

Review of Aristocratic Power Through Tang's Imperial Examination: Confrontation and Collapse

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the rise and fall of the aristocratic prestigious families through the dynamics and characteristics of Imperial Examination System. The concrete contents include but not limited to the exposure of the exclusivity, inheritance and antagonism of prestigious families at the birth time of the Imperial Examination system as well as its collapse after the Resettlement and migration of prestigious families. The methodology employed by this paper goes beyond the qualitative way that is typically used by the current scholarship in the research of this topic. It basically answers the question of how the power origins of the aristocratic prestigious families during the Tang dynasty had been suppressed by the newly reformed educational policies regarding selecting, ultimately leading to their collapse. In summary, the introduction and development of the Imperial Examination System significantly weakened the Fengjian nature of the aristocratic families, undermined their privileges established through monopolization across different social strata, and further ensured the decline and eventual demise of these clans.

Keywords: Aristocratic Prestigious Families, Imperial Examination System, Fengjian.

1. Introduction

It is necessary to first discuss the name issue of China's feudal period. It is widely recognized that Wei-Jin period in Chinese history is the onset of Chinese feudal regime, which is evidentially proved by the practice of enfeoffment of princes in the Western Jin dynasty and the emerging characteristics of aristocratic politics, prominently the birth of manor economies and the personal dependency of private armies. The distinctions of Chinese feudal regime made it more appropriate to be termed as Fengjian, a Latinized Chinese word literally translated as Feudalism in English, to highlight its feudal characteristics demonstrated by the rule of lineage organization system, primarily different from European feudal contracts and obligations. This was fundamentally determined by two economic models respectively exercised by these two societal dynamics, the former one is a Chinese farming economy developed within fiefdoms while the latter one refers to the economic foundation in the system of fiefs [1]. Second, Chinese feudal regime, “Fengjian”, was characteristically distinguished by the social values widely promoted and circulated at that time in the expectation for qualities of the princes being enfeoffed, who were versatile in literacy, military power, and *li* (rite), in contrast to military talent, the only criterion measuring the capability of the lord in Europe [2-3]. Using “Fengjian” to render the feudalism in the course of Chinese ancient history instead of European counterpart is also articulated by Professor Hou Jianxin in his essay *An Analysis of the Concept of 'Feudalism'*. As

Prof. Hou cites in his work, early sinologists offered explanations of the feudal system practiced under China's Fengjian framework, “raised the relatives of the royal House to the rule of States, that they might act as fences and screens to Zhou” [4]. Therefore, a similar model of dividing and granting lands to relatives practiced in China with Chinese feudal features is more appropriate for the paper to employ the term “Fengjian” rather than feudalism in the examination of imperial examination.

The Fengjianism basically was recovered by the aristocratic prestigious families since Late Eastern Han Dynasty, it is worth analyzing the formation of the aristocratic politics that emerged during the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty, which was characterized by the institutional framework of aristocratic factions, the personal dependency of private armies and servant, and the manor economy, are the critical characteristics of the aristocratic prestigious families. The combination of scholarly and bureaucratic roles practiced the values of being a gentleman according to the standards of Fengjian aristocracy. These three facets correspond directly to the patrilineal rule of the lineage organization system (which aligns with the framework of aristocratic factions), the fiefdoms system (encompassing both the manor economy and the personal dependencies associated with private armies and servants), and the standard of a gentleman. As Professor Tian Yuqing discusses in his work *The Politics of the Powerful Families During the Eastern Jin* “Although the social status of the aristocratic clans during the Eastern Jin Dynasty had a hereditary to some extent, it was legally different from the Fengjian nobility” [5]. Therefore, despite the fact that the aristocratic prestigious families did not form a Fengjian entity in the strict sense, it is undeniable that they exhibited strong feudal traits.

