

“Tang and Song China: Two Models of Empire”

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A change occurred in the structure of empire in China between the Tang dynasty (the seventh to tenth centuries AD) and the Song dynasty (tenth to thirteenth centuries AD). The transformation is particularly strong from the late Tang of the tenth century to the late (“southern”) Song of the thirteenth century. A number of transformations occur in this period. A relocation of the bulk of the Chinese population occurred from North China to South China, and an expansion of population by the thirteenth century, compared to the ninth century. The process of urbanization saw a larger percentage of the population living in the cities as compared to earlier period. There was the “medieval economic revolution” involving the monetization of the economy, expansion of market networks, and emergence of long distance trade in luxury goods. These changes were accompanied by advances in agriculture, demise of the aristocracy, and the rise of autocratic monarchy. Changes in political cliques and power struggles became based on ideology rather than based on different social groups. Another transformation visible was a shift from serfdom to tenant farming.

These points are important partly to give context and also to show how this model has influenced our understanding. But many of these would fit nicely in a narrative of modernity from a European perspective, as was noted by a twentieth-century Japanese historian who proposed that China became “modern” in the eleventh century, and this should lead us to rethink this model. It seems a coincidence that this set of features associated with early modern Europe would be seen in China a few centuries earlier. After the 1980s many historians rejected the idea that patterns were present in history, and the idea that the transitions one saw in Europe occurred elsewhere, such as China.

The fundamental change from the Tang to Song period includes transitional elements that are related to each other: the first is the localization of elites. The Late Tang dominant elite was based in the capital, with a subordinate elite in the provinces. Their offices were of national significance, and the phenomenon of trans-generational office-holding was strong. This information is based on excavated epitaphs, which are good sources for the late Tang. Several thousand of these from the Tang period have been preserved. By contrast, the S. Song featured a dominant elite based in the provinces whose offices were not necessarily of national significance and with whom trans-generational office-holding was rare.

To understand how something like a ‘demise of aristocracy’ could have occurred, it is important to note that in the Tang dynasty, blood was more important than talent in defining one’s prestige. But the same top families of the Tang dynasty do not reappear in the Song dynasty. Many were massacred. One account reads: “Every home ran with blood.” Top office-holders were killed off and displaced. The transitional period between Tang and Song dynasty saw the rise of a new set of elites, and a sequence of five brief dynasties in North: four of the five originated in the Northeast, as did their associates and much of the capital’s new population which replaced the old.

The new set of elites in the Song was also associated with a change in mentality and culture. For example, elite burials at the structure of Song tombs look similar to tombs from the Northeast in late Tang, and there is some evidence of a dialect shift: Northeast rhyme patterns resemble Song rhymes. Finally, talent became more important than blood in defining prestige in the Song dynasty. Whereas Tang epitaphs focused on ancestry, Song epitaphs give us rags-to-riches stories. This seems to evidence demise of aristocratic mentality from Tang to Song. The structure of the elite shifted too, but later than the ninth to tenth century transition period. Top political elites were still based at the capital in the Song. Maybe a new aristocracy might have emerged out of this over time. Only in C11 and C12 this happens. The fact that late Tang elites were based in the capital explains why they could be wiped out so effectively. Replacing the people in the capital brought a cultural transformation at the top.

Civil service examinations became significant as an institution in the eighth and ninth centuries. They were not very significant institutions before this period: competitions in the Han dynasty used the same names as the exams in later periods but were really not the same. In the **Tang** they remained a tool for social reproduction for the capital based elites who monopolized these exams. People from the provinces who took these exams did not succeed. There was better education in the capital than in the provinces: this was a time before printing, thus books were probably not accessible outside the capital. Some gossiped that the pass-lists were circulated in advance.

In the **Song** dynasty the situation changed. In the eleventh century there rose a new “culture of fairness” and new belief in a meritocratic principle. Anonymous exams were introduced. Exams were recopied so the handwriting could not be recognized. As a result of this, more people were involved in the examinations. Geographic diversity of exam success rose. The spread of printing made this possible as did the establishment of a national school system. By the eighth century, there were printed documents in China. Many more people were able to access the texts they need to prepare for the exams. A fairly high literacy rate (for an agrarian society) is indicated by the number of people taking exams. The pass rate was low: 1 in 1,000 passed. This was the key to understand what was occurring in the Song regarding the composition of the elites.

The competitiveness of civil service exams helps explain the shift to the **localism** of the Southern Song. Increasingly competitive exams made it no longer possible for families to specialize in bureaucratic service as they had been able to in the late Tang. Local elites changed their **survival strategy**: they diversified their sons. Some might become merchants and find other ways of making money. Elites also established provincial bases to maintain long-term influence.

They also developed an ideological strategy. In Confucian thought, public service had been the most important thing families could do. In the Song and later, this was no longer possible. Public service became defined in new ways, such as charity work for one’s community. An individual in a local elite might build a bridge for his community if he could no longer serve in an office. Nearby stelae explained who paid for the bridge.

Associated with this shift towards localism was what one might call a new social contract. What is the proper role of the state in local society? As late the late eleventh century, there

was a general attitude that the state was the source of everything good. A well-ordered society must emanate from the state. This culminated in **the new policy of Wang Anshi in the eleventh century**. The state could strengthen itself at the expense of local society. Comparing this to later Southern Song is important. Under Wang Anshi the state established special granaries to stabilize prices and provide rural credit to loan grain that could be paid back after the harvest and a charity to feed people when they could not feed themselves. Local elites of the eleventh century, rather than the state, established these granaries. Under Wang Anshi there was also a national school system, probably intended to replace exams. In the late Song, this was eliminated in favor of academies created by local elites.

The fragmentation of elite networks also transpired in the Song. Elites were part of social networks, and held social capital which is equivalent to, and exchangeable with, economic capital. Social capital was acquired by having a network of kin and marriage relationships. Networks also formed a pool of potential office holders. This is true in late Tang dynasty. The social network of the dominant elite was based on the capital. Elite social networks were few in number. Everyone in the capital knew and intermarried with each other. One network comprised military elites. Another, eunuch elites. Eunuchs had families: they married and adopted children. Their epitaphs looked like anyone else's. Eunuchs did not necessarily intermarry with aristocrats who looked down on them, but seem to have intermarried with the military elite.

The Southern Song dynasty saw a significant shift: the pool of potential office holders was based in provinces rather than the capital. These provincial elites intermarried with other local elites, not with elites from other portions of the empire: thus, the top pool was now dispersed and fragmented. People really created a network within their localities rather than a network of national significance. Bureaucrats were now no longer related to each other as they had been in the Tang dynasty.

The idea of autocratic monarchy as the Tang/Song transition model presupposed that the nature of the state changed between the Tang and the Song, and that the state agenda was the elites' agenda since all the members of the upper echelon were related to each other as part of the large network based in the capital. But in the Southern Song no single network of elites embodied the State. The state was now an abstraction. Its agenda might be different from the agenda of the elites from which it was composed.

On other hand, one can think of this differently. In the late Tang, one can see the Chinese empire as colonial model with the center affecting, and dominant over, the periphery. The capital elite served in offices all over the empire. They enforced the policy made by the central government.

In the Southern Song, by contrast, one can talk about integrated localism: we see a two-way interaction between the center and the periphery. The provinces contained powerful and influential folk. Local magistrates and retired ministers could conflict. Local elites and local society exerted some pressure on the state to do what they wanted. So local elites now acquired more power vis-à-vis the state *in the local arena*. This represented a big shift from the late Tang to the late Song. However, these local elite lost influence on national policy. The State was more autocratic in this perspective. And the Empire fits into a completely different model.