

From Universal Empire to Homogeneous State: The Shifting Structure of Political Power across China's Tang-Song Transition

Nicolas Tackett (UC Berkeley)

This paper will examine the shift in organization, distribution, and even conceptualization of imperial power across the Tang-Song transition, a period of especially dramatic change (on par in importance with the Warring States Period!). To be sure, there were numerous long-term continuities in imperial governance: e.g., the enduring power and prestige of the state; the legal and fiscal privileges afforded to officeholders; and the balance-of-power approach to keeping the military in line. But there were simultaneously fundamental changes as well, with far-reaching implications: the disappearance of families that specialized in bureaucratic office (i.e., families serving in office generation after generation); the diminishing prestige of the capital as a center where political elites aggregated and the concomitant rise to “national” prominence of members of the local elite; a simultaneous conceptual shift towards imagining the polity as a culturally (and ethnically) homogeneous people (which explains both the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song, and the fact that—as I have argued previously—the Song saw itself as a mono-ethnic state).

The paper will then propose possible explanations for these dramatic changes. It will address institutional changes (the demise of the “equal-field” system of land redistribution, the deregulation of commerce, the expanded use of the civil service examinations, etc.); the impact of the political fragmentation of the tenth-century (the subject of my current book project); the medieval commercial and print revolutions; the democratization of learning and substantial enlargement of the educated population; and the expanded reach of state propaganda efforts (via print and the civil service examination curriculum).

Relevant to my analysis will be a particular approach to conceptualizing the political elite. I will distinguish elites by place of primary residence (capital vs. provinces; interior vs. frontier; regions under formal vs. informal¹ imperial control); by the arena that they dominated (empirewide [i.e., “national”] vs. local); by occupation (military vs. bureaucratic vs. rulers²); by the resources bolstering their status and prestige (i.e. Bourdieu’s forms of “capital”); by their relationship to the dynasty, i.e., whether they were more committed to the dynasty (keeping the current imperial family in power) or to the imperial system (in which case they would easily maintain their positions even after a dynastic transition to a new imperial family). Finally, note that I will attempt to quantify some elements of my analysis. The metrics I use may include: geographic distribution (places of burial) of the most influential bureaucrats; geographic distribution of the most important generals; total size of the pool of potential officials and the geographic distribution of potential officials; and marriage partners of ruling families.

¹ By informal empire, I refer to the empire’s exertion of influence on tribal politics without conquering them and subjugating them to the regular bureaucratic infrastructure; it is perhaps also appropriate to include tributary “vassal” states under informal empire, though control over these states was much weaker than over tribes just beyond the frontier. Maintaining the informal empire was important for domestic propaganda and to secure the frontier, but will not be considered at length in this paper.

² “Rulers” would include the emperor, the imperial clan, and perhaps those with particularly close personal ties to the emperor, i.e. consort clans and eunuchs.