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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that imperial China had an upper class unusual in world history. The men who occupied the highest places in the social, intellectual, and economic life of the country also provided the staff for government offices. Much of the attitudes and values of the upper class were as a consequence shaped by preparation for entry into the bureaucracy and experience as bureaucrats assigned to managing the administrative concerns of a huge empire. Yet within this common framework, social stratification underwent major shifts during the course of Chinese history. At the most general level, the imperial period can be divided into two eras, Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) through T'ang (618–906), and Sung (960–1276) through Ch'ing (1644–1911). In the early imperial period Chinese class structure was not radically different from that of other premodern societies; the upper class was marked by wealth, way of life, maintenance of traditional values, access to political power; non-bureaucratic ties based on family, locality, or patronage were of great significance in social and political life.[1] It was not until the late imperial period that the features peculiar to the Chinese system were fully developed. Economic and technological changes, and above all the extension of a competitive examination system for selection of officials increased opportunities for social mobility as well as circulation of power within the upper class; these developments intensified the bureaucratic orientation of the ruling class.[2]

This book deals with the characteristics which made the social system of early imperial China different from that of later China. Its subject is the aristocratic families. In the second and third centuries A.D., as China entered a prolonged period of political disunity, there appeared an aristocracy composed of a few dozen families and a few thousand individuals. These families, their position assured by wealth, hereditary privilege, and the prestige of their names, dominated much of public life for the next three centuries. Their power was never absolute; in varying degrees throughout this period they were kept in check by emperors, court favorites, generals, and new men who rose through talent or luck. In the sixth and seventh centuries, the court and

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bureaucracy were strengthened and China reunified. Yet for nearly another three centuries, through the T'ang dynasty, members of the same old families filled many of the most influential social and governmental positions.

Although these eminent families were similar enough to aristocracies elsewhere to merit the description 'aristocratic', they also had features which placed them within the Chinese tradition. One was their eagerness to be associated with the imperial court. Although they had adequate private resources to hold themselves aloof from antagonistic rulers, the long-established ideal of the gentleman-official retained its strength; whenever practicable aristocrats sought prestigious court positions. This attitude seems to have effectively countered any tendencies for the aristocratic families to become feudal lords with proprietary control over sections of the country. Another distinctive characteristic was the relatively limited importance of hereditary privilege and rank to the survival of these families. Until the Sui dynasty (581–618) aristocrats (and others) had hereditary access to government posts, but this right insured against impoverishment rather than guaranteed eminence. Aristocrats were also often given noble titles that could be passed to one son in succession for the duration of the dynasty. Such titles, however, never created a clear social hierarchy. Titled and untitled Lang-yeh Wangs appear to have been of equal social status and both had greater social prestige than titled sons of generals. A third distinctive feature of the Chinese aristocratic 'families' was their size. It is true that whenever status is hereditary the ruling stratum will be composed of families and extended families; hereditary status implies family continuity. But in China, with traditional emphasis on family solidarity and no principle of primogeniture, aristocratic families grew into large kinship groups. One 'family' could include several hundred adult men. The boundaries of aristocratic status thus became entangled in questions of the branching and dispersal of lineages and the compilation of private and public genealogical records.

Scholarship on the aristocratic families

Sources surviving from the Han through T'ang period are principally dynastic histories, poetry, belles-lettres, state papers, collections of anecdotes, a few original documents which have been found in the arid Northwest, and stone inscriptions which survive either intact or in transcription. These sources never directly address the questions asked by social historians; they treat prominent men as individuals not as members of families or social groups and only by chance do they discuss economic resources or local position. Yet the limitations of the sources have not prevented historians from detecting beneath the surface signs that aristocratic families were of great social and politi-

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cal importance in this period. The evidence that they have elicited can be summarized as follows:

