

The Writing of Official History Under the T'ang

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Introduction

The modern historian concerned with the earlier periods of Chinese history remains heavily dependent on the material contained in the standard dynastic histories. It is therefore essential for him to subject the texts of these works to the most rigorous critical scrutiny, for they are rarely the simple product of a single author or group of compilers that they appear to be at first sight. A first step in such a critical scrutiny must be an understanding, in the greatest possible detail, of the process by which the "normative" official historical record of a period came into being, in order to assess the ways in which the process of compilation influenced the final record. Failure to understand such technical matters can blunt our critical interpretation of the histories almost as much as failure to appreciate and make allowance for the conventional intellectual attitudes of official "Confucian" historiography or to understand which specific issues and political problems seemed of paramount importance to contemporary official historians.

This study provides such critical scrutiny of history writing in the T'ang period, and shows how changes in the historiographical process gave rise to marked variations both in the reliability and in the level of detail of the record for different reigns that are reflected in the surviving histories.

Critical investigation of T'ang historical sources is not, of course, anything new. Ssu-ma Kuang was, after all, engaged in just such an activity in the eleventh century when he compiled the critical notes on his sources, the *K'ao-i*, appended to his great history the *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien*, and Ch'ing historians did much invaluable work along the same lines. But their studies raise an interesting interpretative problem. Critical historians of the Ch'ing period, such as Chao I and Ch'ien Ta-hsin, who in the eighteenth century gave close attention to the compilation of the historical record under the T'ang, immediately understood the T'ang system, because the bureaucratic apparatus created to

compile the state record, and the general process of compilation the T'ang had created, had later become permanent features of Chinese government. Many professional historians through the centuries knew the system instinctively from having worked within it. But this heightened understanding based on an awareness of parallels with the official historiography of more recent periods was not without its dangers. Just as scholars brought up in the traditional educational and examination system of Ming and Ch'ing times tended to see the T'ang examination system in terms of their own times, and to read into it an importance, a place in society, a basis in Confucian orthodoxy, and a sophistication of method that it had not yet acquired, so the historiographical system has been taken as evidence of a highly complex, firmly established organization along the lines of that existing under later dynasties. In what follows, I try to show how, just as the T'ang examination system remained in a formative, flexible, and experimental stage by comparison with later practice, the machinery for state historiography was also still in the course of development and underwent considerable changes during the dynasty.

I shall first attempt to examine the various institutions that were involved in the compilation of the record, and to see what limits were put on the record by the circumstances under which its material was collected. Second, I shall examine in turn each of the categories of official historical record – the stages through which the official record was refined, selected, and edited – and show at which stages of the process specific types of materials were inserted.

Lastly, I shall venture some tentative hypotheses on how these institutional changes in the machinery and methods of historical compilation are reflected in our chief source for the period, the *Chiu T'ang shu*. This section was originally intended to give an analysis of the entire history, but the ongoing publication of a vast mass of previously inaccessible epigraphic material, both in China and Taiwan and in Europe, has made it premature to attempt such a study of the biographical section, much of which was intimately related to memorial inscriptions of various sorts. I have confined my detailed remarks to the annals and monographs.¹

1 An example of the complex historiographical problems raised by this new material is provided in David McMullen, "The Death of Chou Li-chen: Imperially Ordered Suicide, or Natural Causes?" *Asia Major*, 3d ser., 2 (1989): 23–82.