Born into one of the most famous aristocratic families of ninth-century China, Ms. Lu possessed a pedigree of unquestionable eminence. Although her family was originally from Fanyang in the northeast, it had relocated to the great capital city of Luoyang at least two centuries earlier. There, Ms. Lu’s forebears joined a social circle that came to dominate society and, through its influence over the state bureaucracy, political power. Not atypical of a woman of her station, Ms. Lu could trace her ancestry through an unbroken line of officeholders going back to the Han dynasty, some seven centuries earlier; several hundred of her clansmen had served in the governments of the successive post-Han dynasties, including the Tang (618–907). When she was fourteen, mindful of the importance of pedigree, Ms. Lu’s family found a suitable match for her in a young man from another great Luoyang-based clan. Unfortunately, her husband died when she was still quite young. Nevertheless, she maintained her high status in society, looking after her children’s education and arranging their marriages. She must have felt enormous pride when her son earned the prestigious jinshi civil service examination degree and when, in 878, her son-in-law—scion of yet another eminent Luoyang family—became chief minister and one of the most powerful men in China. Three years later, however, Ms. Lu’s life and the whole world she had known came to an abrupt end.

1. Accounts of the life of Ms. Lu 盧氏 (818–81) and her husband, Li Shu 李祘 (802–50), can be reconstructed from the three epitaphs discovered in her tomb; for transcriptions of the epitaphs and a description of the tomb in question (a tomb referred to as “M9112” in the report), see Yanshi Xingyuan Tang mu, pp. 168–252, 361–69. For a reconstruction of the genealogy of Ms. Lu’s branch of the Fanyang Lus, see XTS 73 3:2885–2912; her great-grandfather appears on p. 2907 of the table. Chapter 3 of the present monograph provides more information on her clan (which I identify as patri-
At first, the threat must have seemed remote to the residents of the capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang. Although a series of uprisings had broken out in central China in the mid-870s, imperial armies had succeeded by the end of the decade in routing the rebels, pushing them far back toward the deep south. Suddenly, however, in the seventh month of the year 880, the rebel Huang Chao (d. 884) took advantage of a weakness in the empire’s defenses to cross the Yangzi River. It took him only four more months to capture Luoyang, and, before the end of the year, his army marched into Chang’an. Then began one of the most infamous massacres in the annals of Chinese history. Ms. Lu’s daughter and son-in-law, the chief minister, were victims of the bloodshed. She, herself, was a bit more fortunate, escaping with her two sons to a family-owned villa in the countryside some one hundred kilometers east of Luoyang. But her good luck did not last. Perhaps because of an epidemic that accompanied the warfare and chaos, both she and one of her sons died of illness less than a month apart in the late spring of 881. With the surrounding region in turmoil, it was not until a year and a half later that it became safe enough for her youngest son to return her remains to Luoyang for burial alongside her husband. By then, four of Ms. Lu’s five children had died without heirs, and the mood among surviving family members was grim. Scrawled unevenly onto the side of one of the epitaph stones buried in her tomb was a note written by her nephew: “Another year has passed since the Son of Heaven went to Sichuan. The great bandit Huang Chao has not yet been captured and killed. With the ravages of war overtaking Luoyang and Gong County, the people have no means by which to survive”

Although the emperor did, in fact, return from Sichuan to recapture the throne, the once mighty Tang dynasty lived on in name alone. Imperial legitimacy collapsed as warlords seized control of the provinces, ushering in nearly three decades of upheaval, during which dozens of independent regimes all across the country battled for preeminence. By the middle
of the first decade of the tenth century, most of the smaller regimes had been subsumed into larger states. At this point, in the fourth month of the year 907, the warlord controlling the Yellow River Basin and much of North China ordered the execution of the last Tang emperor, by then merely his puppet, thus bringing the dynasty to its final demise. What emerged from the Tang’s collapse—first the so-called Five Dynasties and then the great Song empire (960–1279)—was not merely a sequence of different political regimes. The tenth century witnessed the coalescing of an entirely new social order. The great medieval families that had maintained their prestige for most of the first millennium CE, across multiple dynastic transitions, vanished entirely from the scene. Under the Song dynasty, a culture of merit came to eclipse the aristocratic ethos of earlier times, largely precluding any resurgence of the old order.

The present book seeks to explain this dramatic societal and cultural transformation. It focuses on the final century of Tang rule. Although generations of scholars have explored the profoundly different characteristics of the Tang and Song elites, a vast corpus of new epigraphic material now allows us to elucidate the precise sociocultural processes that led from one social order to the next. On the basis of a collective biography involving tens of thousands of women and men, this volume examines both how the bureaucratic aristocracy of medieval China managed to maintain its influence despite important political and institutional developments in the mid-Tang and why the great clans disappeared so completely with the fall of the dynasty. In the process, it explores in great detail the inner workings of an elite society living well over a thousand years ago. A subsequent study will address the cultural transformation during the post-Tang period whereby a new elite self-identity emerged that discarded many of the ideals and values held by Ms. Lu and the old aristocracy to which she belonged.

The Transformation of Medieval Elites

In fact, between the late Tang and the early Song dynasties, China underwent a series of dramatic changes that utterly transformed society.4

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4. The Japanese journalist and historian Naitō Torajirō 内藤虎次郎 (1866–1934)
A commercial revolution brought about a significant monetization of the economy, the expansion in certain regions of marketing networks deep into the countryside, and the development and spread of urban centers. Following a concomitant demographic transformation, the center of gravity of China’s population shifted to the south, thrusting the Yangzi River valley and the southeast coast to a prominence they had never before held. Simultaneously, remarkable technological innovations increased agricultural productivity, while the greatly expanded use of the printing press substantially enlarged the literate population. During this same period, China would also witness a number of major developments in thought and religion, with the emergence of Neo-Confucianism—a fundamentally new approach to understanding Classical texts—and the popularization of new religious cults and practices. So fundamental were these changes that many Chinese of later times imagined that the Song regime itself had ushered in an entirely new era. Writing several hundred years later, the historian Chen Bangzhan 謝邦顯 (d. 1623) asked rhetorically, “The state system of today, the customs of the populace, the administration of the bureaucracy, the dogma of scholars, did any of these not first emerge during the Song?”