> (1) The dynastic histories of the Chin (265–420) and Northern and Southern Dynasties, while conforming to well-established formats, show an inordinate number of the eminent and powerful people of the time (high officials in particular) to be patrilineal relatives. Moreover, the authors of such histories often found it useful to group these men together according to family, that is, to concentrate as much on giving genealogies of families as biographies of men, though they never stated this explicitly.
> (2) The dynastic histories also show that certain family lines persisted for centuries. Men described as P'eis of Ho-tung or Wangs of Lang-yeh are given biographies in the dynastic histories from the time of the Han or Three Kingdoms through the T'ang or Five Dynasties (907–960). Frequently men from these families are described as descendants of famous men of that name whose biographies appear in earlier histories.
> (3) The genealogical tables for T'ang Chief Ministers included in the *Hsin T'ang shu* ('New T'ang history') provide the specific links between many of the men given biographies in the various dynastic histories. They also show that a few families in the T'ang had grown so large that a single generation could include several hundred men.
> (4) The Chinese were aware of the special character of these families and had a number of terms to describe them, *men-fa* (great bureaucratic houses), *men-ti* (great houses), *shih-tsu* (scholar-official families), *shih-tsu* (hereditary families), *kuei-tsu* (noble families), *yu-tsu* (eminent families), *kao-men* (exalted houses), *chu-hsing* (famous names), and so on.
> (5) The system of recruitment to office used from 220 to 583 was frequently criticized for selecting officials according to family rank, not virtue or ability as claimed.
> (6) In this period, especially the Southern Dynasties, birth was often referred to as a legitimate criterion for social status. There were, for instance, statements that men of less than the most eminent birth were unsuitable for certain offices or for marriage to certain people.
> (7) Wealth, extravagance, arrogance, snobbishness, refinement, local domination – characteristics commonly associated with aristocracies and entrenched power groups – were at times attributed to members of the well-known families.
> (8) Records of the court politics of the period show that a high proportion of leading men came from famous families and contain evidence of occasional struggles between members of such families and the emperors.
> (9) Genealogical research, an activity associated both with active kinship

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> groups and societies in which ancestry must be demonstrated, flourished in this period. Genealogies were compiled not only of single families but also of the whole social elite, a hundred to several hundred families, sometimes ranking families according to eminence. Not only the families themselves but also the government took interest in this activity.

Chinese historians, from the Sung dynasty onward, made note of these features of the Han to T'ang period. Some of the interrelations between these features were also recognized; Chao I (1727–1814), for instance, recognized that emphasis on birth in social life was related to its use as a criterion for selecting officials and that both were related to the survival of families for centuries.[3] It is only in the last fifty to sixty years, however, that scholars, trying to comprehend China's political, institutional, or cultural history, have analyzed the nature and historical importance of these aristocratic families. Modern historians have asked why these families appeared and which of their many attributes were essential to their eminence and durability.

The first modern historian to draw attention to the aristocratic families was Naitō Torajirō (1866–1934). In his effort to comprehend the course of Chinese history and distinguish its major epochs, he characterized China from the end of the Han through mid T'ang as a medieval, aristocratic age. He stressed the cultural basis of the aristocratic families, relating their appearance to growth of respect for pedigree and changing attitudes towards scholarship and manners in the Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Chin.[4] Yet because he attributed the decline of the aristocratic families after mid-T'ang to fundamental changes in the organization of society, he also implied that their existence was related to social, economic, and institutional factors.[5]

Since Naitō's time numerous scholars have attempted to fill in the gaps in his explanation. Starting in the 1920s Okazaki Fumio studied institutional developments related to the aristocratic families, especially the nine-rank recruitment system initiated in 220 which, despite its original rhetoric, within a century became a method of selecting officials by family status.[6] He was soon joined by the Chinese scholar Yang Yün-ju,[7] and institutional history has since remained the major approach of Chinese and Japanese historians who study this period. Underlying the work of many of these scholars has been the assumption that the establishment in 220 and abolition in 583 of the nine-rank system was the primary determinant of the rise and fall of the aristocratic families.

In the 1930s a number of Chinese historians began to look for social and economic explanations of historical changes. Wu Hsien-ch'ing, T'ao Hsi-sheng, and Ku Chi-kuang sought to explain the appearance of aristocratic families not in terms of cultural changes or institutional peculiarities but in terms of

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power, especially economic power.[8] Comparing the aristocratic families to the feudal nobility of Europe, they viewed their appearance as a result of the extension of the independent local power of certain families to the point where they were stronger than the rulers and could in a sense take over the nine-rank recruitment system and use it to give themselves hereditary privileges. Conflicts with the state and emperors were stressed. Ku Chi-kuang, for instance, saw the reassertion of strong imperial control as a major reason for the decline of the aristocratic families at the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.[9] Responding to the same general intellectual stimulus, scholars like Yang Lien-sheng and Ch'en Yin-k'o tried to explain political events, such as factional disputes and dynastic changes, in terms of struggles between groups with different social and economic interests, giving a new significance to the aristocratic families as a political power group.[10] Ch'en Yin-k'o interpreted early T'ang political struggles as conflicts between the Northwestern martial nobility and the Northeastern civil aristocracy, and late T'ang disputes as conflicts between the old aristocratic families and the newly risen families.

