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***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

family members having held office), versus only 13% of the Lower Yangzi epitaphs, 11% of Zhaoyi, and 10% of Northern Zhejiang. Moreover, 85% of Luoyang elites and 94% of Chang'an elites served in offices of national prominence, while only 50% of Lower Yangzi elites, 11% of Hebei elites, and 12% of elites from elsewhere served in such offices (p. 86). Tackett also succeeds in explaining the outliers to this trend. Those elites whom we know fled the capital region during the An Lushan rebellion had begun to return by the end of the eighth century. The scions of elite families who did relocate to the provinces in the ninth century inevitably lost nearly all national power: moving away from the capital region was a sign of downward social mobility. In general, the truly powerful officeholders, both national and regional, maintained strong familial ties to the capital region. The one major exception is the northwest: Hebei was only nominally under the control of the Tang central government during this time period, and very few of the capital elite served there during the ninth century.

Whereas Chapter Two argues for the importance of geography to power, Chapter Three argues for the importance of kinship. Here, Tackett analyzes data culled from epitaphs and the genealogical tables found in *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 to map out patrilines (“blood relatives that can be reconstructed on the basis of documented father-son relationships,” p. 108). He then draws up a series of network maps illustrating the marriage ties between these patrilines (pp. 123, 126) and pulls out two main “cliques,” or strongly intertwined groups of families. One clique, mainly based in Luoyang, is comprised of members of prominent civilian clans. The other clique, based in Chang'an, is more diverse, featuring scions of the imperial family, military families, and the northwestern elite. Tackett's identification of these two cliques is well-founded. Slightly less convincing is his attempt to further localize these groups in specific wards of Chang'an (p. 128). Nevertheless, this minor deficiency in no way diminishes the larger argument about the existence of the two cliques.

Members of the marriage networks outlined by Tackett could mobilize their social capital in two key ways. First, they could circumvent the examination system through the hereditary *yin* 蔭 privilege, whereby a top official could select sons and grandsons for civil service. Second, they would

have far better chances on the examinations because of better access to patrons and recommenders. As many as 79% of chief ministers, 85% of chief examiners, and 89% of ministers of personnel in the ninth century had ties to the marriage network of capital elites (p. 134), giving a candidate with access to this network an immediate leg up on their competitors. Moreover, passing the examinations was only the first step in attaining an official post: the next step was the actual appointment, something which required connections to current officeholders. Tackett goes to great lengths to prove these points because previous scholarship has generally assumed that the restructuring of the examination system after the An Lushan Rebellion allowed provincial elites to gain greater power at the expense of the old aristocrats based in the capital. While certain exceptional individuals did manage to climb the ladder, Tackett demonstrates that the exams and the offices they led to were dominated by a relatively small number of capital elites. Thus, the old guard proved remarkably adaptable to this new system: the cause for their decline must be sought elsewhere.

Chapter Four gives further evidence for capital elites' political dominance by closely examining the situation outside of the Chang'an-Luoyang region. Despite strong blows to the central government during the An Lushan rebellion, the court quickly bounced back to start a process of "recentralization" that was basically complete by the 820s. With the one exception of Hebei in the northeast, the national authorities retained a firm grip over the remaining provinces, appointing their own capital-based elites to the top civil posts in these regions (see figures on pp. 162–66). These governors were by and large effective at retaining the peace: very few rebellions erupted outside of autonomous Hebei during this period. Even more surprising is that the central government retained such effective control despite the fact that the provincial armies were controlled by the local elites. The author admits that he lacks a convincing explanation for this phenomenon, saying only that "it is not clear," (p. 185) and that it is "beyond the scope of this study" (p. 182) to describe how the central civil authorities kept the local military forces in line. He then proposes that the relationship of the central oligarchy to the provincial elites should be thought of as colonial: the capital-based bureaucrats would

be temporarily appointed to top positions in the provinces, then return to the capital within a few years.

Chapter Five, which depicts the horrifying violence and chaos of the Huang Chao Rebellion, marks a significant departure from the book's previous chapters. Instead of empirical statistics and maps based upon information drawn from epitaphs, we find summaries of passages from *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 and other official histories sprinkled with colorful details from contemporaneous poems, mainly the long narrative "Lament of the Lady of Qin" 秦婦吟 by Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (847–910). This methodological shift is due to the fact that the production of epitaphs suddenly drops off in the 880s: in Chang'an and Luoyang, we find 195 excavated epitaphs that can be dated to the 860s, 147 for the 870s, and 9 for the 880s (p. 225). Thus, Tackett's main source dries up right at the most crucial point in his narrative. He deftly explains this by noting that the large-scale violence, economic collapse, and fleeing of the capital region brought on by the Huang Chao Rebellion would have made funerary inscriptions unaffordable and impractical. However, this argument from a lack of evidence is not as strong as his previous arguments based on abundant, well-sifted evidence. Moreover, while his descriptions of chaotic post-Huang Chao China are both vivid and compelling, they come off as impressionistic when compared with the remainder of the book. There is an irony here: the more Tackett convinces us in early chapters of the importance of epitaphs and sophisticated digital analysis, the more he undermines his own use of standard historical and literary sources in Chapter Five.