is credited with first describing this great transformation. The Naitō thesis became influential among Japanese scholars of China in the mid-twentieth century, and among American scholars during the 1960s and 1970s (although Naitō’s claim that the Song marked the beginning of the “early modern period” is no longer taken seriously). For an overview of the thesis and a more recent critique, see Miyakawa, “Outline” and Lau Nap-yin, “He wei ‘Tang Song biange.’” More recently, there has been a flurry of publications on the thesis in Mainland China. See, for example, Li Huarui, “Ershi shiji zhong ri ‘Tang Song biange’ guan”; volume 11 (2005) of the journal Tang yan jiu, especially the introduction by Zhang Guangda; and Li Huarui, ed., “Tang Song biange” lun.


7. Elvin, Pattern; Cherniack, “Book Culture and Textual Transmission.”


9. Chen Bangzhan, Songsbi jiishi benno, pp. 1191–92. Chen argues that the Tang-Song transition constituted the third of three great historical transformations, the first two being the initial establishment of civilization in antiquity followed by the establishment of a unified empire at the end of the third century BCE.
But perhaps the most dramatic of the changes associated with this so-called Tang-Song transition was the transformation in the nature and composition of the Chinese sociopolitical elite. The twelfth-century scholar Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–62) succinctly described its essence: “Up until the Sui and Tang dynasties, officials had dossiers [identifying the offices of their ancestors], and families had genealogies. The appointment of officials relied upon the dossiers; marriages between families relied upon genealogies. . . . Ever since the Five Dynasties, one no longer asks about family background when selecting officials, and one no longer asks about family prestige when arranging marriages.” 自隋唐而上，官有簿状，家有谱系，官之选举，必由於簿状，家之婚姻，必由於谱系。. . . 自五季以来，取士不问家世，婚姻不问阀阅。10 In other words, whereas one’s pedigree was critical in the Tang, by the Song, people no longer felt that it mattered. Over the past several decades, historical scholarship has made enormous strides in elaborating upon the nature of both the Tang and the Song elites. David Johnson, Patricia Ebrey, Mao Hanguang, Sun Guodong, and others have characterized the relatively circumscribed medieval aristocracy that defined its status on the basis of blood.11 Robert Hartwell, Robert Hymes, Peter Bol, and Beverly Bossler have all described the new, more diffuse collective of elite families who first emerged in the early Song, families who justified their dominance of society and politics on the basis of talent and education.12 They represented the core element of what has sometimes been called the “Chinese meritocracy” and would constitute one of the most striking distinctions between Chinese and Western societies over the course of the subsequent millennium.

But beyond this general account of the sharp distinction between the two elites, disagreement remains as to how this transformation actually


transpired. Most important for the present volume, there is no consensus on what brought about the aristocracy’s decline or even on when the process began. For some—including Yang Yunru 楊筠如 (1903–46), Tang Zhangru 唐長孺 (1911–94), and many other influential historians of the Six Dynasties Period—the aristocracy had already gone into decline by the founding of the Sui dynasty (581–618), when China was reunified following hundreds of years of post-Han disunity. According to this view, warfare and uprisings dealt a blow to the aristocracy, while its base of power was further weakened as the newly strengthened central government extended its control into provincial society. Simultaneously, the systems in place that granted ranked families the hereditary right to serve in government were effectively dismantled, preventing the old elite from maintaining its monopoly on political power.13

More commonly, however, scholars situate the transformation within the Tang dynasty itself. Yet there is no consensus as to when precisely or why the changes took place. The great early-twentieth-century Chinese historian Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969), for example, underscored the effects of the expanded civil service examination instituted under Empress Wu (r. 690–705). According to Chen, factionalism and violence during the last two centuries of Tang rule often pitted scions of the aristocracy against a new class of elites composed of civil service examination graduates.14 By contrast, others, notably Denis Twitchett and Tonami Mamoru 深波護, have emphasized the institutional and political innovations implemented in the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion of the mid-eighth century.15 According to this thesis, the breakdown of the “equal field” system—which had once mandated the regular redistribution of land—and the deregulation of commerce created an environ-
ment favorable to the development of new landed and commercial elites. Simultaneously, financial commissions set up to tap into these commercial profits as well as provincial governments established to bring order to the countryside after the rebellion were said to have preferred men of talent to scions of the aristocracy. These commissions, it is argued, began recruiting the sons of merchants and other recent parvenus, providing the “newly risen” elite with unprecedented opportunities to enter officialdom and, over time, to acquire political influence.

However, empirical evidence suggests that all of these influential theories have underestimated the ability of the old elite to withstand changes in institutional and societal structures. In fact, several important studies have shown that the old families managed quite successfully to perpetuate their grip on political power until the very end of the Tang dynasty. David Johnson demonstrated that, even in the post–An Lushan period, the majority of Tang chief ministers came from aristocratic family backgrounds. Sun Guodong came to similar conclusions by examining a somewhat larger sample of Tang bureaucrats. And Mao Hanguang, in a study of all levels of the Tang bureaucracy, confirmed that a small number of families actually increased their influence over time and came to represent by the final three decades of the dynasty close to half of all known officeholders.

Several chapters in the present volume will provide abundant additional evidence in support of these conclusions.