The main contribution of these early, wide-ranging studies was to point to possible cultural, institutional, and economic explanations of the changes in society between the Han and the T'ang. In the past thirty years almost all aspects of the historical situation in which the aristocratic families flourished have received further attention. The most significant accomplishments of these decades have been investigations of small segments of the political, economic, and institutional history of the period which have established limitations on the hypotheses scholars can reasonably propose about the aristocratic families.

A variety of detailed studies can now be brought to bear on the problem of the relationship between the existence of aristocratic families and the weakness of the numerous dynasties between the Han and the T'ang. More has been learned about the kinds of powers the government lost, who acquired them, and how the government eventually regained them. Chin Fa-ken, T'ang Chang-ju, Ho Ch'ang-chün, and Kawakatsu Yoshio have studied the sparse evidence for the economic position and military power of locally entrenched families.[11] There can now be little doubt that for limited periods the central government lost almost all powers to local magnates. Yet from their studies it is also clear that the largest local magnates were not identical with the aristocratic families whose names repeatedly appear in the history. Taking a different perspective, Yen Keng-wang has shown that when central authority declined considerable autonomy was acquired by county (*hsien*), commandery (*chün*), and prefectural (*chou*) administrators who could decide and implement policies and choose their own subordinates.[12] Aristocrats would

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have profited from this system when they held such positions, as they did in the Northern Dynasties, but not when they disdained them. The process by which central control was rebuilt in the Northern Dynasties has been partially clarified by studies of the equal-field (*chün-t'ien*) system of land distribution which strengthened the government's tax base and control over landownership, and the militia (*fu-ping*) system, which made possible mobilization of large armies under central command.[13] The purpose and effect of these measures was to strengthen the central administration at the expense of local magnates. Unfortunately little has been learned about the impact of these policies on the aristocratic families prominent at court.

The evolution and operation of the nine-rank system have been worked out in detail by Miyakawa Hisayuki, Miyazaki Ichisada, and others.[14] The early view that this system provided great political power to the aristocratic families has had to be qualified; although aristocrats gained posts, even high ones, by virtue of their birth, and a large proportion of all known officials were from prominent families, real power was often in the hands of men of lower status.[15] Yet at the same time attention has been brought to the great social and symbolic importance of the nine-rank system. Because the high status of specific families was made visible by the kinds of offices their men held in the bureaucracy, any tendencies to esteem pedigree were strongly reinforced. Ochi Shigeaki has shown how this led to the recognition of three strata of upper class families in the Eastern Chin and Southern Dynasties.[16] David Johnson has drawn attention to the compilation of officially-sponsored national genealogical compendiums which provided a textual basis for the increasingly stratified society.[17]

Theories which attribute the existence of aristocratic families to either the nine-rank system or the weaknesses of the central government have somehow to account for the survival of these families into the T'ang, after the nine-rank system had been abolished and unified central control revived. One explanation could be that the T'ang government was less strong or less bureaucratic than previously supposed. Yet analysis of administrative documents surviving at Tun-huang has left little doubt that the T'ang government kept close watch over local administrative and fiscal affairs.[18] Another explanation could be that the aristocratic families survived as a power group, able to protect their common interests through political activities within the bureaucracy. The early theories of Ch'en Yin-k'o along these lines, however, have not stood up to scrutiny; close studies of the factional politics of the T'ang have failed to produce any evidence that the aristocratic families formed a coherent or self-conscious power group.[19] A third explanation could be that persistence of aristocratic social attitudes assured the prominence of the old families. A number of studies have attempted to assess the importance and strength of

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such attitudes. Niida Noboru examined the highly restricted marriage practices of aristocratic families in the T'ang. Takeda Ryūji, Ikeda On, Denis Twitchett, and David Johnson have made careful studies of references to the compilation of national genealogical compendiums and a few surviving fragments.[20] The attention given these compendiums by rulers and the general public show that distinguishing families by status remained politically important well after the nine-rank system had been abolished.