The evolvement of the Imperial Examination System formulated and developed by the Emperor Taizong of Tang Dynasty purposed to fundamentally undermine the Fengjian nature of the aristocratic prestigious families, disrupting their ability to continue their characteristics as Fengjian factions. Unfortunately, discussions within the academic community regarding the specific mechanisms through which the Imperial Examination System undermined the foundational privileges of the aristocratic prestigious families—thereby precipitating their collapse—are often cursory, frequently concluding with a summary. Moreover, the interconnections between the various privileges held by aristocratic factions across different domains, as well as the chain reactions initiated by their dismantling, are frequently overlooked. This paper seeks to address this critical gap by rigorously examining these dimensions, thereby providing scholars with an opportunity to further investigate how one of the most successful policies and political reforms in Chinese history specifically influenced social transformation during this pivotal period.

2. The Root of the Power of Aristocratic Prestigious Families

As previously articulated, the aristocratic prestigious families from the late Han Dynasty through the Sui and Tang dynasties exhibit a distinctive nature of Fengjianism. This Fengjian nature is constructed through the interaction of the aristocratic faction system, the manor economy, and the personal dependency on private armies. A historical analysis reveals that this Fengjianism is embodied in the identities of the aristocratic families across various domains: the exclusivity of the scholarly community, the hereditary continuity within official families, and the confrontational posture of the magnate. Through these three defined characteristics, the aristocratic prestigious families effectively monopolized economic production and regulated social mobility between different stratum, thereby further eroding imperial authority and positioning themselves as the principal power brokers in China from the 2nd to the 6th centuries. This chapter aims to critically examine these three distinct attributes of the aristocratic clans, elucidating the three foundational pillars that underpinned their authority and influence during this pivotal historical period.

2.1. Exclusivity

The aristocratic prestigious families undertook the responsibility of enlightenment within the empire through their identity as scholars, thereby giving rise to a community referred to as the "Scholarly Community". During the mid to late Eastern Han Dynasty, this community began to manifest a pronounced exclusivity, resulting in an increasingly insular social structure. This exclusivity encompasses, on one hand, a pronounced hostility and opposition toward other political factions, and on the other hand, a systematic exclusion of individuals from outside their own group who aspire to integrate into it. Such exclusion transcends mere political ideological confrontation or administrative disputes; it progressively develops into a broader phenomenon of rejection and discrimination against individuals perceived as lacking pure lineage—specifically targeting those bearing multiple identities, such as military personnel and eunuchs. This dynamic not only reinforces the social boundaries of the aristocratic clans but also underscores the elitist ethos that characterizes their identity and interactions within the political landscape. Therefore, this exclusivity and their nature responsibility enabled the aristocratic prestigious families to exert significant influence over public opinion, particularly in the realm of social assessments of individuals, thereby shaping and monopolizing the talent selection system of the Han Dynasty, known as the "Recommendation System". Through the opportunity of "Selecting officials by reputation" had been increasingly used by the authority as the primary criterion for selecting bureaucrats in the empire, intellectuals who dominantly controlled the empire's public opinion were able to consolidate greater power for their own benefits. In fact, the Han imperial authority always harboured a distrust of the scholar-official group, such as the great proscription suppression, a harsh measure implemented by the imperial authority to limit the scholar-official class. However, the emperor's effort failed due to the Yellow Kerchief Uprisings, and found the aristocratic prestigious families had already taken most of the critical positions in the government. The exclusivity of the scholarly community was realized through the familial nature of education and the transmission of knowledge. The prohibitive costs of education, the prevailing modes of knowledge dissemination, and the entrenched moral values associated with clan and kinship gradually fostered the emergence of the literati as a highly exclusive social group. By leveraging the pervasive influence of Confucianism, scholar families garnered greater prominence and recognition compared to other clans. Therefore, the "Academic Aristocracy" became one of the most critical features of the scholar-official class. The founder of the Cao Wei Kingdom, Cao Cao, epitomizes the exclusivity of the scholarly community. At the outset of his career, Cao Cao encountered considerable difficulties in talent recruitment, as the aristocratic families largely rejected the Cao family of Qiao Commandery due to their association with eunuch origins. Consequently, he could only attract relatives and local associates to his cause. It was not until Cao Cao forged an alliance with Xun Yu, a leading figure among the aristocratic clans of Yingchuan, and actively promoted a policy of "selecting by talent," that this initial disadvantage began to be ameliorated. Nevertheless, the Cao Wei Kingdom's inherent limitations regarding its influence within the scholarly community became starkly apparent following the deaths of its first three leaders. Despite the efforts of the Cao royal family to assimilate into the scholar community, the aristocratic families ultimately opted for the Sima family—who themselves hailed from a scholarly background—culminating in the establishment of the Jin Dynasty. Cao Cao's experiences underscore the obstinate exclusivity of the aristocratic clans, a form of exclusion that is not only evident among peers of relatively equal status but also extends to those in positions of greater power. The aristocratic clans can employ various alliances to isolate and undermine external groups, thereby effectively achieving their ultimate objective of directly controlling power within the political system. This dynamic illustrates how the interplay of social hierarchies and political maneuvering enables these clans to maintain their dominance and influence, even in the face of superior authority.