But if the old clans indeed continued to dominate political life in the second half of the ninth century, how exactly did they manage to survive for such a long period? And why did they disappear so abruptly in the tenth century? The fact that both Ms. Lu and her husband—like so much of the Tang political elite—came from unbroken lines of officeholders going back centuries is remarkable and requires an explanation. It is equally striking that few, if any, of her or her husband’s clansmen are even mentioned in sources after the ninth century. On the basis of a

19. For descriptions of the total disappearance of the old aristocratic clans after
few telling anecdotes, David Johnson has hypothesized that “class wars” at the end of the Tang dynasty fueled by “violently anti-aristocratic feeling” played an important role—a hypothesis that my own research shows to be not far from the mark.20 But even Johnson has argued that, by the ninth century, the aristocracy was “no more than an idea,” an elite that was “not founded . . . on genuine social or political realities.”21 Similarly, according to Patricia Ebrey, it constituted merely a “status group” whose survival “rested on a . . . precarious balance.”22 But could an obsolete class that had outlived its place in society really maintain its status and power for so long? Was its domination of the bureaucracy to the end of the ninth century not evidence enough that it had adapted well to institutional and socioeconomic developments occurring during the dynasty?

These questions point to one final problem with current discussions of the Tang elite and its demise. As it turns out, not all scholars define the Tang elite in the same way. Were the great families of the Tang dynasty first and foremost members of a status elite, represented by the lists of eminent clans described in the following chapter? Or were they essentially a socioeconomic elite, whose rise and fall paralleled changes in China’s land tenure system?23 Or were they ultimately a political power elite defined by their ability to dominate the bureaucracy? In other words, in our consideration of elite society, how can we best assess the configuration among the Weberian classic trinity of status, wealth, and power? One of the goals of this monograph is to sort through this problem by first exploring Tang China’s status elite (chapter 1) and socioeconomic elite (chapter 2), before proceeding to a careful discussion of the bureaucratic aristocracy that maintained, I will argue, both high status and dominant political power.

Tang historians have been hampered in their exploration of these questions by the relative sparsity of source material, especially by comparison
with the voluminous documentation available to scholars of the Song period. After a flurry of studies in the 1960s and 1970s that mined traditional sources for anecdotes and isolated examples assumed to be typical, research into Tang society largely reached an impasse. This situation has changed dramatically with the availability of new sources. An astonishing abundance of new epigraphic data—notably the excavated tomb epitaphs described in detail below—has the potential of entirely revitalizing the study of Tang history. With the availability of such material, it is possible to reexamine late Tang society in finer detail than would have been possible just a decade ago and to resolve definitively a number of unanswered questions. Whereas earlier historians have had to limit their purview to a small number of the most powerful and highly educated men whose biographies grace the pages of traditional dynastic histories, it is now possible to place these men in the context of an elite society defined far more broadly. Epigraphic materials allow us to re-create the lives of women and men not only in the lower echelons of the bureaucracy, the military, and the corps of eunuchs, but also among merchants and major landowners who, though wealthy and influential at the local level, did not necessarily hold government titles. By examining the margins of the upper class, it is possible to clarify substantially the relationship between status elites, economic elites, and political elites, and to understand better how some families remained influential for centuries only to disappear suddenly with the fall of the Tang.

While exploiting new sources of data, this study also seeks to reconceptualize the late Tang elite in three important ways. First, it moves away from the notion that the transformation from the Tang to the Song involved a single socioeconomic trajectory whereby the great clans of the Tang were displaced by a new elite. The Tang upper class—like most successful elites in world history—was highly adaptable to new situations.24 There is, in fact, little evidence from the eighth or ninth centuries suggesting that a cohesive new class of women and men had begun to threaten the old social order. Attempts to interpret late Tang

24. For another example of elites adapting to changing political circumstances, one might turn to the Roman senatorial aristocracy and the landowning elite of the Aegean and Anatolia, who “changed identity” instead of “declining to extinction” after the demise of the Roman Empire. See Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages, pp. 206–7, 238–39.
factionalism at court as a manifestation of class struggle have largely failed. It seems clear that, rather than catalyzing the demise of the old elite through a competition for dominance during the Tang, new elites rose to prominence only after the fact, filling a vacuum left behind by the destruction of the great medieval clans at the end of the dynasty. Thus, the fall of the aristocracy and the rise of a new order should be treated as separate sociocultural phenomena.

Second, the present study is based fundamentally on a multiregional perspective. Most historians of Tang China have concentrated on developments they believe to have affected China as a whole, drawing at the most a distinction between the north and the south. But there are other ways of conceptualizing the geography of the empire that permit a clearer understanding of the sociopolitical structure of power. For example, when exploring the nature of the Tang elite, it is essential to distinguish the capital region—that is, the Tang’s two capital cities and the corridor linking them—from the provinces in general, a distinction to be developed in some detail in chapter 2. It is also important to pay attention to the unique characteristics of the three autonomous Hebei provinces in China’s northeast, which were in many respects politically and culturally isolated from the rest of Tang China. There is good reason to believe that, as a result of its cultural isolation, Hebei would be the initial source of the new meritocratic culture that would rise to dominance in subsequent centuries.

Third, this study develops techniques for better analyzing kin and marriage networks, based, once again, on the epigraphic materials. As Robert Hymes has argued in his local study of the Fuzhou elite during the Song dynasty, it is impossible to understand an individual’s place in society without considering the place of the individual’s close relatives. However, there have been almost no attempts to date to analyze in systematic fashion an entire elite social network. As we shall see, digital techniques permit the reconstruction of a surprisingly large portion of the late Tang aristocracy and its marriage ties. One goal of this monograph is to assess the explanatory power of a social network of this type,

with the assumption that such networks constitute an important asset of “social capital” that can help an elite reproduce itself in power. Chapter 3 will examine how the aristocracy’s marriage network served as a concrete resource, as important as its status and prestige, a resource that all but guaranteed its long-term political survival. Besides shedding light on the nature of power, networks can also explain the dynamics of cultural change. Networks, by definition, consist of individuals and families who interact with each other on a regular basis and who are likely, therefore, to share common beliefs and ritual practices. As the embodiment of particular subcultures, networks can thus be thought of as one of the fundamental elements of a culture. In principle, then, it is possible to explore the elite’s changing sense of identity from the perspective of the shifting composition of its social networks.

