

A Comparative Analysis of Foreign Perspectives on Tang Dynasty Narratives: Examining History of Imperial China and A History of China

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Abstract: *History of Imperial China*, published by Harvard University Press in the United States, and *A History of China*, published by Kodansha in Japan, are significant works on Chinese general history abroad. Due to differing perspectives and temporal and spatial contexts, these works exhibit distinct narrative styles and characteristics for the same historical period. This article compares the narrative variances between the Tang History Volume of *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China*, aiming to elucidate the underlying reasons for such disparities. Analysis reveals that the primary distinction between these two historical works lies in their overarching focus: while *History of Imperial China* adopts a global perspective, examining the evolution of China's imperial system, the volume China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (*History of Imperial China*, Vol. III) delves into the shifts and adaptations of the Chinese imperial system during the Tang Dynasty. Conversely, each volume of *A History of China* boasts unique attributes, with Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (*A History of China*, Vol. VI) adopting an East Asian perspective to scrutinize the Tang Dynasty's impact as a global empire. This article posits that the disparities in overall structure and specific content between the two works stem from several factors, including publishing objectives and target audiences, the scholarly traditions of Chinese history research in the United States and Japan, the historical relationship between respective countries and China during the Tang Dynasty, as well as the research fields and propositions of the authors.

Keywords: *History of Imperial China*, *A History of China*, Tang History, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

The Cambridge History of China, published by the University of Cambridge Press in the United Kingdom, *History of Imperial China*, published by Harvard University Press in the United States, and *A History of China*, published by Kodansha in Japan, stand as pivotal general historical works on Chinese history abroad. Despite focusing on the same historical period, varying narratives and characteristics emerge due to diverse perspectives and temporal contexts. By examining the parallels and distinctions in Chinese historical narratives between China and foreign nations, as well as among different countries, we can gain insights into different viewpoints and attain a more holistic understanding of history. Additionally, analyzing the historical perspectives and narrative traits of

different nations becomes feasible. This article selects the Tang history volumes from *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China* as case studies to investigate discrepancies between the two works and endeavor to elucidate the reasons behind these disparities. The rationale for choosing these two series of books lies in their representation of Western Chinese history research (*History of Imperial China*) and Asian Chinese history research (*A History of China*) within overseas Chinese historical works. The selection of Tang history as the focus is justified by its significance as one of the paramount periods in Chinese history. Moreover, these two book series offer extensive discussions and abundant content, thus providing comprehensive material for argumentation.

2. Overview of *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China*

History of Imperial China, published by Harvard University and edited by Canadian historian Timothy Brook, features contributions from three authors. The original English version was completed between 2007 and 2016, with the Chinese version translated and released by CITIC Publishing House in October 2016. Comprising six volumes, the series includes: The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han, China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties, China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty, The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China, The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and China's Last Empire: The Great Qing. Notably, the title indicates a focus on China's imperial system's developmental trajectory, making it more specialized than a general history.

A History of China, published by Kodansha in Japan, constitutes a comprehensive series covering ancient to modern times. Originally comprising 12 volumes in Japanese, written between 2004 and 2005, this series differs from scholarly-edited works in that it is edited by publishing houses. Each volume is authored by eminent scholars, resulting in distinct and personalized content. Chinese scholar Xu Hong lauds the series for vividly preserving authors' original ideas, highlighting the diversity of scholarly thoughts[1]. The Chinese version, introduced by Guangxi Normal University Press in 2014, comprises 10 translated volumes, including: From Mythology to History: The Xia Dynasty, From Urban Countries to China: The Shang and Zhou Dynasty, Spring and Autumn Period, Warring States Period, The Legacy of the First Emperor: Qin and Han, The World of the Three Kingdoms: The Later Han Dynasty and The Three Kingdoms Period, The Collapse and Expansion of China: The Wei and Jin Dynasty, The Northern and Southern Dynasties, Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties, The Flowing of Chinese Thought and Religion: The Song Dynasty, The Expeditionary Conqueror of the Grassland: The Liao Dynasty, Western Xia, Jin and Yuan Dynasty, The Sea and The Empire: The Ming and Qing Dynasties, and The Last Dynasty and Modern China: The Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. Unlike *History of Imperial China*, this series does not adhere to a single narrative thread but rather focuses on historical stages and prominent features of each era.

This article's comparative study focuses on Volume III of *History of Imperial China*, titled China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty, and Volume VI of *A History of China*, titled Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties.

