Abstract  The aim of this talk is to explore the question of whether the records for Li Longji’s 李隆基 (Tang Xuanzong's 唐玄宗) ascent to supreme power over the years 710-712 are internally consistent and reliable. The narrative preserved in the Old and New Tang Histories and in the Comprehensive Mirror suggest that he was predestined to reign, and that his progress towards the throne was both inevitable and marked by exemplary moral attitudes. Examination of documents contemporary with this ascent to power, however, preserved in two large early Song collections, suggest that there were points in Li Longji’s ascent to supreme power where the outcome was far from inevitable. These documents, written from several different points of view, amount to a discourse on the concept of the imperial succession and of emperorship that is distinct from the accounts of emperorship generated seventy years earlier under Taizong’s rule. Claims made by Li Longji’s supporters were similar to those made by supporters of other protagonists in the blood-stained history of court politics in the early eighth century. The official narrative bears the imprint of later distortion.

Speaker bio  David L. McMullen read Chinese Studies at the University of Cambridge from 1959 to 1962, after two years as a national serviceman in the Royal Air Force. He obtained his Ph.D. Degree at Cambridge under the supervision of the late Professor E.G. Pulleyblank. He taught at Cambridge from 1968 until his retirement in 2006 as Professor of Chinese in the then Faculty of Oriental Studies. The area of Professor McMullen’s research is the history of Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907). He has published on the tradition of administration in Tang China, the ideology of government and the connections between the two. The topics covered include state and scholarship, on attitudes to state ritual, attitudes to the compilation of the historical record, the cult of the political hero in the Tang period, the division between the public and the private, attitudes towards literary ideology and practice and Confucian canonical authority, and the tradition of scepticism towards local cults and towards Buddhist notions of the afterlife. More recent work include topics such as ‘Political Dissent in Tang China’, analysis of court assemblies, analysis of eighth century emperors’ attitudes towards ‘enfeoffment’, an analysis of the transmission of manuscript verse in the Dunhuang archive, and Tang Xuanzong’s use of the verse tradition as a form of ‘soft power’. Prof. McMullen has recently been particularly interested in the use of recovered epigraphical material, mainly the mushiming unearthed in the vicinities of Tang Chang’an and Luoyang.