In order to treat effectively the large amounts of biographical, geographic, and network data compiled for this study, it has been necessary to make use of a variety of quantitative techniques. Since the 1980s, the use of quantification in historical research has declined quite significantly. The fiascos of an earlier period of quantitative hubris have taught us that statistics and other forms of data manipulation must be deployed with great care and responsibility. There is always the danger that tables and graphs can “flatten” data, dissimulating the potential significance of unique and aberrant characteristics of individual cases. Unfortunately, moreover, readers do not always have access to the raw data, so they cannot effectively evaluate methodological details. Nevertheless, if the historian proceeds with great care, there is the potential to revolutionize the field of medieval Chinese history by exploiting the range of new digital resources presently available, notably the Chinese Historical Geographic Information System (CHGIS) and the Chinese Biographical Database (CBDB). Whenever possible, in order to give readers the opportunity fully to evaluate the graphs and tables used in this study, the original data has been made available on the web sites of both the author and the publisher (see appendix A). In addition, a portion of the data has already been integrated into CBDB.

Finally, a few words on the use of the term “aristocracy.” The Tang

27. Bourdieu, “Capital social.”
28. I am not alone in making use of a rather inclusive definition of the term “aristocracy.” See also Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages, pp. 153–54. Wickham
elite that constitutes the subject of this study shared a number of features with the later European aristocracy. It maintained an ethos of superior education, manners, and moral standards based on the notion of good breeding, a notion that led to an insistence on good marriages. Its claim to superiority was rooted in ancient pedigrees (real or fictive) that were recorded in genealogies that went back hundreds of years. This elite held de facto (albeit not de jure) hereditary rights to political power based on a principle of accumulated merit, described in the following chapter. In sum, this elite maintained both moral and political domination. Finally, its power and prestige were essentially independent of the regime, and, indeed, they had been maintained across multiple dynastic transitions.

But it is important to stress that, although it was a cultural analog to the European aristocracy, the Chinese aristocracy described in this monograph was by no means identical. Unlike the European case, it was not a juridical category after the sixth century, and its members did not hold hereditary titles of nobility. It did not pride itself on its military valor, thus in many ways resembling the Roman senatorial aristocracy more than later European “nobles of the sword.” The great families of Tang China also did not maintain large landed estates over multiple generations. Moreover, in China, as previously emphasized, the aristocracy cannot properly be conceptualized as having formed an obstacle to the development of either an absolute monarchy or the bourgeoisie. Finally, because of the system of concubinage, the meaning of heredity was somewhat different in China as compared to Europe.

depends on a similarly inclusive definition for a proper comparative study of the very different societies emerging in Europe and the Mediterranean after the decline of the Roman Empire.


30. See Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages, pp. 155–65, for a good description of the Roman senatorial aristocracy. Like Tang great clans, Roman senatorial elites derived their prestige from officeholding and from a cultured, literary lifestyle. Unlike the Tang great clans, however, the high status of Roman senators also depended on their immense landed estates.

31. See the section of chapter 1 titled “The Geographic Dispersal of Great Clan Descendants” for more on why landownership played a relatively minor role in defining the Tang aristocracy.

32. It is difficult to understand how sons of concubines often had the same status as their brothers born of the principal wife since good marriages were deemed so important to preserving the aristocracy. The key to this problem is that, besides inheriting the
Tomb Epitaphs as a Historical Source

Tomb epitaphs (muzhiming 墓誌銘) in the Tang period consisted of square slabs of limestone (or, in some cases, of brick or even porcelain), usually between a foot and a half and two feet in width, on which were inscribed biographies of the deceased that were generally from several hundred to several thousand words in length. These objects were placed flat on the floor of the tomb chamber, alongside the coffin of the deceased and other grave goods. The inscription was usually protected by a decoratively carved limestone cover. Because, by the ninth century, the muzhiming was deemed a literary genre, the texts of some two hundred of them survive in the collected works of late Tang writers. In recent decades, thousands of additional Tang era tomb epitaphs have come to light, unearthed by archaeologists and grave robbers alike. Figure 0.1 depicts a rubbing of one such epitaph. Along with a limited quantity of other epigraphic material—notably the several dozen surviving spirit-path steles 神道碑 and other monuments erected outside of tombs—it is this vast corpus of new biographical material that has permitted a comprehensive reexamination of the Tang aristocracy and its demise.

The texts of tomb inscriptions are rich with information of interest to historians, often information unavailable in any other historical source. They contain lengthy eulogistic passages that express the values and ideals of the society of the time. They record the dates and places of death and burial of the deceased, and they also usually identify the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, husband or wife, as well as, on occasion, blood of the father, sons of concubines were educated and brought up by the principal wife. Upbringing played as important a role as blood in the Chinese concept of heredity. See Bray, *Technology and Gender*, pp. 353–54; Ebrey, *Inner Quarters*, pp. 230–31.

33. There exists an abundant literature on tomb epitaphs. For a comprehensive description by the foremost Chinese authority on Tang epitaphs, see Zhao Chao, *Gudai muzhi*. For an account of epitaphs as religious objects and their development as a literary genre, see Davis, “Potent Stone.”

34. All epitaphs from surviving collected works are included in the Qing dynasty collectanea *Quan Tang wen* 仝唐文 (Complete Tang prose). A few of them may actually not have been intended for the tomb. Han Yu’s 韓愈 (768–824) epitaph for Li Yu 李于 (776–823) seems to be more of an exhortation against the medicinal use of cinnabar than a eulogy for the deceased. For a discussion of this epitaph, see Davis, “Entombed Epigraphy.”

35. See appendix C for more information on sources of excavated epitaphs.
Figure 0.1. Epitaph of Li Gao 李皋 (808–78). Photograph of epitaph rubbing has been divided onto two pages for the sake of readability; the original epitaph stone is square.
the maternal grandfather, father-in-law, and sons-in-law. Chapters 2 and 3 will explore the uses of such data for analyzing geographic variations in elite composition and for reconstructing kin and marriage networks. Tomb epitaphs also provide an abundance of data useful for analyzing demographic patterns, including age at marriage and at death, numbers of sons and daughters, and records of migration. They describe, usually in considerable detail, the bureaucratic career of the deceased (or of her husband). And, finally, many incorporate fascinating anecdotes that bring to life women and men who lived well over a thousand years in the past.