2.2. Heredity

Because of the monopolization of the recommendation system, the aristocratic prestigious achieved a transformation in the considerations of appointing imperial officials, from personal character and ability to the lineage and familial ties. This shift facilitated a form of hereditary succession in official appointments, which was institutionalized by the "Nine Ranks and Imperial Judges System" promulgated during the Cao Wei period. The so-called hereditary succession in the appointment of officials refers to the exercise of selecting an official based on his lineage and family background. This characteristic effectively ensured the bureaucratic privileges that had been obtained by the aristocratic families through official appointments continued to remain concentrated within specific families. Consequently, the system shifted from one where the empire granted bureaucratic privileges to secure loyalty, to one in which these privileges were allocated as Fengjian entitlements by the aristocratic families themselves. Furthermore, because these privileges were entrenched in economic and legal frameworks, they laid the foundation for the monopolistic capabilities of the aristocratic clans in economic production, as will be discussed in the following sections.

In contrast to the exclusivity exhibited by the scholarly community discussed earlier and the economic antagonism to be explored in subsequent sections, the aspect of hereditary succession within the official class most clearly reflects the Fengjian characteristics of the aristocratic families—fully aligning with the rule of lineage organization system inherent in Fengjian political structures. While the aristocratic families in the realm of the scholar may consider similar occupational backgrounds among their peers, their expression of lineage succession within the official class is overtly based on blood lineage, to the exclusion of even those from similarly aristocratic backgrounds but of lower status. It is like Prof. Tian Yuqing's opinion in his book *The Politics of the Powerful Families During the Eastern Jin* "The aristocratic politics had been solidified, and the inherent contradictions of this system—namely, the conflicts between different houses—thus became a recurring theme in the history of the Eastern Jin period"[5]. Many individuals from lesser elite families find themselves confined to positions as low-ranking officials throughout their lives, regardless of their talents, with no opportunity for advancement. In stark contrast, offspring from prestigious families are often granted official positions at a young age, sometimes without any evident ability, purely due to their family background. A notable example is Wang Ningzhi, the son of the renowned Wang Xizhi, who, during his tenure as the governor of Kuaiji, was unable to organize a defense against the rebellion led by Sun En and resorted to prayer for divine intervention, ultimately resulting in the tragic demise of his entire family [6]. This example not only shows the decisive role of lineage in appointing officials but also demonstrates the political corruption that positions of authority occupied by aristocrats without merits: The empire's lack of suitable talent to fill the bureaucratic system often led to a state of semi-paralysis in its operations, further weakening the power of the monarchy. In this context, the aristocratic prestigious families seized the opportunity to fill these official vacancies, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in the selection and appointment of bureaucrats that favoured the interests of the aristocratic prestigious families.

2.3. Antagonism

As a social identity within the economic structure of the aristocratic prestigious families, the "magnate family" exemplifies a pronounced antagonistic quality. This antagonism is particularly distinctive during the period of China's unified imperial system. Such a quality is realized through their expansive domination in economic production capabilities through the increasing share in the national income and encroachment. The aristocratic prestigious families manipulated their influence as scholars and leveraged the economic and legal privileges obtained through official appointments to appropriate land, agricultural production, and handicraft production within their settled regions for

their own wealth accumulation. This process reflects the characteristics of symbiotic expansion and erosion: the economic expansion of the aristocratic families simultaneously acts as a process of erosion of the imperial economy. Through this dialectical process of mutual growth and decline, the aristocratic families gradually acquired the capacity to resist the monarchy and other political entities that threatened their interests, further fuelling their ambition to seize greater power and benefits. For instance, the Yuan Family of Runan provided considerable financial and human resources to Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu in their early stages of development, while the Cao Family of Qiao supplied substantial provisions and funds to Cao Cao during his rise to power, all of which were realized through generations of accumulated land and manpower. This evidence underscores the critical role of their expansionist tendencies in the evolution of the aristocratic prestigious families.

