

*The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy.* By Nicolas Tackett. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014. Pp. xiv + 281. \$49.95/£36.95.

Nicolas Tackett has written an important book that is worthy of the attention of historians of premodern China. The book is most notable for its path-breaking quantitative approach to premodern Chinese history. Dr Tackett's analysis of a database of individuals named in late Tang epitaphs provides new insights into macro-trends in social and political history, particularly geographical distribution and marriage relations of families with men who served in the bureaucracy of the late Tang. More controversially, he argues that most ninth-century bureaucrats were descendants of a "medieval Chinese aristocracy" of the book's title that had "maintained political influence for centuries" (p. 235).

Dr Tackett's most important sources are 2,231 funerary epitaphs (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) dating to the period from 800 to 880 that have been excavated from tombs mainly over the last several decades. Through painstaking efforts—involving travel to museums and archaeological institutes in China and inputting data on a computer—Dr Tackett has compiled a database of 6,255 individuals or kin mentioned in the published and unpublished epitaphs. This data is supplemented with information on about 25,000 other people appearing in received sources such as the *Old Tang History* (*Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書) and *New Tang History* (*Xin Tang shu* 新唐書). The database is freely available on the websites of the author and the Harvard University Asia Center. Due to the quantity and nature of his data, Dr Tackett presents a mainly macro-scale analysis of the elite families serving in the Tang government.

As historical sources, epitaphs have strengths and weaknesses. A major limitation is that the format and content follow fixed conventions, like modern obituaries, and avoid frank discussions of the deceased's personality and negative experiences such as demotions and exile. Nevertheless, the epitaphs have a number of strengths because they provide information about individuals who normally do not appear in received historical sources, including mid-level government officials and military officers, women of these elite families, and the patrilineal ancestors and children of the deceased. The epitaphs also generally provide useful information about career patterns in government because the deceased's bureaucratic offices often are listed chronologically. Dr Tackett argues that the excavated epitaphs are particularly valuable to his study of the Tang elite because they comprise a random sample of the "members of the wealthier strata of society" (p. 16) and reveal the locations of their permanent residences, which the author argues generally were near the sites of their burials.

In the “Introduction,” Dr Tackett wades into the debates regarding the existence of a “medieval aristocracy that defined its status on the basis of blood” (p. 5). Dr Tackett favours “influential studies,” most prominently in the English-language scholarship David Johnson’s *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy*,<sup>1</sup> arguing “that the old families managed quite successfully to perpetuate their grip on political power until the very end of the Tang dynasty” (p. 7). Dr Tackett dismisses the sceptics, such as Six Dynasties scholar Dennis Grafflin, who hold that the putative prestige of the old clans was an ideological construct that papered over their lack of continuity and political power in the Six Dynasties period.<sup>2</sup> Dr Tackett also contrasts his findings with those of Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 and Denis Twitchett—who held that the clans met their demise during the reign of Empress Wu 武后 or after the An Lushan rebellion 安史之亂 respectively—by arguing that the fall of the “medieval aristocracy” only came after the Huang Chao 黃巢 rebellion in the late ninth century.<sup>3</sup>

In chapter one, the author correlates the individuals in his epitaph database with two compilations of prestigious clans discovered at Dunhuang, which had been one of David Johnson’s main sources of evidence. These eminent clans are listed according to surname and what Johnson called a choronym, the name of a pre-Tang commandery where the family originated. The remainder of chapter one and chapter two include an empire-wide spatial analysis of the locations of homes and governmental posts of eminent clan members. Instead of living in ancestral homelands, most individuals claiming eminent descent resided in the capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang or the corridor between them, and dominated offices in the Tang central bureaucracy. Dr Tackett infers that these were “bureaucratized aristocrats” who “depended in large measure on generations of bureaucratic service” for prestige, rather than clan membership (p. 61). In other words, geographical proximity to the capitals determined access to office, rather than descent from an eminent lineage. Echoing historians of the Six Dynasties sceptical of the medieval Chinese aristocracy thesis, Dr Tackett argues that the “aristocratic” mentality of the epitaphs was that “it was *descent* from officeholders that was critical to the self-identity of the status group” (p. 68) and justified the nepotism required to maintain their power.

