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Understanding China through Comics, Volume 2

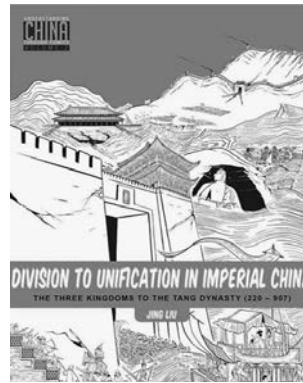
Division to Unification in Imperial China: The Three Kingdoms to the Tang Dynasty (220–907)

By JING LIU

ALBANY: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 2016

168 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1611720303, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Karl R. Neumann



The classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* opens with the famous line, "Anything long divided will surely unite, and anything long united will surely divide." This aphorism aptly summarizes the historical thread that winds its way through the second volume of Jing Liu's series *Understanding China through Comics*. In just under 150 pages, Liu deftly navigates the ebb and flow of nearly 400 years of Chinese history by placing key people, events, and ideas within a compelling narrative, augmented by eye-catching visuals. By keeping the emphasis on the big picture and the interactions between China's past and present, Liu helps the reader navigate the complexities of this formative era with both passion and humor.

Spanning a time frame from 220 to 907 CE, Liu's work is chronologically structured and subdivided into three major sections that each encompass a key era. The book opens with a brief serial filmlike recap of the main ideas covered in the series's first volume. This sets the stage for the initial third of the text ("The Age of Division") that explores the end of the Han dynasty, the internecine conflicts of the Three Kingdoms, the brief Jin reunification, and the invasions by non-Han people that led to China's division into northern and southern traditions in the fifth and sixth centuries. Within this political narrative, Liu injects subsections focusing on important intellectual developments, like the Profound Learning Movement, the broad acceptance of Buddhism into Chinese civilization, and the consequent evolution of Daoism into a religion. The next third of the volume explains the Sui dynasty's ambitious efforts to reunite China for the first time in two and a half centuries. This section ends with an extensive examination of how the Sui collapsed as a result of a devastating series of wars with the early Korean kingdom of Koguryō. The final third of the book is devoted to the political, social, and cultural impacts of the Tang dynasty "golden age."

One of the book's most attractive elements is the interplay between Liu's prose and his vivid illustrations. The text's language is straightforward but sophisticated in its reflections on Chinese history and culture, making it accessible to a range of readers, from middle school-aged students to adult learners. Liu's fluid writing is complemented by monochromatic images that vary in size from vignettes to diagrams spanning two full pages, depending on the topic being discussed. Several of the larger illustrations highlight Liu's keen ability to articulate complex historical and philosophical ideas with precision and comprehensibility. A detailed dynastic timeline presented near the start of the book quickly establishes the political

complexities of the Age of Division and is enhanced by short captions summarizing the chronology's wider historical implications. A bit later, Liu uses two separate full-page images to visually establish the personalities and geographical influences of the Three Kingdom's main protagonists. Cao Cao, Lu Bei, and Sun Quan are distinctly drawn and with clear character profiles, helping the reader successfully navigate the otherwise-complex set of events that solidified the end of the Han dynasty. Similarly, Liu uses several single-page graphic organizers to explain the many ways the Sui and Tang Dynasties drew upon the diversification of Chinese culture present in the Age of Division to revise the systematic bureaucracy, tribute system, and China's social order. These and many of the book's other visualizations could be very useful to teachers seeking resources to quickly initiate class discussions on these topics or provide students with the background necessary to examine period artifacts and primary sources.

Liu's technique of telling stories with the larger story is also effective. At strategic points, Liu pauses to explain topics that are important to understanding the larger narrative. One example is his discussion of Buddhism's spread to China and its powerful influence on Daoism's transition from an elite philosophy to a more widely practiced religion. Buddhism's remedies for the suffering and conflicts of the Age of Division are richly illustrated and carefully compared to Confucian and Daoist solutions. Abstract Daoist concepts like yin-yang and practices like feng shui are also simply and accurately defined. Another instance of Liu's effective use of the story-within-story technique is his exploration of Sui's devastating wars with Koguryō. Focusing on the Battle of Salsu (612 CE), Liu quickly conveys how Koguryō's tenacity and creativity spelled doom for Sui, despite all its power. Conventional texts might provide more elaborate details on this event, but Liu's streamlined approach is effective in guiding the reader to quickly understand how Sui ambition was fertile ground for their eventual overthrow by the Tang. Learners new to this content will appreciate these summaries for their clarity and for how they illuminate the broader history Liu is depicting.

Even with all these positive attributes, there are some elements that need consideration, especially if the text were to be used in the classroom.

Like any good serial comic book, it leaves the reader with . . . a cliffhanger ending.

The powerful simplicity of Liu's monochromatic imagery is surely an asset, but there were instances where just a touch of color here and there would have been beneficial. For instance, adding identifying colors or patterns to the initial timeline and repeating them within the text would help readers better note the transition from one era to the next. There were times where the fluidity of Liu's work made it easy to miss text section cues as one story merged into another. Additionally, learners unfamiliar with this era in Chinese history can be easily confused by the tendency of non-Han dynasties like the Northern Wei to reuse names from earlier kingdoms as part of their efforts to legitimize their rule over Han peoples. A simple explanation combined with a color/pattern code could be very useful in this regard. Finally, high school and older learners can benefit from supplementary primary and secondary sources to deepen their understanding of the strong foundation laid by Liu's work. Expansion of the suggested readings printed at the back of the book might do much to support this effort.

All in all, *Division to Unification in Imperial China* is an entertaining and informative sequel to the first volume in the series. Like any good serial comic book, it leaves the reader with a cliffhanger ending. Volume 2 of *Understanding China through Comics* is a wonderful read and bodes well for the subsequent two parts of the series. It will leave most readers eager to learn even more about China and its spectacular past. ■

KARL R. NEUMANN is currently teaching courses in East Asian studies and US history at the Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. In 2013, he was awarded a Swensrud Teacher Fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society, where he transcribed and digitally mapped primary sources related to American trade with China in the nineteenth century. Recently, he contributed to the Five College Center for East Asian Studies' online project, "The Ties that Bind," which maps American historical, cultural, and social connections to East Asia.

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