The encroachment of the aristocratic prestigious families is perhaps the most significant and profound characteristic affecting the empire. Through this trait, the aristocratic families not only accumulated vast amounts of wealth and human resources but also simultaneously weakened the wealth and manpower of the central imperial authority. During the era of the Chinese Empire, the primary forms of taxation were the poll tax and corvée labour, both of which were implemented through the central government's control over household registration in various provinces and counties. During periods of social stability, the common people could effectively and stably engage in agricultural labour in their registered locales, thereby providing a continuous stream of taxes and labour to the empire. However, with land consolidation, political turmoil, and various natural disasters, many commoners abandoned their registered locations, becoming displaced persons or landless individuals. Ultimately, in order to survive, they were taken in by the aristocratic clans that owned large tracts of land. Yet, due to the preferential treatment given to the scholar-officials by the imperial government, these clans could reduce or even exempt themselves from significant amounts of taxes and corvée labour. As a result, the excess population and land not officially registered became "hidden households", which meant they provided labour and rents solely to the landowners, no longer bearing the burdens of national labour and taxes, thus forming a strong feudal-like relationship of personal dependence. The outcome was that the aristocratic clans grew increasingly wealthy and powerful, while the central court weakened due to the loss of taxes and labour. Hence, the economic corrosiveness of the aristocratic clans is akin to cancer cells within the body of a powerful empire: they are difficult to eradicate and continuously consume the limited vitality of the empire.

Through this expansion and encroachment, the aristocratic prestigious families not only strengthened themselves economically but also contributed to the overall weakening of the empire. This trend gradually enhanced their capacity for resistance, reaching its peak during the late Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms period, and the transitional period between the Western and Eastern Jin dynasties. The implementation of the Tuntian system during the late Han Dynasty serves as a salient illustration of this phenomenon. Traditionally, the Tuntian system involved the resettlement of displaced peasants onto lands that had been abandoned by their original proprietors, with the state—the Han imperial government—retaining nominal ownership of these lands. Consequently, in the final decades of the Han Empire, this system enabled the state to sustain its economic vitality and mobilize manpower, thereby facilitating a reassertion of control over the northern territories. However, the reality was that the supreme authority of the emperor had effectively been undermined, with real administrative and political power concentrated in the Prime Minister's office, primarily under the leadership of Cao Cao. The resources generated by the Tuntian system—namely, financial revenues, agricultural produce, and labour—were ostensibly attributed to the imperial government, yet in practice, they were appropriated by Cao Cao's regime. This dynamic exemplifies how the aristocratic prestigious families leveraged their socio-economic dominance to systematically undermine the empire's tax base and labour resources, thus consolidating their own power to confront both internal and external threats to their interests. Moreover, the regime established by Cao Cao,

known as the Cao Wei Kingdom, effectively functioned as the preeminent representative of these aristocratic families, with numerous families affiliated with his administration also belonging to various gentry factions. This situation highlights the intricate interplay between state authority and aristocratic power during a period of profound socio-political transformation. This arrangement serves as a quintessential illustration of the Fengjianism of the aristocratic families during this period.