In any case, the destruction of the Huang Chao Rebellion is well-attested in traditional sources, and is of a scale far greater than the An Lushan Rebellion. Tackett argues that when Huang Chao's forces sacked Luoyang and occupied Chang'an, they physically eliminated a large percentage of the capital elite and utterly crushed the all-important kinship networks. Those capital elites who survived were wrested from their cushy positions at the top: some would become officials in the Five Dynasties, but never again would they retain such a firm grip on wealth, status, and authority. Thus, they left behind a power vacuum, which would be filled by the local elites who cozied up to

regional warlords. The most important of these regional elites would be the Zhao family, just starting to emerge from its cocoon in the autonomous Hebei region, which would eventually found the Song dynasty in 960.

In addition to the physical book, Tackett points his readers to his accompanying online database, located at <http://ntackett.com>, which contains nearly all the data he draws upon as well as a number of additional figures. This in itself is a major statement on the importance of openness in scholarship—a common practice in the sciences that Sinology and other humanities fields have been slow to adopt. As a field, we ought to welcome more gestures of this type. One minor inconvenience is that the database and accompanying figures are embedded in an .mdb file, which can only be opened with the program Microsoft Access. While Microsoft Access is part of the standard Microsoft Office suite for PCs, those of us who use Macs have no way of accessing the figures in the database. The best I could do was purchase an .mdb file viewer, which allowed me to export the data but not the figures or queries; to view the latter I had to borrow a colleague's PC. This could easily be remedied by the author exporting his additional figures as a series of .xls or .pdf files, listed separately on his website. Alternatively, the publisher could have included these figures in an additional appendix to the physical book.

Despite its preference for statistics, maps, and other kinds of empirical data, Tackett's book is not at all dry. The prose is concise and purposeful without becoming distant or alienating. Moreover, there are enough fascinating tidbits to satisfy even the most quantitative-adverse reader. For example, Tackett notes in Chapter Three how the epitaphs of many eunuchs list wives and adopted sons in their epitaphs “in imitation of their civilian bureaucrat counterparts” (p. 120). We also learn that the son of chief examiner Gao Kai 高鏞 was mocked for failing the examinations, despite family connections, with the couplet: “one hundred twenty dung beetles / cannot lift up this one piece of crap” 一百二十個蜣螂，推一個屎塊不上 (p. 139). Descriptions of the violence of the 880s are particularly striking: according to the “Lament of the Lady of Qin,” during Huang Chao's seizure of Chang'an, “In house after house blood flows like boiling fountains; / everywhere victims scream in bitterness, with screams that shake the earth” 家家流血如泉沸，

處處冤聲動地 (p. 196), and Huang Chao's successor, Qin Zongquan, is rumored to have "cart[ed] along salted human corpses for consumption while on the march" (p. 208).

But the emphasis is on the data. And *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* comes out during a golden age for this sort of research, as the digitization of our lives creates increasingly large pools of data on our own habits, and Silicon Valley develops ever more sophisticated algorithms for analyzing this data. Prosopography is poised for a renaissance: high-quality digital resources for Sinology are cropping up in abundance, and anyone savvy enough to repurpose social media and supply-chain analytics for the study of imperial China should by all means do so. What once took paper-bound philologists and historians weeks to do with dictionaries, indexes, and libraries can now be achieved in seconds by means of a few keystrokes. Social scientists and digital humanists are able to work on a much larger scale than ever before, and, further, able to present their research in a digital-visual language that is increasingly native to our students. Those who have, like Tackett, an impressive facility with both computer programming and traditional textual analysis are set to achieve great things.

It is for this reason that it is essential for the scholar wielding such digital tools to do so critically. The one shortcoming I found in Tackett's otherwise convincing and compellingly written book is the lack of a sophisticated theoretical apparatus. To be sure, he explains his methodology at great length and makes his data openly available, but key concepts such as "empirical," "prosopography," "map" (as noun and verb), "network," and "colonial" are presented as if self-evident. After giving a brief nod in his introduction to "the fiascos of an earlier period of quantitative hubris" and recognizing that such techniques must be used "with great care" (p. 11), Tackett never again brings up the underlying theoretical issues. My critique is not meant to dismiss quantitative and empirical research outright, or in any way diminish the significance of Tackett's achievement. I only mean to highlight the fact that questioning basic, underlying concepts is as important as a clearly reproducible methodology and an openly accessible database.

One case in point is the term "network," which is fast becoming one of

the most widely employed metaphors in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>1</sup> In these early decades of the twenty-first century, networks are ubiquitous (e.g., social networking websites, the world wide web, power grids, commercial distribution chains, etc.), so it is natural to think of the network as a neutral, timeless concept. We assume that any set of multi-polar relations is best described with this word and its attendant associations. But what do we gain by thinking of these relations as “networks” other than the rhetoric of analytic objectivity? Why not the more organic “webs” or the open-sounding “communities” or the Benjaminian “constellations” of relations? The metaphor of the network may be natural to us, but it certainly wasn’t to the Tang Chinese: the closest ninth-century analogue I can think of is the Huayan Buddhists’ “Indra’s Net.” Foreign, analytic concepts can be powerful tools for understanding history, but all such concepts ought to be clearly marked as such and then defended.