In the context of the present study, one particular value of tomb inscriptions involves their function as an identifying marker of members of the wealthier strata of society. Epitaphs were both necessary elements of elite burials and elements generally restricted to those who could afford more elaborate funerary rites.36 Many of these inscriptions articulate a deep concern about leaving a grave site unmarked. A frequent refrain noted that, over the passing eons, geological forces would transform the landscape in such a way that “grave tumuli will perhaps be leveled” and “the pine and cypress trees [traditionally planted beside the tomb] will disintegrate into broken sticks.” According to one epitaph:

Mountains become fields, fields become oceans;
Of that which survives from antiquity, what has not been transformed?
Young pines and new tumuli, we know them to be ephemeral;
In a thousand years, all that will remain is the epitaph marking the site.

As anecdotal literature makes clear, numerous ancient graves were stumbled upon by accident in the Tang, just as many historical tombs excavated today were first uncovered by farmers plowing their fields or by

36. For a similar argument regarding Song era epitaphs, see Bossler, Powerful Relations, p. 10.
37. Epitaphs of Wang Qi (747–803) and Fu Cun (d. 860).
men digging cellars or wells. How were families to know that someone in the distant future would not uncover their own tombs? In case of this eventuality, it was essential to explain to the women and men of the future that the human remains in the tomb were worthy of the utmost respect. Thus, those families with sufficient means made sure to place in the grave the “true account of the facts” of the deceased’s life, carved onto the one material known never to perish—stone. In one inscription, the author explained that, “by recording this here, we can hope that later generations will appreciate [the deceased]” and “The tomb must have an epitaph: how else would others grasp the virtuous conduct of the former gentleman?”

But the preparation of an epitaph was only one of the many steps critical to an ideal burial, all of which could cost substantial sums. One had to hire a diviner to select an auspicious day for the funeral. If a good day could not be found, it was not uncommon to place the deceased in a temporary grave near the clan cemetery while awaiting a more favorable moment. In such a case, there would be additional reburial expenses at a later date. One also had to hire a geomancer

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40. Epitaph of Chen Shishang 陳師上 (779–839). Innumerable epitaphs explicitly state that stone is a material that does not perish. For example, according to the epitaph of Wang Zhen 王振 (768–833), “stone is that which does not decay.”
41. Epitaph of Fan Mengrong 范孟容 (791–831). Several epitaphs refer to themselves as “veritable records” of the life of the deceased.
42. Epitaph of Li Gongdu 李公度 (784–852). For another articulation of the notion that “a burial must have an epitaph” 葬宜有銘, see Han Yu’s epitaph for Du Jian 杜兼 (750–809).
43. For an interesting account of a diviner at work, see the epitaph of Ms. Luo 骆氏 (746–808). That divination was taken very seriously is clear from the fact that certain days were evidently more popular for burials. For example, according to my data, 12 of 37 epitaphs (32 percent) dating to the year 834 involved burials on one of only three days: the twenty-fourth day of the eighth month, and the fourteenth and twentieth days of the eleventh month. There is some evidence that the selection of the day depended partly on the surname of the deceased. See epitaph of Wei Yu 韋裕 (d. 859).
44. Epitaphs of Cui Zhi 崔殖 (791–856), Ms. Cui 崔氏 (784–858), Yu Ruxi 于汝錫 (791–847), and Ms. Li 李氏 (771–822). See also epitaph of Zhang Guan 張觀 (803–69) in conjunction with that of his uncle, Zhang Xin 張信 (782–850), which confirms the site as that of the clan cemetery.
to select a suitable site for the tomb so as to assure that the spirit of the deceased remained at ease. If the tomb were poorly situated, the family might later discover that “the fengshui was not balanced,” a situation undoubtedly “ill-fated for the surviving descendants” that necessitated an immediate relocation of the tomb at additional cost. Then, after selecting a choice spot, families sometimes needed to buy the land. Especially in the Yangzi Delta region, epitaphs frequently alluded to the purchase of burial land, often incorporating language reminiscent of land contracts.

In terms of expenses, this was only the beginning. Elite tombs were not simple pits into which coffins were deposited. They consisted of an underground chamber, often built of brick and sealed with a stone door, on top of which was erected a large dirt mound. A variety of objects were placed within the tomb, some of substantial value, including bronze mirrors, ornamental objects of jade and lacquer, and glazed ceramics. Some of these items were auspicious symbols; others were of use to the deceased post mortem, as explained in one inscription: “Today, those of us gathered in the tomb have all brought inside models of objects that the lady customarily used for adornment or for enjoyment; her spirit will certainly be pleased to use these” 佳於兆中，皆取夫人平昔服玩之物樣製，致於其內，神逝因而喜用之. Besides preparing the grave, there were also expenses associated with mortuary rituals, including both the encoffinment ceremony and the funerary procession. For both of these,
one normally had to hire musicians and officiants, including someone to intone the text of the epitaph stone.\textsuperscript{51}

Lastly, there was the question of the epitaph, itself. First, it was necessary to purchase two slabs of limestone, one for the main inscription and one for the epitaph cover. These stones were sometimes cut from the rock of a famous mountain elsewhere in the empire, to be transported, probably at considerable expense, to the grave site.\textsuperscript{52} Then one had to recruit individuals to compose the text, to pen the calligraphy (initially with ink), and, finally, to carve the ink impression into the stone. Especially in the provinces, specialized workshops may have been commissioned for these tasks. Some of the cruder epitaphs reveal obvious signs of having been produced in shops. These types of inscriptions rarely record the names of the authors and calligraphers, but they do sometimes take note of the total word count, undoubtedly an accounting technique used to calculate the final price of the work.\textsuperscript{53} And there are even a few cases in which two epitaphs appear to have been manufactured by the same individuals. For example, significant portions of the inscriptions for Zheng Shuyi\textsuperscript{*} 鄭恕已 (d. 851) and Lü Jianchu\textsuperscript{*} 呂建初 (826–69) are verbatim