3. The characteristics and differences of the Tang history narratives in *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China*

3.1. Narrative perspective

In *History of Imperial China*, the narrative perspective is notably characterized by its global outlook. Timothy Brook, the editor-in-chief, highlighted this perspective in a 2021 interview with Xinmin Weekly, emphasizing the examination of internal and external factors that shaped China's development within the context of global history. Brook articulated that connecting China with the

outside world offers Western readers a fresh understanding of the country's dynamics beyond its borders[2]. Additionally, the book adopts a realistic perspective, as expressed by Brook in the preface of the Chinese version. He urges historians to delve into the intricacies of life during the historical eras they write about, emphasizing the importance of capturing the complexity of life experiences rather than adhering to preconceived historical narratives[3]. Consequently, the narrative of Tang history in *History of Imperial China* is grounded in realistic considerations of time and space, framed within a broader global vision.

Contrastingly, in *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties*, published by Kodansha, the narrative perspective distinctly emphasizes East Asia. The author underscores the Tang Dynasty's centrality in the East Asian world in the preface of the Chinese version, expressing hope that readers will engage with East Asian issues through an exploration of the captivating history of the Sui and Tang Dynasties[4]. Moreover, the title of the preface, *Rapidly Turbulent East Asia*, sets the stage for the establishment of an East Asian perspective from the outset, evident in the overall structure of the book.

3.2. Narrative thread

China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty, the third volume of *History of Imperial China*, authored by Mark Edward Lewis, a distinguished expert on ancient Chinese history and a professor at Stanford University, maintains the series' focus on the development of Chinese imperialism. The introduction sets the tone by stating, Most Chinese regard the Tang Dynasty (618-907) as the highpoint of imperial China, both politically and culturally [3]. The overarching narrative logic of this volume centers on the theme of change. As articulated in the introduction, the Tang Dynasty was also an age of transformation. The world at the end of the Tang was quite different from what it had been at the beginning, and the dynasty's historical importance is a consequence of the changes that took place during that time [3]. This volume's nine chapters delve into various facets of change, exploring background, institutional elements, social dynamics, cultural and geographic patterns, foreign trade, commerce, and cultural evolution. Hence, the main narrative line of *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* is change or transformation.

Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties, the sixth volume of *A History of China*, authored by Professor KEGASAWA Yasunori of Meiji University, underscores the Sui and Tang dynasties' pivotal role not only in Chinese history but also on the global stage. In the preface of the Chinese edition, the author emphasizes the dynasties' significance as a peak period in Chinese history and as central to the East Asian world[4]. The author poses the question of why the Sui and Tang dynasties wielded such profound influence. Throughout the book, the central theme revolves around influence. The narrative explores the political, institutional, and other factors contributing to this influence, as well as its manifestations in economic, cultural, religious, and external communication spheres. Thus, the key narrative thread of *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties* is influence.

4. Analysis of the Reasons for Differences in the Narration of Tang History between *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China*

Firstly, the divergent publishing purposes and target readerships of the two series play a significant role. *History of Imperial China* is a scholarly series edited by academics, focusing on in-depth research into China's imperial system, tailored for history students and researchers. Conversely, *A History of China* aims to make historical knowledge accessible to the general public. Li Zhe from Higher Education Press mentioned that it is a tradition for Japanese scholars to present academic insights in popular reading materials to maximize knowledge dissemination [1]. This contrast is

evident in the narrative style and content selection. While *History of Imperial China* emphasizes analysis, delving into data and political contexts with academic language, *A History of China* prioritizes storytelling, presenting content in a more accessible manner, often in areas familiar to the public, with colloquial language. For instance, both volumes cover women in the Tang Dynasty. In *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (History of Imperial China)*, the discussion in Chapter 7, titled Kinship, focuses on the social status and political roles of Tang Dynasty women, primarily serving themes of politics, society, and law. Conversely, *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (A History of China)* dedicates a chapter to Empress Wu and Women in the Tang Dynasty, exploring various aspects such as daily life, emotions, and marriage. Demonstrates a more accessible and friendly approach to the content.

Secondly, the historical research approaches of the United States and Japan, especially their traditions in Chinese history research, diverge significantly. In the academic realm, it is widely acknowledged that Chinese history studies in the United States have transitioned from a Western-centric perspective to a more Chinese-centered view. The newer generation of Chinese historians is dedicated to uncovering China's history from within its own society and exploring the driving forces behind its historical progress[5]. Conversely, in Japan, the East Asian perspective holds considerable importance in Chinese history research. As Atsushi Ikeda notes, it's common for Chinese history research in Japan to be seen as an integral part of East Asian history, a view entrenched in the Japanese academic community[6]. This disparity is particularly evident in the overall narrative perspective and chapter organization of the two books. In *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (History of Imperial China)*, the opening chapter titled The Geography of Empire delves into the expansion of the Tang Dynasty from its heartland in Guanzhong to various regions such as the northeast, Central Plains, Sichuan, and the surrounding areas. It also explores the unique dynamics between internal and external forces during the Tang Dynasty, embodying the concept of uncovering history within China itself. In contrast, in *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (A History of China)*, as previously mentioned, the introductory chapter titled Rapidly Turbulent East Asia sets the tone from the outset. Furthermore, after discussing key aspects of Tang Dynasty governance, society, economy, and military, Chapter 9 specifically delves into the trends observed in East Asian countries, providing a comprehensive examination of the influence exerted by the Tang Dynasty on its neighboring nations.

