



Rise of the Tang Dynasty: The Reunification of China and the Military Response to the Steppe Nomads (AD 581–626) by Julian Romane.

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The rise and fall of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) and the founding of its successor, the Tang (618–907 CE) through a series of civil wars is one of the great epic tales in Chinese history. It spotlights the extravagance and megalomania of the second Sui emperor, Yangdi, and the heroism and perspicacity of the young general Li Shimin, second son of the Tang founder. Recounted piecemeal in the annals and biographies of the *History of the Sui Dynasty* (*Sui shu*, 636 CE) and the *Old History of the Tang Dynasty* (*Jiu Tangshu*, 945 CE), the story first appeared in a coherent narrative in Sima Guang's magisterial *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian*, 1084 CE). Since then, it has been retold many times and in many languages.¹ Although some scholars have questioned elements of the traditional narrative, most have followed the story line and interpretive framework that Sima Guang established.²

Author Julian Romane's addition to the English-language literature falls squarely in the traditionalist camp, hewing closely to the work of Sima Guang in a narrative that occupies the book's first 127 pages. Romane rarely critiques his sources and never seeks to distinguish fact from fiction by comparing variants of key episodes preserved in surviving Tang and Song texts.³ Instead, he scolds "modern commentators" for their skeptical attitude toward traditional narratives (xiv, 39, 51). But, besides retelling an often told tale, he declares "three purposes to this book: to give a detailed picture of medieval Chinese warfare; to provide background to the structure of Chinese military development; and to illustrate how influences passed across the Eurasian 'world island'" (xiv). He addresses the last two goals in the second half of the book (133–205), which consists of appendices on: (1) Chronology of Chinese Dynasties, (2) Military Geography of China, (3) The Great Cities of the Sui and Tang Dynasties, (4) Chinese Art of History, (5) Chinese Military Handbooks, (6) The Great Eurasian Routes, (7) The Horse and the Steppe, (8) Li Shimin's Horses, and (9) Chinese Imperial Armies. These appendices make it clear that the volume is unified by a particular interpretation of history, if not a fully developed argument.

Romane holds that the use of horses in warfare produced social changes all across Eurasia that eventually delivered political power to "clans of horse lords" (129). The "heavy cavalry of knights

1. See C.P. Fitzgerald, *Son of Heaven: A Biography of Li Shih-Min, Founder of the Tang Dynasty* (1933; rpt. NY: AMS Pr, 1971), Woodbridge Bingham, *The Founding of the Tang Dynasty* (Baltimore: Waverly Pr, 1941), Arthur F. Wright, *The Sui Dynasty* (NY: Knopf, 1978), Arthur F. Wright and Howard Wechsler, chaps. 2–4 in *The Cambridge History of China* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1979), Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (Albany: SUNY Pr, 2006), and Hing Ming Hung, *Li Shi Min, Founding the Tang: The Strategies That Made China the Greatest Empire in Asia* (NY: Algora Pr., 2013).

2. Hing Ming Hung's book (*ibid.*), e.g., is little more than an English paraphrase of relevant chapters of the *Comprehensive Mirror*.

3. Such as Wen Daya's *Court Diary of the Founding of Great Tang* (*Da Tang chuanyue qijuzhu*, ca. 624 CE) or Wang Qinruo's *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature* (*Cefu yangui*, 1013 CE).

in armour” first appeared with the Parthians at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE (182–83). This form of cavalry took root in China by the time of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE), if not earlier, during the Han period. The Li family, founders of the Tang, were northern horse lords (191), whose heavy cavalry dominated the battlefields of the Sui-Tang transition.

This thesis overlooks salient differences between China and other parts of Eurasia, such as the staying power of Confucian-educated civil administrators and the political structures they represented. Romane makes some assertions that will raise the eyebrows of specialists in Chinese military history. He maintains, for example, that most of the *fubing* militia soldiers who formed the backbone of the Sui and Tang military were cavalrymen, but offers no evidence to support that novel proposition. The same goes for his claims that nomad cavalry—not chariots—brought an end to the Western Zhou in 771 BCE, and that “Ruists” (better known to nonspecialists as Confucians) blocked technological development in the interest of maintaining social order.