Reasons for a case study

As progress is made in study of the social, political, and institutional history of early imperial China, the broad outlines of the aristocratic families have come into clearer focus. Numerous problems of interpretation nevertheless remain. Scholars generally acknowledge that the aristocratic families were rich, educated, socially exclusive, and able to gain high titles and offices. The principal interpretive issue is which of their characteristics were crucial to their position. Many view these aristocratic families essentially as local gentry who gained enough power to be able to demand honors and perquisites, especially official titles and offices. Others see office-holding as the defining feature of the aristocratic families, their status dependent on continued access to office and the prestige it brought. Some, stressing this bureaucratic side of the aristocratic families, conclude that they were ultimately dependent on the rulers.[21] To illustrate the magnitude of these disagreements, it is as though scholars could not decide whether the aristocratic families were closer to the Roman patricians, whose position brought political privileges but derived from wealth, to the Russian service nobility of the seventeenth century, who possessed extensive landed wealth but were obligated to hold office to maintain their status, to the English aristocrats of the same period whose titles defined their status but who often took positions in the military or government for the economic rewards they offered, or even to the Fujiwara of Heian Japan, who preserved their wealth and prestige through undisputed control over the court.[22]

One reason why so much confusion surrounds the social and political nature of the aristocratic families is that their basic features are still poorly delineated. Scholars have seldom been able to address questions of degree or extent. It is known that many aristocrats held high offices, but not what proportion of the members of an aristocratic family gained posts, nor the kinds of posts they held; that the aristocratic families were accused of reluctance to marry anyone of lesser birth, but not how they defined lesser birth or whom they actually married; that many aristocratic families were considered large, but not how large they were nor how their size or composition changed.

The only way to corroborate generalizations or replace accusations of pol-

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itical domination with evidence of its extent is to collect more information which can be analyzed systematically. A great mass of largely unexploited data is incorporated within dynastic history biographies, funerary inscriptions, private writings, anecdotes, and so on. These sources seldom discuss the aristocratic families *per se*; their value is that they contain hundreds of thousands of items about the political experiences, social activities, family life, and intellectual attitudes of specific members of these families. Taken piece by piece this information is of little significance; one aristocrat had eight brothers who held office, another lived and was buried at great distance from his 'native place.' Yet if this information is sorted chronologically and genealogically and the context of anecdotes and events explored, its potential is great: the characteristics of the aristocratic families can be documented rather than simply imputed.

It is to make possible the kind of close analysis needed for use of these unwieldy sources that I have narrowed my focus to one family, the Po-ling Ts'uis. A case study of a single family has obvious limitations: some of a family's characteristics may have been unique or accidental; there may have been several different types of aristocratic families, and so on. But a case study is a good place to start if one wishes to gain a solid empirical basis for interpretations of the aristocratic families. A few case studies have already been undertaken by Chinese and Japanese scholars, but much work remains to be done.[23]

A major advantage of a case study is that within its framework ways can be found to ask basic questions about the aristocratic families in concrete terms. The most important questions approached in this book can be subsumed under two general lines of inquiry. The first is the nature of the aristocratic families as kinship groups. How large were they? Should they be thought of as powerful, organized lineages with recognized heads and common activities like the Fujiwara in Heian Japan? Or were the members of the aristocratic families more like seventeenth-century English nobles whose status was hereditary and who were conscious of family ties but who were seldom organized on kinship lines? No existing source discusses these issues and no early genealogy survives. Many aspects of the composition of the Ts'uis, however, can be inferred by asking indirect questions. How closely linked were the Ts'uis mentioned in historical sources? Can one detect contact between Ts'uis more distantly related than first cousins? If so, what kind? Can one find cases where Ts'uis acted in concert in political matters? Where they opposed each other? Did the Ts'uis as a whole have a common graveyard or ancestral temple? If not, what kind of subgroups had them? Can one find Ts'uis who moved away from where the bulk of their relatives lived? Was their status or the status of their children the same as that of other Ts'uis?

