
***The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy.*
By Nicolas TACKETT. Cambridge: Harvard University
Asia Center, 2014. Pp. xv + 281.**

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Nicolas Tackett's book presents a tightly crafted argument reconsidering the so-called "great clans" of medieval China, how they adapted to a new political structure in the ninth century, and why they all but disappeared by the Song. It does so by marshaling forth data on over 32,000 individuals culled from thousands of excavated epitaphs (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) as well as transmitted sources, using the latest digital tools to systematically analyze said data. The result is a refreshingly original theory about the most hotly contested topic in the field of medieval Chinese history: the nature and cause of the Tang-Song transition.

Tackett's main thesis, laid out clearly and repeatedly, is that the Tang elite did not begin to lose power in the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion (mid-eighth century), as is commonly thought. Rather, he argues, the aristocracy disappeared because the majority of its members were physically eliminated when the Huang Chao Rebellion swept through the "capital corridor" between Luoyang and Chang'an in the 880s, bringing chaos and destruction to much of the empire for several decades. Since the aristocracy was largely located in this capital corridor, and since their power depended upon an intricate network of family ties that allowed them to game or circumvent the civil service examinations, the large-scale butchery brought about by Huang Chao and other warlords in the late ninth century was devastating to the old system.

Heavily leaning on epitaphs as his main source material, Tackett is careful to give an overview of their nature and function in his Introduction, describing and defending several basic assumptions about these epitaphs: 1)

they are markers of wealth; 2) those which have been excavated represent a random cross-section of the wealthy; and 3) they contain generally reliable and accurate information. A fourth point is introduced and defended in Chapter One: epitaphs are usually found near the home of the deceased's family base. Tackett's argument lives and dies with these four points. And indeed, his evidence for points one and four is both sound and convincing. The production of gravestone epitaph cost an enormous amount of money, as attested by mountains of anecdotal evidence. Medieval beliefs about ghosts' desire to be near their relatives ensured that families would be buried together. When the subbranch of a clan did move locations, they would often undertake the costly procedure of reburial. Points two and three are less thoroughly defended, and I will examine them in greater detail below.

Chapter One defines the elites. The standard practice has been to delimit the aristocracy by drawing on lists of the "great clans," each designated by a surname and an outdated commandery name or "choronym" (e.g., "the Boling Cuis" 博陵崔). However, clan names are not as useful as we might imagine: the elites, with their big families, reproduced at an astonishing rate, and thus many could legitimately claim membership to them by the ninth century. As a result, such claims became diluted. For this reason, greater importance began to be attached to recent genealogy: whether one's family members held office for several generations and whether one was related to a top minister or other eminent figure. Both arguments are drawn from epitaphs: while the great majority of individuals depicted in these inscriptions claim membership to the great clans, far fewer could legitimately claim that they come from a branch of that clan with a continuous tradition of officeholding. Chapter One also demonstrates that, in the ninth century, few elites retained land in their ancestral home (identified by their "choronym"); most, instead, were buried near the capitals.

Chapter Two shows that the late Tang political elites overwhelmingly resided in the two capitals, Luoyang and Chang'an, and the corridor between them. For example, a table on page 85 informs us that 82% of epitaphs from Luoyang and 72% from Chang'an present to us individuals with a "strong tradition" of officeholding (defined as three or more recent generations of