<sup>1</sup> Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Grafflin, “The Great Family in Medieval South China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 1 (June 1981), pp. 65–74. Dr Tackett’s “Introduction” includes comprehensive citations to relevant scholarship in Chinese, English, and Japanese.

<sup>3</sup> Chen Yinke, *Tangdai zhengzhishi shulun gao* 唐代政治史述論稿 (1943; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997); Denis Twitchett, “The Composition of the T’ang Ruling Class: New Evidence from Tunhuang,” in *Perspectives on the T’ang*, ed. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 47–85.

Chapters three and four employ spatial and network analyses that buttress the author's argument about the existence of a geographically-centralized bureaucratic elite in the second half of the Tang. Most strikingly, Dr Tackett identifies two marriage cliques. One based in Chang'an "was organized around the imperial clan" and "included several military families" (p. 125). The other, based primarily in Luoyang, lacked a dominant clan, but included families whose members were more likely to "occupy the top positions in the civil bureaucracy, including those of chief minister" (p. 144). Drawing on previous scholarship on the favouritism endemic to the Tang examination and bureaucratic placement and promotion systems, Dr Tackett plausibly hypothesizes that membership in marriage networks reinforced social connections and the *yin* 蔭 hereditary privilege to provide access to governmental offices from generation to generation. Though the *yin* privilege granted eligibility for government offices to one son and grandson of government officials at one rank lower each generation, connections were needed to obtain initial appointments to open positions, which were in short supply.

Chapter four also makes an eye-opening challenge to the conventional view of the late Tang as politically decentralized. With the exception of three prefectures in Hebei that managed to remain autonomous, the author's analysis of spatial patterns of office-holding demonstrates that the capital-based families dominated the upper-echelon provincial posts of governor, prefect, and magistrate until the Huang Chao rebellion in 880. Local elites usually filled lower-echelon civil posts and "the bulk of military positions at all levels" (p. 177). Dr Tackett admits that his macro-study is unable to explain how the Tang central government managed to control the provincial military, but argues plausibly that the "low rate of mutinies" demonstrates the existence of bureaucratic control of armies (p. 182). Every historian studying the late Tang provinces will need to take these findings as the starting point of future research.

Chapter five, which seeks to explain the disappearance of the eminent clans in the historical record after the 880s, is the only chapter that relies primarily on conventional qualitative research in received texts. Mainly based on the narrative of the Huang Chao rebellion in *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 and literary sources, such as poetry describing the carnage, Dr Tackett argues persuasively that the decimation of Chang'an and disruption of Luoyang destroyed the power base of the elite that had relied on geographical proximity to the capitals for access to bureaucratic offices.

The author has made a strong case that the late Tang had a geographically-based elite that met its demise by the late ninth century. Despite the value of these findings, quantitative analysis provides less persuasive support for Dr Tackett's broader claims that the late Tang's capital-based elite was a (1) "bureaucratic *aristocracy*" with (2) "*dominant political power*" and (3) had maintained power for centuries (p. 8, my italics). I will deal with these three points in succession below. Since some problems

of analysis are related to the types of data tabulated in the database, I also will mention potential approaches to future research.

One, Dr Tackett's self-described "rather inclusive definition of the term 'aristocracy'" (p. 11, n. 28) conflates a *figurative* aristocracy whose sons had advantages in gaining bureaucratic offices via *yin* privilege and connections with a *literal* aristocracy who enjoyed hereditary rights to titles and land. The *de jure* aristocracy comprised members of the imperial family and meritorious civil and military officials who were granted noble titles and lands in perpetuity (*shiyè* 世業). Since these titles typically are mentioned in epitaphs, the author missed an opportunity to include them in his database. In the Tang system, a noble title was an official source of status—distinct from claims of eminent clan membership—that was inherited by the main heir. The lands in perpetuity—inherited by sons in partible shares with the main heir receiving a double allotment—were sources of wealth that gradually diminished over generations. Noble titles could contribute to the diversification of the Tang elite by cementing the rise of men of low social status, such as generals of foreign or commoner background who had established merit in military service. Future scholars may want to build upon Dr Tackett's work by using quantitative analysis to determine the prevalence of titles of nobility among the Tang's elite, and degree to which noble title holding was a factor influencing access to office.