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The second line of inquiry concerns the dual nature of members of the aristocratic families as bureaucrats and aristocrats. Although aristocracy and bureaucracy have often overlapped in world history, there are inherent conflicts between these two roles: aristocrats have autonomous status, while bureaucrats depend on their institutional position; birth, the essential attribute of aristocrats, should be of no consequence in a bureaucracy which must reward above all institutional position and achievement. A number of scholars have tried to reconcile the apparent contradictions involved in aristocrats serving in the bureaucracy. Miyazaki, for instance, has shown how the bureaucracy was reorganized along more aristocratic lines. T'ang Chang-ju has pointed to some of the instability created by aristocrats' dependence on political privileges. Ch'en Yin-k'o has emphasized the aloofness and pride of aristocrats who held office.[24] Nevertheless, no one has closely examined the question from the viewpoint of the aristocratic families themselves. Did they hold office primarily to maintain their status, or more to embellish it? How dependent were they on court favor? What share of their resources were effectively private, beyond the control of the court? As part of a case study, ways can be found to ask these questions indirectly. Can one find Ts'uis who did not hold office? If so, how did their status or the status of their children compare to other Ts'uis? Can one find occasions when the Ts'uis held aloof from the court? What were the consequences? Can one find situations where they had to choose between preserving their private wealth or prestige and their formal governmental position? Which did they choose, and what effect did their decision have?

Delimiting a subject

A case study requires, first of all, a family deserving the name aristocratic. Defining the aristocratic families and what made them aristocratic is not easy. The Chinese of the time, conscious of many social distinctions, had a rich vocabulary of terms for families of great status or power. Unfortunately they had if anything too many different terms. None seems to have referred to a specific group of known families, and the same family could be described in different contexts with different terms. Therefore it is left to the modern historian to determine which were the most significant distinctions among the elite families. Most scholars have either assumed that all families called eminent, long-established, or powerful were essentially comparable, or have divided them into two groups, the aristocratic families and the local or provincial elite.[25] But even dividing these families into two levels obscures important distinctions. In this book the term aristocratic families is not used as a direct translation of any Chinese term (though it would be closest in conno-

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tation to *men-fa*). Rather it is used to refer to the very small number of families whose members appeared over and over again in the dynastic histories, whose positions were not tied to transient political alignments, but were more durable and independent. This autonomy came from diverse resources such as local power, legal privileges, and deeply ingrained respect for birth. In other words, what made a family aristocratic was hereditary high social status, independent of full court control.[26]

By defining the aristocratic families in this way, I am excluding the families who in almost all dynasties gained great wealth and prestige as a result of their ties to the imperial family as relatives or early supporters. These families are called here the nobility (the closest terms in Chinese would be *kuei-tsu* or *kuei-yu*). They were usually given hereditary titles, privileges, and stipends, and often were encouraged to continue intermarrying with the imperial family. With so many legal and material advantages it is not surprising that noble families often survived and produced prominent men for three, four, or five generations. Only when these families proved able to survive full withdrawal of imperial patronage are they counted as aristocratic families.

Furthermore, the term aristocratic is limited here to families of the highest stratum, whose national prestige was fully recognized. A number of recent scholars have drawn attention to the 'ruling class' or 'oligarchy' of a hundred to several hundred families whose names were listed in national genealogical compendiums in the Northern and Southern Dynasties and T'ang.[27] The noble and aristocratic families would be those families placed in the highest ranks in these works, comprising only a small portion of all the families listed. Although one cannot doubt that the appearance of an aristocracy and the appearance of a defined ruling class were related phenomena, both based on common historical conditions and social attitudes, too little is known about the differences between them to assume that descriptions of the one apply equally well to the other. Therefore, to be properly cautious, it is best not to group them together until similarities can be proved.

The problem of definition would be simplified if any of the rankings of families had been preserved. Unfortunately all that survive are summary lists of the families in the ruling class of the T'ang, arranged by prefecture rather than rank. An approximate list of the aristocratic families could be made from the dynastic histories, based on how the social status of the family was described in the dynastic-history biographies of its members, the number of prominent men from the family, how members of the family were treated by others, with whom they associated or married, and so on.[28] But it would be difficult to know how many families to call aristocratic or to defend ranking one family higher than another. The closest one can come to a contemporary list of the great families is an essay by the historian and genealogist Liu Fang