\textsuperscript{51} That the epitaphs were read aloud is clear from the occasional pronunciation instructions that appear as in-line commentaries carved onto the stone. For examples, see epitaphs of (Ms.) Cui Chengjian 崔成簡 (753–819), Ms. Du 杜氏 (752–829), Ms. Li 李氏 (774–839), Zhao Wenxin 趙文信 (763–845), Wang Yun 王恽 (789–845), Li Dan 李耽 (d. 857), (Ms.) Liu Bing 劉冰 (826–68), and Ms. Pei 裴氏 (852–77). In five of these nine cases, the pronunciation instructions appear in the rhymed verse at the end, perhaps suggesting that these portions were more likely to be intoned during the burial ceremonies. One might expect the highly educated literati of the capital—the subjects of most of the epitaphs in question—not to have required pronunciation assistance, suggesting that it was a hired officiant rather than a family member who read the epitaph aloud.

\textsuperscript{52} For explicit references to the purchase of stones for the epitaph, see epitaphs of Shi Shimian 施士丐 (734–802), Ms. Zhao 趙氏 (d. 819), Cui Yuanli 崔元立 (806–26), and Guo Wenggui 郭翁歸 (784–849). For reference to a stone cut from a famous mountain, see epitaph of Lei Kuang 倪光 (d. 870).

\textsuperscript{53} For examples, see epitaphs of Ms. Zhang 張氏 (795–855), Ms. Song 宋氏 (759–819), Lai Zuoben 來佐本 (d. c. 873), Yang Jian 楊堅 (835–79), and Fei Fu 費脩 (856–77). See Tackett, “Transformation,” p. 22, for images of the character count tally carved onto the epitaph stone.
copies of each other. Even the calligraphy seems to have been produced by the same hand.

In the two capital cities of Luoyang and Chang’an, families were spared some of these costs. Authors and calligraphers were often kinsmen, relatives by marriage, or men who had once depended on the patronage of the deceased. For example, when a certain Cui Yuanli* 崔元立 (806–86) died at a young age, his eldest brother purchased a stone and then commanded a second brother to compose the text of the inscription. In the case of Sun Bei* 孫儼 (832–70), his mother traveled four hundred kilometers to ask Sun’s beloved cousin to write the epitaph. In these cases, the signatures of the authors and calligraphers—which generally included these men’s full bureaucratic titles—probably served partly to highlight the prestige of the deceased’s social network. It is for this reason that, when Lu Chu* 盧初 (732–75) was reburied fifty-four years after his death, his descendants did not replace the older epitaph, composed by his uncle the chief minister. Instead, they simply affixed an addendum. But whereas capital elites might not be required to hire

54. In particular, the eulogistic passages are essentially identical in these two epitaphs; the relevant dates and names, however, are customized for the individual in question.

55. For other examples, see Tackett, “Transformation,” pp. 14–15, 24; epitaphs of Ms. Xun 荀氏 (809–54) and of Ms. Su 蘇氏 (824–78), paying particular attention to the last three columns of each; and epitaphs of Mr. Jia 贾公 (779–817) and of Ms. Lü 呂氏 (764–816).

56. Authors and calligraphers who were relatives by blood or marriage are usually identified as such in their signature lines. Ties of patronage, by contrast, are difficult to identify. In the case of the epitaph of Lu Zhan 盧占 (d. 866), for example, there is no explanation of the deceased’s relationship to the author, Yuan Wei 源蔚. In the epitaph of Lu’s brother, Lu Pan 盧槃 (d. 879), however, one discovers that Lu Pan was Yuan’s patron. Thus, Yuan presumably composed Lu Zhan’s epitaph on behalf of his patron as well.

57. In another case, the brother of the deceased wrote the text of the inscription and then ordered his subordinate to pen the calligraphy; and, in another, a son was ordered by a family elder to produce the calligraphy for his father’s epitaph. See epitaphs of Wei Zhouji 魏舟濟 (790–849) and Ma Jing 馬敬 (d. 832).

58. Han Yu makes clear the prestige conveyed by the author of an inscription in his epitaph for Shi Hong 石洪 (771–812), in which he goes so far as to identify the eminent individual who had composed Shi’s father’s epitaph.

59. The original calligraphy was apparently deemed less valuable: the text of the inscription composed by the uncle was rewritten onto a new stone along with the addendum.
an author or calligrapher, they did need to pay men to inscribe the text into the stone, men who were sometimes also charged with filling in details left out by the calligrapher. These carvers were lower in status, craftsmen rather than highly educated literati, and so were almost never relatives of the deceased. They rarely signed their names; those that did often held low-level positions as stone workers in the employ of the central government. Interestingly, many extant carvers’ signatures belonged to men from a small number of families. It is possible that the families in question were renowned for the quality of their carvings. Thus, they may have been asked to sign their names on the stones to make it clear that a premium had been paid for their services.

It is not possible to ascertain the cost of each element of the funerary preparations. However, a few epitaphs do reveal the price of the land. Thus, we know that the family of the eunuch Tong Guozheng* (787–851) expended 113.35 strings of cash to purchase a 7.56 mu graveyard.

60. Numerous epitaphs have a blank space in lieu of the given names of one or more of the deceased’s ancestors, suggesting that these names were sometimes filled in later. In some cases, one or more of the names indeed appear to have been carved by a different hand. See, for example, epitaphs of Cui Wu (795–871), paying particular attention to the given names of the deceased and his father; and of Ma Zhiling (831–74), paying particular attention to the father’s name. In some cases, characters for death and burial dates do not adhere to the regular gridlike spacing of the other characters in the text, suggesting that dates were also sometimes added later. See, for example, epitaph of (Ms.) Zhang Jing (825–66). It was presumably quite often the carver who added this information, as made explicitly clear in the carver’s signature on the last line of the epitaph of Miao Zhen (786–844).