Two, while it is clear that the families of the men and women memorialized in funerary epitaphs claimed high status based on birth and government service, Dr Tackett's book does not provide a full explanation of the nature of their putative power or how they may have maintained it over multiple generations. Power ultimately lay in the hands of the emperor—or the people controlling him—and high status, marriage alliances and geographical proximity to the capitals did not guarantee the ruler's favour. A classic example from the early Tang is Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (c. 600–659), a member of an eminent family, who was a highly-influential grand councillor and brother-in-law of Emperor Taizong 太宗. Under Taizong's heir, Gaozong 高宗, Zhangsun was forced to commit suicide in part because he opposed replacing Gaozong's wife, Empress Wang 王皇后 of eminent clan background, with Empress Wu who was a concubine with origins in the lower elite. The high status and social connections of Zhangsun Wuji and Empress Wang did not protect their positions at court. In the case of Zhangsun, his power and influence depended on personal ties to Taizong that proved to be fleeting under Gaozong. As this example shows, holding power in high office at any time during the Tang was difficult and often dangerous. Future researchers seeking to clarify the nature and holders of power may want to consider two different approaches. Quantitatively, in addition to the above-mentioned noble titles, data can be compiled on official ranks because epitaphs typically mention a deceased male's official positions and those of a deceased female's husband or male

relatives. Each office in the bureaucratic and military hierarchies was associated with a particular rank that determined salary and privileges. Analysis of this data may yield insights into whether particular families were able to hold high-ranking government posts over multiple generations. In addition, qualitative case studies of families with multi-generational service in high offices may help to explicate the strategies involved in exercising and maintaining power.

Three, Dr Tackett's hypothesis that his findings can be projected back in time to the early Tang or even the third or fourth centuries also is open to debate, and will require further research to substantiate. Even in chapter one, Dr Tackett's analysis can be construed to raise doubts about the long-term persistence of the majority of eminent clans. Although 87 percent of late-Tang individuals with a surnames and choronyms in funerary epitaphs claimed descent from a great clan on the above-mentioned Dunhuang lists, there are signs that most families had problems maintaining access to office over the long term. Three-fifths of the clans on one Dunhuang list and three quarters of the clans on another list do not appear among individuals in Dr Tackett's ninth-century database. Dr Tackett plausibly assumes that they "had dropped out of the upper classes" (p. 33). Meanwhile, 13 percent of individuals in the database claimed descent from surname-choronym combinations that were not in the Dunhuang lists. Dr Tackett assumes that these clans originally were named in the lost portions of the two Dunhuang lists. Another equally plausible hypothesis is that some of these clans were parvenus who rose in prominence after the lists were compiled in the early Tang. The author acknowledges the need for more research to support his larger thesis. In one footnote he cautions readers, "not to assume that the Tang great families were as powerful in the earlier period [third and fourth centuries] as they would become in the seventh and eighth centuries" (p. 235, n. 1). In the next footnote, he admits that more study of tomb epitaphs is needed to determine how the "political elite was affected by the regime changes of the sixth and early seventh centuries" (p. 235, n. 2). I agree that more research is needed to determine the historical development of the political elite during Tang and earlier periods. Dr Tackett's macro-scale quantitative analysis should play a role, but so should traditional qualitative studies based on close readings of texts.

Regardless of any shortcomings, Dr Tackett has made an important contribution to our understanding of late Tang socio-political history. Just as significantly, Dr Tackett's pioneering application of quantitative analysis to premodern Chinese history demonstrates that it has value for detecting large historical trends that otherwise might escape our notice.

JONATHAN KARAM SKAFF  
*Shippensburg University*