Romane is not a sinologist⁴ and it shows in a number of rookie mistakes: for instance, Cao Pi, not his father Cao Cao, founded the Wei dynasty. Xiongnu groups, not the Tuoba, brought down the Western Jin dynasty. And the Tang crushed the Eastern Turks in 630, not 629. The Sui founder never “proclaimed himself Emperor Wen” (10); the title (*shihao*) was posthumously bestowed. There are also problems with dating systems and the transcription of names.⁵ Romane mentions the “vast Chinese secondary literature” (xiv), but lists in his bibliography only the four-volume *History of Chinese Civilization*.⁶

Romane’s translations from the Chinese tend to be only imaginative paraphrases. Consider, for example, the following versions (by, respectively, Romane and Hing Ming Hung) of a speech in Li Shimin’s face-to-face confrontation with Illig (Ch. Xieli) Qaghan of the Eastern Turks:

You pledged friendship with the Tang! You promised not to invade our lands! Here you are! I am the King of Qin [Li Shimin’s title]! Do you want to fight with me yourself? You and your force can attack us here but we will fight! Do you dare? (122)

The Tang government and you have reached a friendly agreement and you have promised not to invade our territory any more. But now you have gone back on your own promise and have invaded very far into our territory. I am the King of Qin. If you want to fight a duel with me, I will be very glad to fight with you. If you want to attack me with all your men, I will resist your attack with these one hundred cavalrymen.⁷

Romane’s rendition is less accurate and fails (here and passim) to indicate omissions with ellipsis points. Even more troubling, he occasionally inserts material not found in his sources. A

4. By his own account, he first encountered Chinese history as an undergraduate at Beloit College in the mid-1960s. His graduate studies (M.A., Univ. of Colorado, 1970) focused on social science pedagogy. He has published articles on Alexander the Great’s sieges, and *Byzantium Triumphant* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2015). The lack of a record of sustained engagement with things Chinese casts doubt on his claims to have made his own translations from classical Chinese sources like the *Comprehensive Mirror*.

5. Chinese lunar-calendar dates are sometimes misrendered as Western dates. The battle of Huoyi, for example, took place on the third day of the eighth month of the thirteenth year of the Daye reign period of Sui Yangdi, which Romane renders as “August 3”; the correct date should be either 8 September (Julian) or 11 September 617 (Gregorian). The author veers between a highly unusual X X X naming format (as in Hing Ming Hung’s work) and the more standard X Xx format; thus, a Tang officer appears as both “Yin Kai Shan” (57) and “Yin Kaishan” (59).

6. Originally published by Peking Univ. Press (2006), then by Cambridge Univ. Press (2012).

7. *Li Shi Min* (note 1 above) 121. For the Chinese text, see Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956) ch. 191, p. 5992.

case in point is his use of “heavy cavalry” in his battle narratives, even where his sources speak only of “cavalry” (58–59, 61, 82). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he has surreptitiously stacked the deck to sustain his views about “*Chevaliers*” and “horse lords” in the Chinese context. The book has been poorly edited and proofread in general.⁸

Such disappointing details aside, *Rise of the Tang Dynasty* presents a mostly competent (albeit uncritical) rehash of Sima Guang’s narrative of the fall of Sui and rise of Tang, with particular attention to the great battles. Its appendices offer a grab-bag of information and propose that Sui and Tang China was part of a Eurasia-wide phenomenon of rule by “horse lords.” The book may entertain nonspecialist readers, but serious students and scholars should use it with caution.

8. Needed corrections include “tuan” for “turan” (39 and passim) and “Pei Yutong” for “Pie Yutong” (five times on pages 73–74). The conclusion on 204 is repeated almost verbatim on 129–31. Hing Ming Hung’s book (note 1 above), one of Romane’s most important sources, is absent from the bibliography and appears only as “Hung” in the rudimentary source notes for each chapter.