61. The one exception that I am aware of involves the epitaph of Guo Liang (770–841), authored by his nephew Han Shifu, a member of a Luoyang family of carvers. This is an interesting case because Guo was a low-level military official, a type of person one rarely encounters in Luoyang epitaphs. It is possible that this man’s family would not have had the resources to commission an epitaph but were able to obtain one at bargain prices through Han Shifu’s intervention.

62. Several of these men held the title of Carver of the Jade Slips, an office apparently attached to the Department of State Affairs.

63. Specifically, according to my data, one-third (15/45) of Luoyang epitaphs with a carver’s signature were carved by men surnamed Han; approximately the same proportion (24/65) of Chang’an epitaphs were carved by men surnamed either Shao or Qiang. The fact that many of these men were craftsmen attached to the Department of State Affairs suggests that their work was probably deemed of high quality.
in the outskirts of Chang’an. And we know that the cost of this prime real estate near the imperial capital (15 strings per *mu*) was over twice as high as land in the vicinity of Yangzhou in the Yangzi Delta region. But there is no information on the expenses associated with the other components of the burial. Fortunately for the historian, however, a few epitaphs do disclose the total price of the entire mortuary process. In fact, the cost could be staggering. When Feng Shenzhong* (810–52) died while serving as chief of staff to the provincial governor of Hedong, the governor sent a subordinate to accompany his remains back home to Chang’an, offering the family an additional 200 strings of cash to allay other expenses. The brother of Wei Jinghong* (812–55) provided an equal sum of money when Wei died away from home; in this case, the money was also intended to help support his widow and orphan son. Some burials apparently could cost even more. When Li Xun* (803–60) died in the Han River valley, a friend provided over 300 strings of cash to pay for the coffin and for the return of his body to Chang’an. And when the eldest daughter of Ms. Zhang* (761–817) sought help in moving her mother’s body from Chang’an to Luoyang for reburial, one son-in-law felt obliged to donate 300 strings of cash. It is likely that a part of these costs was associated with the expense of transporting remains long distances, a procedure that probably necessitated the organization of special rituals to ensure that the soul of the deceased did not separate from the body. However, the cost of transport was by no means the only major expense. One provincial governor provided 500 strings of cash and 50 rolls of silk for a military officer in the provincial army who had died locally and was to be buried locally as well. By means of comparison, 200 to 500 strings of cash was enough to feed from

64. This land seems to have included one guard house and 1.56 *mu* of land to support the guards. In calculating the price of a *mu*, I have used the approximate conversion 1 *mu* = 240 square *bu* and 1 string of cash = 1,000 cash.

65. Two Yangzhou epitaphs, those of Xu Ji (751–834) and Mr. Zhang 張公 (789–859), allude to land purchased at rates of 4.1 and 6.4 strings per *mu*, respectively.

66. Probably because of the extra expense of returning a body home for burial, there are other examples of provincial governors making the arrangements and financing the return of a subordinate’s remains to the capital for interment. See, for instance, epitaph of Yuan Gun 元裒 (758–809).

fifty to a hundred adult males for an entire year.\textsuperscript{68} Little wonder, then, that families frequently complained that they had “exhausted the wealth of the household in order to prepare for the funeral in accordance with ritual” \textsuperscript{69}

To be sure, there were a variety of ways to cut costs. One could rent rather than buy the land for the graveyard.\textsuperscript{70} Or one could convert one’s own farmland into a burial site for one’s kinsmen.\textsuperscript{71} In lieu of purchasing a new slab of limestone for an epitaph, one could even recycle an older stone. The funerary inscription of Wang Shiyong* 王時邑 (799–845), for example, was carved onto the back of a block cut from a Buddhist stele dating to a century earlier. That of Zhao Gongliang* 趙公亮 (842–84) shows traces of an earlier epitaph for another man, named Yang Xishi 楊希適, which had been partly polished off.\textsuperscript{72} It was also common for a family to save money by not commissioning a new stone for a man’s wife. In the case of Fu Cun’s* 傅存 (801–60) epitaph, an addendum announcing his wife’s demise was awkwardly squeezed between the title and the first line of text.\textsuperscript{73} And one boy who died at a young age was interred within his father’s tomb with a small note carved onto the side of the father’s epitaph.\textsuperscript{74}

However, although there were ways of cutting costs, the mortuary practices of the late Tang upper class were, without doubt, expensive. Empirical evidence generally confirms that tomb epitaphs were characteristic of only the more sophisticated tombs and were limited to families

\textsuperscript{68} It cost about 4 strings of cash to feed an adult male for an entire year. See Huang Zhengjian, “Han Yu richang shenghuo,” p. 256.

\textsuperscript{69} Epitaph of Liu Hui 劉惠 (772–848). For other examples of widows turning to friends or relatives to finance burials, see epitaphs of Ms. Li 李氏 (812–69) and of Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814).

\textsuperscript{70} Epitaphs of Ms. Wang 王氏 (836–49) and of (Ms.) Zhu Siniang 朱四娘 (d. 830).

\textsuperscript{71} Epitaph of Cai Zhi 蔡質 (807–45). Before the demise of the land registration system, tombs seem often to have been placed on mulberry land (which, unlike grain land, remained in the family generation after generation); the “statement of purpose” at the end of an epitaph frequently makes reference to “mulberry land.”

\textsuperscript{72} For an image of one corner of Zhao’s epitaph, see Tackett, “Transformation,” 23. For more similar examples, see epitaphs of Yu Yan 手偃 (710–50), Qiao Shixi 喬師錫 (785–848), Ms. Li 李氏 (823–56), and Wang Xun 王詢 (c. 808–77).

\textsuperscript{73} For an image, see Tackett, “Transformation,” p. 23.

