



A Monumental Work Analyzing the Historical Changes of the Han and Tang Dynasties

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Abstract

“The Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties: The Formation and Early Changes of Chinese Feudal Society” (referred to as “Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties” in this article) not only systematically expounds the formation and early changes of Chinese feudal society from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, but also puts forward many innovative academic viewpoints, which has played an important role in promoting the study of ancient Chinese history.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Ancient Chinese History, Historical Interpretation, Academic

1. Author Introduction and Content Summary

Mr. Tang Changru (1911-1994) is a renowned historian from Wujiang, Jiangsu. He graduated from the Humanities Department of Datong University in Shanghai and has taught at multiple schools. Since 1940, he has served as a lecturer and associate professor at Guanghua University in Shanghai, Lantian National Normal University in Hunan, and the History Department of Wuhan University, and has been teaching at Wuhan University for a long time. He holds multiple important positions at the school, including the director of the history department and research institute [1]. In addition, Mr. Tang Changru also holds multiple academic positions, including research fellow at the Institute of History of the Chinese Academy

of Social Sciences and member of the State Council's planning group for the compilation and publication of ancient books. He has extensive knowledge, especially in the fields of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang history, ancient books, and the compilation and research of Dunhuang and Turpan documents. He is praised by the academic community at home and abroad as one of the outstanding historians of the 20th century and has made important contributions to the development of history.

Apart from the "Introduction" and "Comprehensive Discussion", "Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang" is divided into three chapters. The introduction mainly discusses the social structure of the Han Dynasty [2]. At the opening of the book, the introduction provides readers with an important background for understanding the historical changes during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties. The first article, "On the Changes in the Wei and Jin Dynasties", deeply analyzes the social and economic reconstruction, the rise of aristocratic politics, the trend of diminishing the status of soldiers, and the significant changes in the field of ideology and academia, especially the rise of metaphysics, comprehensively demonstrating the historical transformation of this period. The second article, "On the Differences between the Northern and Southern Dynasties", provides a detailed comparative analysis of the significant differences between the two periods from four aspects: social and economic structure, status of aristocratic families, military system, and academic style. It reveals the unique historical development paths of each period under the background of the North-South split. The third article, "On the Changes in the Tang Dynasty", focuses on four major areas: social economy, aristocratic examination system, military system, and academic thought. It elaborates on the profound changes in Tang society and demonstrates the transformation process and historical influence of the Tang Dynasty from the early stage to the prosperous era [3]. The comprehensive section provides an overall overview of the historical development of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties. It not only summarizes the main viewpoints of each chapter, but also puts forward the author's unique insights into the historical development of this period, providing readers with a macro-historical perspective and in-depth thinking space. This book extensively cites literature and attaches great importance to the identification and revision of literature. It also fully absorbs and draws on the research results of domestic and foreign academic circles. It is a must read for history learners in the process of studying the history of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties.

2. Key Points and Experiences with Great Inspiration during the Reading Process

2.1. The Author's Writing Purpose and Problem Awareness

"The Three Treatises on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties" is a macroscopic examination of Chinese history

from the 3rd to the 9th century, and through the complex historical phenomena, it provides insights into the clues and threads of the development of ancient Chinese history, and thus obtains a series of regular understandings of the formation and changes of Chinese feudal society. This work is a theoretical summary of the author's long-term research on the history of the "Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties". The content is extremely rich, the arguments are quite detailed, and it can be said that the author has profound thoughts and innovative ideas, which makes people sincerely feel the author's profound academic ability, broad and profound historical perspective, rigorous scholarship, and perseverance in exploring truth [4].

The full text of the book "Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties" is over 330,000 words, covering the range from the Han Dynasty to the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Based on the analysis and argumentation of a large number of historical materials, the book mainly explores the issue of periodization of ancient Chinese history, the differences in historical development between the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the transformation of China's feudal society from the early stage to the later stage, and specific historical issues during the Wei, Jin, Sui and Tang Dynasties. It conducts in-depth and detailed investigations and insights into the development trajectory of ancient Chinese history. These issues collectively constitute Mr. Tang Changru's problem consciousness, and a series of studies have been conducted to draw conclusions. Mr. Tang believes that "from the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, there were profound changes in society, which manifested the transformation of slave society into a feudal society. One of the most obvious signs of this change was the humbleness and universalization of the masses. In the Han Dynasty, especially in the Western Han Dynasty, slave owners were the most active elements in the socio-economic field. Handicraft workshop owners, plantation owners, and large merchants used a large number of slaves and hired laborers with slave-like characteristics for labor production and commercial activities. The number of slaves possessed was one of the measures of their wealth [5]. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, slave owners operating in the circulation field were rare, and during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, it was even rarer". The Han Dynasty restricted slaves, and the Jin Dynasty restricted guests, clearly indicating two different forms of exploitation. The sentence is: In addition to the macro issues mentioned above, Mr. Tang also analyzed many significant and specific issues that were previously unknown to his predecessors in the book, such as the formation of the aristocratic system and the establishment of the Nine Rank Official Law during the Wei and Jin dynasties, the ideological mysticism that adapted to the early feudal society's aristocratic politics, and the basic characteristics of the late Han and Wei dynasties as the formation stage of Chinese feudal society [6]. In the second article, Mr. Tang fully utilized comparative methods to compare the social, economic, political, military, and cultural aspects of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. He pointed out that the reason for the differences in social development between

the Northern and Southern Dynasties was due to the “development path of the feudal society of the Three Kingdoms and Western Jin” in the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, while in the North, due to the influence of wars and other reasons, “some institutional forms emerged under special historical conditions”. In the third article, Mr. Tang pointed out that the trajectory of social development in the Northern and Southern Dynasties ultimately achieved complete unification during the Tang Dynasty. Tang Changru conducted a detailed study of the development and changes in various fields, such as social economy, politics, military, and culture in the Tang Dynasty. He pointed out that these changes marked the transition of Chinese feudal society from the early stage to the later stage, and through a detailed examination, Tang Changru pointed out that the most important part of these changes is the inheritance of the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, which we will call “Nanization” for now.