We must remember that the concept of “network” has a history.<sup>2</sup> Tackett’s Introduction and Chapter Three could have benefitted from a sustained engagement with one recent theorization in the study of networks, the “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT) championed by Bruno Latour.<sup>3</sup> ANT’s stress on the constant formation and re-formation of groups would have provided more nuance to the depiction of marriage networks and the late Tang examination system. An uncle helping out his relative in the exams or in securing an official

1 For two other Sinological works published within the past year which foreground the importance of “networks” to their respective topics, see K. E. Brashier, *Public Memory in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), and Jack W. Chen et al, “The *Shishuo Xinyu* as Data Visualization,” *Early Medieval China* 20 (2014): 23–59.

2 “Network” first appears in English as a direct translation of the Hebrew *ma’āšeh rešet*, referring to the net-like structure of part of Moses’ sacrificial altar in Tyndale’s 1530 translation of Exodus 38:4. The word did not come to take on its current, social sense until the late nineteenth century, first cropping up in a biography of the British military commander Charles “Chinese” Gordon. The empirical study of social networks began with the “sociograms” of Jacob Moreno in 1933. Cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry on “network, n.”; Jacob L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive?* (Beacon, NY: Beacon House, 1934); and M. E. J. Newman, *Networks: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40–42.

3 My understanding of Actor-Network Theory is based upon Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

post is *performing* both his kinship and his membership in the elite. Moreover, in some cases, late Tang elites may have had to negotiate their connections, pick sides in complicated internecine battles, or actively choose to reaffirm the importance of blood relations. One of ANT's other main concerns is the agency of non-human actors, which allows us to see how the very materiality of the epitaphs constructs the networks of patriline. Certainly, the costly, labor-intensive project of inscribing a tombstone with lists of kinsmen and placing it in a world of other such tombstones is an active gesture to future generations to pick up the epitaph, read it, and posit its relation to others. But the intentions of the elites who commissioned these epitaphs is mediated by the agency of scribes and writers, the epitaphs themselves, their modern discoverers, and the journals and databases in which they are published.

Which brings us back to the four basic premises of the book: 1) that epitaphs are markers of wealth; 2) that excavated epitaphs represent a random cross-section of the wealthy; 3) that epitaphs contain generally reliable and accurate information; and 4) that epitaphs are usually found near the home of the deceased's family base. If we keep in mind Actor-Network Theory's insight that the materiality of the epitaphs actually construct the network of elites, we can see how important these assumptions are. As stated above, Tackett skillfully defends the first and fourth point. Point two, however, can neither be proven nor disproven, and must instead be taken on faith. There is the possibility that different groups (whether that be different local cultures or clans) engaged in different burial practices, some with more lasting material evidence than others. If the local elites of a given province or if a subbranch of one of the great clans maintained a tradition of writing their inscriptions on a precious variety of wood, there is no way we would know about it today. Moreover, it is well-known that many of the recent archaeological discoveries in the last two decades occurred during modern commercial construction. When digging the foundation for a shopping mall, one may chance upon a medieval tomb. This means that more discoveries will be made in urban areas, and that epitaphs which may have stood in remote family estates are more likely to remain buried, unpublished, and thus uncatalogued by Tackett. As for point three (that the epitaphs are accurate), this would have been stronger

had the author given a more thorough analysis of the literary conventions of these inscriptions. How did readerly expectations and ritual practices shape the information included in these epitaphs? Did the use of parallel prose encourage certain types of claims over others? While Tackett demonstrates that most inscriptions did not outright lie about their recent genealogy, it is possible that reverence for the dead encouraged exaggeration. Fortunately, a handful of other scholars are beginning to look at the style and rhetoric of epitaphs, and will soon be able to better contextualize Tackett's sources.<sup>4</sup>

Minor issues aside, I think Tackett is right. He has used compelling evidence to make a strong case for the importance of the Huang Chao Rebellion, rather than the An Lushan Rebellion, as the key turning point in medieval Chinese history. As such, he has laid out a boldly original account of the first stage of the Tang-Song transition, an account he promises to continue with a forthcoming sequel on large-scale cultural shifts during the Five Dynasties and early Song. The author's use of excavated materials and digital analysis, though slightly under-theorized, is both judicious and cogent, a model for all social scientists and digital humanists hoping to pursue similar lines of inquiry. *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* is a marvelous achievement, a strongly delivered thesis on the twilight of the medieval Chinese elite that will surely be quoted and debated for decades to come.

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4 A February 2014 workshop convened at Rutgers University, titled "Commemoration by Commission: Buying and Selling Memory in Late Medieval China," featured thoughtful presentations by Jenny Liu, Jessey Choo, Timothy Davis, and Alexei Ditter on the literary and religious qualities of these epitaphs. A follow-up conference on "Entombed Epigraphy," co-organized by Choo, Ditter, and Yang Lu, will take place in May 2015.