

# Literary men and intellectual transformations in Tang China

**L**iterary *Men and Intellectual Transformations in Tang China*, by Jo-shui Chen, Distinguished Professor of History, National Taiwan University, is a major study of intellectual change in China from the eighth to the eleventh century. The subject of this book pertains to the Tang-Song transition, which is widely viewed as one of the greatest historical changes in China before the coming of Western powers in the late nineteenth century. On the intellectual side, one major outcome of this all-important transformation was the emergence of a new type of Confucianism that evolved into the cultural orthodoxy of late imperial China. This new approach to Confucianism fundamentally altered the previous intellectual order, which had been much more diverse in structure and had included key roles for both Buddhism and Taoism (mainly in the form of the Taoist religion).

In the book, Professor Chen focuses on the earlier phases of these intellectual changes, roughly, from the middle of the eighth century to the late ninth century, corresponding to the middle and late periods of the Tang Dynasty (609-907). He finds that two main strains of thought existed in the mid- and late-Tang Confucian revival. One rejuvenated the traditional form of Confucianism, emphasizing its function in establishing a sound political order. The other carried a strong anti-Buddhist sentiment and posited that Confucianism should be the guiding principle

governing the human world as a whole, including spiritual matters and the cosmological significance of human existence. The former represents mainstream thought at the time, while the latter was the primary source of innovation. Professor Chen also finds that the pivotal force generating the intellectual changes in question might not have been ideas in the Confucian revival per se; rather, change was driven by the fact that many literary writers began to promote the Confucian cause after the mid-Tang era. Literary writing was the most prestigious activity in Tang elite culture, and literary writers enjoyed unrivaled status among the literati. As such, the change in focus of the literary community had an enormous intellectual impact. Professor Chen also analyzes the ideas of mid-Tang intellectual leaders in contrast to the generally held beliefs in the earlier periods of medieval China, thus illuminating both early-Tang intellectual outlooks and the essential features of the Confucian revival as an intellectual trend.

Professor Chen's book is distinctive in its approach, addressing multiple subjects related to the phenomenon of the mid- and late-Tang Confucian revival from diverse perspectives. The book is thus interdisciplinary in character. It extensively explores literary and religious trends and pays detailed attention to the social origins of ideas. Based on these diverse studies, Professor Chen offers a systematic explanation for a great and complex

intellectual transition. The book not only elucidates phenomena and developments that have previously failed to receive adequate scholarly attention but also shows the dynamics—or at least some of the important drivers—of this historical change. In addition to achieving a new and expanded understanding of a critical historical shift, the book lays a solid foundation for further inquiry into the foggy intellectual conditions of the tenth and early eleventh centuries.

## Reference

Jo-shui Chen. (2016). *Literary Men and Intellectual Transformations in Tang China* (expanded edition). *Tangdai wenshi yu Zhongguo sixiang de zhuanxing*. 唐代文士與中國思想的轉型 (增訂本). Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

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