2.2. Academic Exploration and Historical Interpretation of This Book

Mr. Tang Changru delved into macro issues such as economy, politics, military, and academic thought during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui, and Tang dynasties, while also delving into specific historical details such as population changes, land systems, clan systems, military systems, and the rise of mysticism [7]. He conducted a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the history of this period. Mr. Tang used a combination of macroscopic examination and microscopic analysis to extensively collect and utilize a large number of historical documents and archaeological materials, such as “Records of the Three Kingdoms”, “Book of Jin”, “Book of Southern Qi”, “Book of Wei”, “Book of Sui”, as well as archaeological materials such as inscriptions and epitaphs. He not only compared ancient and modern times, comparing the Han Dynasty with the Wei and Jin Dynasties to distinguish the differences between the two, but also made comparisons between the north and the south, pointing out that after the Yongjia Rebellion, the north and south split again, and at that time, the development process of the history of the north and south underwent significant differences in some aspects [8]. At the same time, Mr. Tang adopted analytical methods or means such as literature research, comparative research, and inductive deduction. For example, when exploring the social changes from the late Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, Mr. Tang Changru cited a record from Volume 23 of the “Records of the Three Kingdoms” and “The Biography of Changlin in the Book of Wei”: “Changlin’s uncle once served as a guest and was ‘treated’”. Based on this, he analyzed and pointed out that “although the local government wanted to extort money from the valley, it also indicated that the host could not treat the guest casually, at least as an excuse for treatment, which implied that the guest was still a good person”. In addition, he also cited the story of Sima Zhi’s punishment of local strongman Liu Jie during the reign of Jian Chang in Volume 12 of the “Records of the Three Kingdoms” and further analyzed the legal status and social influence of the

dependent relationship at that time. In addition, the author compared the academic trends of the North and the South in the book. Mr. Tang believed that during the late Han and Three Kingdoms periods, the North and the South basically entered feudal society simultaneously. After the Yongjia Rebellion, the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties followed the development path of the feudal society of the Three Kingdoms and Western Jin [9]. In the North, due to long-term wars, social production was severely damaged, and a group of new rulers were originally ethnic minorities who half cultivated and half grazed on the northern border. These Northern ethnic regimes, especially the Northern Wei regime that unified the North, in addition to following the traditions of the Han and Wei dynasties, inevitably mixed their familiar models and customs, such as the equal land system and the prefectural military system, which are typical examples. Therefore, in the process of restoring production, consolidating political power, and establishing order, the northern society inserted an unnecessary process, resulting in some institutional forms that emerged under special historical conditions, thus showing significant differences from the Southern Dynasty that inherited the traditions of the late Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties. When comparing the Tang Dynasty with previous history, Mr. Tang pointed out: With the political reunification and cultural integration and exchange between the North and the South, the various differences that emerged during the period of North South division gradually narrowed... The Tang Dynasty underwent significant changes in economy, politics, military, and culture, marking the transition of Chinese feudal society from the early to the later period [10]. However, these changes, or the most important part of them, were the inheritance of the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, which we will call “Nanization”.

3. Thoughts on This Book and Its Author

Since the 1930s, under the guidance of Liu Chenggan and Jin Songcen, Tang Changru began to specialize in the study of history. Tang Changru relied on his profound foundation in traditional historiography and the guidance of scientific theory to continue his academic research career for over fifty years, writing extensively [11]. In his early years, Tang Changru focused on the collation and verification of historical materials from the Liao, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties. In the 40th year, he turned to the field of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui, and Tang history, specializing in the history of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. At the age of 80, Tang Changru, despite his illness, conducted a theoretical summary of his lifelong historical research and wrote the book “Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang”. Tang Changru integrated his early research on specific topics into the macro thinking of historical materialism, summarized and elevated his academic research, and condensed this work. This book systematically summarizes Tang Changru’s unique insights on the formation and development of feudal society throughout his life, and summarizes Tang Changru’s academic research into a systematic theoretical framework.

It plays a foundational and guiding role for scholars who later studied the history of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang [12].

The academic spirit of Mr. Tang Changru is what we truly need to learn and carry forward. We can learn from the “Afterword” that Mr. Tang started writing this book at the age of 77, and his vision was declining day by day, making it very difficult to read large character woodcut editions. Writing was even more difficult. In the winter of 1989, his wife passed away, and he underwent surgery for a stomach disease in 1990 [13]. In the midst of his old illness and loss of loved ones, Mr. Tang “considered stopping writing several times, but finally gathered the courage to complete the first draft by the end of 1991”. “After the first draft was completed, he invited comrades Zhou Yiliang and Wang Sizhi to review it, and comrades Zhang Zexian and Huang Huixian to revise it”. Finally, according to the opinions of the reviewers, he revised it again before submitting it to the publishing house for publication. This is a vivid manifestation of Mr. Tang Changru’s persistent exploration of the true meaning of history and clarification of historical laws, demonstrating his rigorous and pragmatic attitude toward scholarship. It is also the fundamental reason for the high academic level of “Three Discussions on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang”.

“The Three Treatises on the History of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and Sui and Tang” is an important historical academic work that not only provides us with rich historical data and profound insights, but also offers new methods and perspectives for historical research. Mr. Tang Changru’s work will undoubtedly continue to play a significant role in future academic studies and become an essential reference for the study of ancient Chinese history.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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