

these minor flaws do not change the urgency of Madokoro's call to confront honestly the self-serving and compromised terms on which refugee relief has developed and continues to operate today.

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***Fire and Ice: Li Cunxu and the Founding of the Later Tang.*** By Richard L. Davis. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 237. \$60.00/HKD450.00.

Professor Richard Davis has done more than any scholar to bring the history of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period into the mainstream of Chinese historical studies. This important period had, previous to his work, languished in the liminal state of a time of chaos between two great dynasties, the Tang and the Song. Very few works were written in any language on the period, and it mostly seemed to be a confusing interregnum without significant historiographic value. The few studies that did exist tended to search for the developments that would lead to the creation of the Song dynasty. Those developments were primarily found in institutions, rather than battles, people, politics, or culture. The history of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, like much of Chinese history in Western languages, was devoid of biographies. With *Fire and Ice*, Professor Davis has continued his efforts to bring the lives of some of the emperors who ruled during the Five Dynasties to our attention, and to make available the complex military, political, and cultural landscapes in which those emperors operated.

*Fire and Ice* is a history of the life of the Later Tang emperor Li Cunxu 李存勗 (885–926), posthumously known as Zhuangzong 莊宗. It is an updated version of a manuscript that Professor Davis wrote a decade ago and was subsequently translated into Chinese and published in Beijing in 2009. Davis returned to the biography after publishing a biography of Zhuangzong's successor, Li Siyuan 李嗣源 (867–933), posthumously known as Mingzong 明宗,<sup>1</sup> revising the manuscript in light of nearly a decade of new secondary scholarship. Davis modestly describes his goal as making the history of this period accessible to the undergraduate audience. While this book

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<sup>1</sup> *From Warhorses to Ploughshares: The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014).

would no doubt be accessible to undergraduates and general readers, its presentation also leaves no excuse for specialists in other areas of Chinese history to ignore this period. More critically, by writing another biography of a lesser-known historical figure, he highlights that other strand of Chinese history writing, biographies.

Surprisingly few Western sinologists have written even one biography of a Chinese figure, let alone two. This is extremely odd given that biographies of exemplar figures have been a staple of Chinese history since at least Sima Qian, yet the modern Western academy seems resolutely uninterested in the form. On the other hand, *Fire and Ice* does demonstrate some of the difficulties of writing a modern biography based upon traditional Chinese histories. Although Davis consulted all of the very limited sources available for Li Cunxu's life, most of the major ones, he admits, were based in the veritable records (*shilu* 實錄), and all took a negative view of Li. The strong tradition of Chinese biographies was also marked by the need to categorize their subjects into positive or negative exemplars of certain types. Davis strives with uneven success to overcome the bias of the source materials, but concedes that after all is said and done, "Li Cunxu will always be an enigma" (p. xi).

Despite these limitations the portrait of Li is quite human. He was a man of two worlds, Shatuo 沙陀 and Chinese, and grew up in a time of tumultuous politics and war. As Davis makes clear, he was an extraordinary man, for all his faults, reinvigorating the Shatuo forces and defeating the Later Liang dynasty to "restore" the Tang. This would not have been surprising to his parents, or indeed anyone close to Li growing up, since he was pronounced destined for greatness as a child. He was not only accomplished in both Chinese and Shatuo culture, but also talented in music and the arts. As with other broadly accomplished and highly privileged men, however, he was also self-indulgent, arrogant, and narcissistic. The qualities that made him an attractive hero also made him a repulsive autocrat.

Davis recognizes that, given the limitations of the sources, it is impossible reliably to challenge the traditional biases against Li Cunxu. From the perspective of eleventh-century historians like Ouyang Xiu, Li acted the way he did because he was a Shatuo Türk, just like his father Li Keyong 李克用. Barbarians were impetuous and violent, and their leaders were no different. Li Cunxu's military successes in the traditional view are the mere expression of barbarians' martial vigour, but as Davis's narrative highlights, the political challenges were equally important. The historiographical problem for Ouyang Xiu was demonstrating that Heaven's Mandate passed through the hands of Li Cunxu, while at the same time denying the barbarian as much legitimacy as possible.

As a work aimed at a more general reader, Davis's biography spends less time on the historiographical issues and makes its particular contribution in separating out the individuals who surrounded Li Cunxu. Li was strongly influenced by a series

of women, beginning with his mother, all of whom acted to mitigate his more self-destructive impulses. Li was also advised by men like Zhang Chengye 張承業, a eunuch, Guo Chongtao 郭崇韜, a military man, and the adopted son of his father, and successor, Li Siyuan. Zhang would also serve as a standard of propriety for Li, raising the possibility that the sources were making a not-so-subtle argument that a barbarian like Li looked to women and eunuchs for correct behaviour. Guo Chongtao was also critical, though mostly on the battlefield.

The most critical person in light of subsequent events was Li Siyuan. The two men were competitive, with Siyuan serving under Cunxu. After Cunxu was killed in a mutiny, Siyuan managed carefully to tread the myriad political and military challenges to succeed him. The complexity of the Later Tang polity makes for fascinating reading, though the large cast of characters is often hard to follow. Even knowing that Cunxu will become emperor and that Siyuan will succeed him, the story is hardly linear or predictable.

In the end, I am left wondering if Professor Davis is not making a more pointed criticism of the field with his two biographies. Previous scholarship has focused much more on institutions and culture over individuals. The Tang-Song transition, in this telling, is not about chance and personalities, but about evolving structures that brought about the Song founding from the remnants of the Tang. For Song historians, the reason their dynasty succeeded was because their founder was the first in a long line of lesser men to possess the moral qualities to conquer and rule, rather than just conquer. Just as important, Song historians traced the evolution of the institutions of government to show that the Song inherited and made adjustments to the critical administrative systems that allowed the Song to flourish. Modern scholarship has overwhelmingly supported the latter explanation due mostly to academic fashion.

*Fire and Ice* highlights the choice that modern scholars have made to ignore the personalities of the Five Dynasties. Li Cunxu looks very similar to the Song founder in many respects, as does his successor Li Siyuan. All of these rulers had advisers, external and internal threats, and powerful and influential mothers. But Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 created a long-lasting dynasty, and Li Cunxu and Li Siyuan did not.

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