Thirdly, the relationship between the United States and Japan during the Tang Dynasty differed significantly. China and Japan, being close neighbors, shared extensive cultural exchanges during this period, with Japan assimilating numerous elements of Chinese culture that became integral to Japanese society, exerting a lasting influence to this day. Consequently, discussions of the dissemination of Chinese culture in Japan are inevitable in Japanese narratives of Tang history. However, given that the United States did not exist during the Tang Dynasty, American scholars lack the opportunity to explore the historical relationship between the two countries during that era. As a result, they typically adopt a more detached and retrospective approach to Tang history in China. For instance, both volumes discuss the pinnacle of Tang literary achievement—poetry. In *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (A History of China)*, discussions of China-Japan interactions permeate the discourse on Tang poetry. References are made to Tang figures like Wang Wei, who had close ties with Abeno Nakamaro, and the profound influence of Bai Juyi's poetry in Japan. Furthermore, distinctions are drawn between the unique characteristics of poetry from the Flourishing Tang Dynasty and Japan's preference for poetry from the mid-Tang period[4]. Notably, Japanese scholars often adopt a perspective of proximity and cultural affinity, reflecting on these exchanges as neighbors or even kin. Conversely, such discourse perspective and tone are absent in *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (History of Imperial China)*. This discrepancy is attributed to the historical relationship between the two countries, encompassing geographical, historical, diplomatic, and other factors, both during the Tang Dynasty and in the present day.

Finally, the differences in the author's research field and academic approach are notable. This contrast is particularly evident in the *A History of China* series, where the authors' personalities are prominently showcased. In the recommendation preface of *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (A History of China)*, Professor Zhang Guogang of Tsinghua University's History Department highlights the distinctiveness of the book. He notes the author's low evaluation on Emperor Zhenguan's reign. Additionally, when exploring Empress Wu Zetian's rule, the author draws comparisons with female-led regimes in East Asia during the same period. Unlike conventional Chinese textbooks or dynastic histories, the author delves into topics such as the Tang Dynasty's red light district, the urban landscapes of Chang'an and Luoyang, and the Buddhist culture of Wudai Mountain and Yunju Temple in Fangshan. Professor Zhang further acknowledges that Japanese scholars possess unique advantages in international Chinese history research, fostering their own academic styles and traditions. Consequently, this book reflects the author's comprehensive achievements and contemporary Japanese research on Sui and Tang history, embodying the distinct perspective of Japanese scholars on Sui and Tang history [4].

An analysis of specific topics, such as discussions on women in the Tang Dynasty, further highlights the divergence between the two works. In *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (History of Imperial China)*, women are analyzed in only one section of Chapter 7, spanning a mere 9 pages. Conversely, *Brilliant World Empires: The Sui and Tang Dynasties (A History of China)* dedicates an entire chapter to examining Empress Wu and women in the Tang Dynasty. Based on the author's biography, it is evident that the author published a monograph on Empress Wu Zetian in 1995, suggesting that this work served as the foundation for the chapter's content. Moreover, the topic of Empress Wu and women is likely one of the author's research focuses. Consequently, Japanese scholar Kegasawa Yasunori extensively presents personalized research findings in this Tang history volume. In contrast, the introduction to Mark Edward Lewis in *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (History of Imperial China)* is relatively brief. However, it notes Lewis's expertise in examining Chinese issues from political and social perspectives. Accordingly, the analysis within the book underscores the author's focus on politics and institutions, prioritizing the exploration and description of society's overall landscape.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, history, whether presented academically or for general readership, inevitably reflects the author's perspective and personality. Consequently, different narrative styles can offer varied insights and portrayals of historical events. Overseas Chinese history research, in particular, often brings unique perspectives and fresh ideas to the table. However, it's essential to recognize that every historical narrative has its strengths and limitations, influenced by the author's perspective, publishing constraints, and academic context. While learning from others' strengths, it's crucial to acknowledge and address their limitations. This process allows for a more comprehensive understanding of history. This article has focused on comparing the Tang history volumes of *History of Imperial China* and *A History of China*, but further exploration of the differences and underlying causes in historical narratives remains possible. Future research can expand the scope of study, validating and refining the perspectives and conclusions presented here.

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