally, the epilogue provides description of the fate of Li's successors.

Li Siyuan was from an uncivilized ethnic Shatuo people of Göktürks and ascended to the throne of Later Tang and ruled over the Chinese people in the Northern provinces in the end. While Li Siyuan's predecessors, Li Keyong (李克用) and Li Cunxu (李存勖), failed to attract willing obedience from the Chinese subjects, Li Siyuan won public support not only by rejecting arbitrary rules based on the nomadic mores but also by imitating the enlightened monarchs of the previous dynasties. According to the detailed descriptions in this volume, Li endeavored to eradicate political corruption aroused by the privileged people and repeatedly expressed his determined will to abstain from luxuries at court and the extravagant lifestyles of the aristocracy. He was, therefore, able to form images as a reliable and committed leader that could appeal to the Chinese people.

As the title *From Warhorses to Ploughshares* implies, the author, Richard L. Davis, focuses on how Li Siyuan searched urgently for ways to escape from the vicious circle of repeated military coups staged by warlords and the political turmoil caused by their political immaturity.

The frequent changes of dynasties and chronic chaos brought about by the recurrent military upheavals created preconceived ideas about the Five Dynasties Period and undermined its historical value as opposed to the relatively high esteem for the contemporary local regimes in the southern provinces. As a result, the low appreciation and respect for the period interrupt proper understanding not only of the Five Dynasties Period but also of the context of the early period of the Song dynasty. Even during this period deemed as a regression in history, in fact, this volume argues that there were enlightened leaders such as Li Siyuan who promoted development and prepared for a new era.

In addition to his great achievement, Davis clearly points out the limitations of Li's political reforms, as well. Although he accomplished a great deal in politics, Li could not systemize his reforms for the next generation to inherit nor foster a competent successor who would continue implementing his policies. When he received the title of emperor at the age of 60, Li did not have sufficient time left to carry out every policy he intended to pursue. As soon as he died peacefully in 933, his successors immediately resumed struggling for power and the Later Tang dynasty in the end collapsed in four years. However, Davis argues that it is still worth paying attention to Li's reforms despite their failure in that Li came up with breakthroughs in the so-called dark ages by presenting the ultimate goal for his Shatuo successors to pursue.

Nevertheless, this research also poses several problems. For instance, this detailed factual chronicle of Li Siyuan does not show distinctive differences from the existing researches on him nor does it reveal new information regarding his life. And as Johannes L. Kurz demonstrated in his review of this volume,<sup>1</sup> Davis dealt with the historical materials in a careless way in many parts of this book. In addition, this

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes L. Kurz, "Book Review—*From Warhorses to Ploughshares: The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong*," *Journal of Chinese Studies* 中國文化研究所學報 61 (2015), 353-364.

book is rather monotonous since there are no contentious issues for the readers to discuss. Despite these problems, however, the academic quality and the detailed portrayal of this relatively unknown period and figure in Chinese history greatly enhance the merit of this volume. Consequently, it is obvious that this research has provided a significant stepping stone to future studies in this field.