\textsuperscript{74} Epitaph of Gu Chongxi 龔崇僖 (765–847).
who had the resources to fund more elaborate burials. Sumptuary laws did apply to certain elements of the burial rituals, but these laws seem not to have affected the epitaph itself. Thus, it is fair to say that any individual with a tomb inscription was by definition a member of the wealthier strata of society. That is not to say that these individuals came from a homogeneous socioeconomic class. Moreover, the corpus of excavated epitaphs discovered at any one locale represents a roughly random cross-section of elite society in that one region alone. Compared to the dynastic histories, tomb epitaphs provide data on a much greater range of elites, from the most powerful court bureaucrats to landowners of more modest means. Thus, in the case of a series of tombs from the late Tang that were excavated in the vicinity of Zhenjiang (in Jiangsu Province), the simpler tombs contained brick epitaphs, while the more elaborate ones had inscriptions carved onto limestone. Presumably, this discrep-

75. A series of regional studies seems to confirm this generalization. To list two examples, in Anhui, vertical shaft tombs and pit tombs of the Tang period had few grave goods at all; by contrast, double-chambered brick tombs always contained epitaphs. In Tang and Song Hubei, there was a direct correlation between tomb size, quality of grave goods, and presence of a tomb inscription. See Fang Chengjun, “Anhui Sui Tang zhi Song muzang,” p. 51; Yang Baocheng, ed., *Hubei kaogu faxian*, pp. 304–6, 319–25.

76. Spirit-path steles and other stones placed in front of the tomb, for example, seem to have been subject to sumptuary regulations. See stele of Yang Ning (773–803), which explains these regulations. But these regulations did not apply to epitaphs. See Tackett, “Great Clansmen,” pp. 109–10. Indeed, Ye Wa has convincingly argued that the state’s enforcement efforts targeted the visible aspects of mortuary practice rather than what was actually placed within the tomb. See Ye Wa, “Mortuary Practice,” esp. pp. 296–98. Thus, there were restrictions on the transportation of epitaph stones by carriage during the funerary procession but not specifically on the placement of epitaphs within the tomb. Perhaps for this reason, it is possible that some epitaphs were actually carved in advance at the site of the tomb. See epitaph of Ms. Xue (805–48), which explains that the author “carved a stone inscription at the tomb.”

77. Archaeological efforts dedicated to excavating Tang era tombs differ substantially by region. Thus, although one can compare the percentages of epitaphs from different regions that share a particular characteristic, one should avoid comparing total numbers of epitaphs from different regions.

78. Liu Jianguo, “Jiangsu Zhenjiang Tang mu,” p. 146. One might argue that individuals with brick epitaphs should not be treated as members of the upper classes. It should be noted, however, that brick epitaphs constitute a very small percentage of the corpus of inscriptions used in this study.
ancy reflected two rather different socioeconomic groups. The epitaphs are all the more valuable for the social historian in that they demarcate a range of economic levels within the elite strata of society.

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 explores the usefulness and limitations of the most common means used by scholars today to identify members of the Tang aristocracy: their clan names. Abundant evidence confirms that surnames and places of origin were frequently deployed in texts of the period to designate “great clans.” But although these clans remained an important status group, I argue that their situation had changed substantially by the ninth century. The vast majority of such families (with the exception of those residing in the peripheral regions of the southeast) no longer had direct links with their places of ancestral origin. Moreover, the fecundity of such families—facilitated by the presence of concubines—resulted in large numbers of individuals who could claim descent from famous families, so that the prestige of the names was substantially diluted. Thus, it is clear that the political elite of the ninth century that actually held major positions in the bureaucracy consisted of only a very small subgroup of the biological descendants of these old families.

If the clan name is insufficient for identifying members of the dominant sociopolitical elite, how does the historian go about doing so? The subsequent two chapters discuss first residence patterns and then marriage networks as alternative indicators for identifying and describing its members. Chapter 2 approaches this issue by comparing the composition of the wealthiest families (i.e., the subjects of excavated epitaphs) residing in different parts of the empire. This comparison reveals a clear divide between a national elite based in the capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang (and their surrounding regions) and a local elite based in the provinces. Such a pattern, I will argue, created a “colonial” relationship between center and periphery that sharply distinguished the Tang empire from the Late Imperial state.

Chapter 3 describes how the geographic concentration of the dominant political elite in the two imperial capitals both reinforced and was reinforced by a tightly knit and highly circumscribed marriage network consisting of a small subgroup of the pre-Tang great families. This network was composed of two cliques—one organized around the
imperial clan and one around the most eminent of the old families. It was the members of these two cliques who constituted the dominant political elite that essentially monopolized power during the late Tang. The social capital embedded in the capital-based elite marriage network allowed this elite to control both recruitment into the bureaucracy and appointments to the highest posts in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Chapter 4 then reevaluates the functioning of the provincial commissions, bureaucratic structures established in the wake of the great An Lushan Rebellion of the mid-eighth century that took over many of the administrative responsibilities once managed by the central government. Historians have often argued that these provincial governments constituted both a centrifugal force obstructing the power of the central government and an important avenue of new upward social mobility. In fact, I show that the central government and the long dominant bureaucratic elite both adapted well to the new circumstances and largely maintained their hold on power. By the second half of the ninth century, the capital-based social network of national elites had managed to coopt all potential avenues of upward mobility.

But how then did this elite—which had survived several earlier dynastic transitions and rebellions—disappear suddenly and completely with the fall of the Tang? This question is resolved in chapter 5. Although the An Lushan Rebellion has attracted far more attention among Chinese historians, chapter 5 demonstrates that the Huang Chao Rebellion of the late ninth century was far more destructive to the old families. When the rebels all but annihilated the two capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang, they physically eliminated a large percentage of the political elite, whose permanent residences and property holdings were overwhelmingly concentrated in these two cities. It was their physical elimination that—more than anything else—brought about their near immediate demise.