3. The Declining Power of Aristocratic Prestigious Families

The preceding sections have elucidated the roots of the Fengjianism of the aristocratic prestigious families and their practical manifestations from the late Han Dynasty to the Sui Dynasty. Following the establishment of a stable, unified imperial structure during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the imperial authority began to focus on diminishing the political and social influence of these aristocratic families. The introduction of the Imperial Examination System represented a novel approach to the selection of officials, specifically designed to counteract the monopolization of the talent recruitment system by aristocratic prestigious families. This system not only effectively undermined the status and privileges of the aristocratic officials but also inflicted significant damage on their influence in the realms of education and economic production, with the ultimate aim of their eradication. While the Imperial Examination System was not the sole political reform targeting the decline of the aristocratic prestigious families, it is undoubtedly recognized as one of the most successful initiatives among the various reforms implemented during this period. As Professor Yan Buke elucidates and concludes in his book *Crests and Valleys*, 'monarchical autocracy, centralization, and bureaucratic politics are the 'norm' of Chinese politics' [7]. Through the Imperial Examination introduction and development, the Tang Dynasty could regain the Imperial power after the founding nobility step down from the court which is the 'norm' of the Chinese politics. This chapter will systematically analyse the roles and implications of the scholarly, official, and magnate of the aristocratic prestigious families in relation to their decline, highlighting their significance in the broader context of socio-political transformation.

3.1. Self-Registration and Talents-based Selection

The two fundamental principles of the Imperial Examination System, namely "Qualification Self-Registration" and the reliance on examination results as the sole criterion for recruitment, represented a direct and effective challenge to the bureaucratic-academic complex of the aristocratic families. These principles not only disrupted the exclusivity of the aristocratic families within the scholarly community but also systematically dismantled the hereditary practice of "lineage-based selection" in the appointment and dismissal processes. Furthermore, these principles significantly curtailed the capacity of the aristocratic families to manipulate public opinion in order to control official selection and resist the authority of the emperor. Moreover, they broadened the pathways for social mobility across various strata of society, thereby compelling the relatively insular scholarly and bureaucratic networks to reopen. This transformation facilitated a more meritocratic system, thereby challenging the entrenched power of the aristocracy and fostering a more inclusive political landscape.

A comparative analysis of the origins of chancellors during the early and mid-Tang Dynasty reveals significant transformations in the sociopolitical landscape. In the reigns of Emperor Gaozu and Emperor Taizong, a substantial 71% of chancellors hailed from aristocratic backgrounds [8]. However, by the mid-Tang period, specifically during the reigns of Emperors Dezong and Shunzong—an era noted for the optimal functioning of the imperial examination system—this proportion had markedly declined to 33%. Given that these figures pertain exclusively to chancellors, it is reasonable to surmise that the representation of aristocratic backgrounds among lower- and mid-level officials was even lower. This decline underscores the profound impact of the examination

system, which, after sixty-four years of implementation, significantly diminished the traditional aristocratic prestigious families within the aristocratic class. This era witnessed an influx of individuals from less prestigious and commoner lineage into the bureaucratic ranks. Consequently, the scholarly elite experienced a notable erosion of their capacity to exhibit the internal cohesion and external exclusivity that had characterized their historical dominance.

Furthermore, the inverse relationship between the proportion of chancellors selected via the examination system and those appointed through family privilege system underscores a paradigmatic shift toward meritocratic principles in official selection. In the early Tang period, a notable 58% of chancellors were initially incorporated into the bureaucratic system through family privilege system, whereas by the reigns of Emperors Dezong and Shunzong, this figure had dramatically decreased to 10%. This data not only illustrates that the Imperial Examination System emerged as the predominant avenue for official appointments but also reinforces the notion that candidates, irrespective of their social origins, were mandated to undergo rigorous examination processes, with final selection grounded solely in their examination results.

Thus, it is evident that the two core principles of the examination system fundamentally challenged the aristocratic families' ability to dominate talent selection through the manipulation of reputation and the leveraging of lineage. This transformation precipitated a rapid devaluation of reputation and familial lineage—once regarded as vital social resources—thereby facilitating their withdrawal from the political sphere. Moreover, this transformation effectively dismantled the exclusivity of the scholarly community's membership predicated on lineage, thereby facilitating the inclusion of individuals from non-aristocratic backgrounds. Simultaneously, the abolition of pre-requisite qualifications for official selection, coupled with a renewed emphasis on the candidates' individual skills and knowledge, significantly disrupted the bureaucratic inheritance that had enabled aristocratic families to perpetuate their dominance in official appointments through familial connections.

The Niu-Li factional strife, which spanned the mid to late Tang Dynasty, emerged as a significant manifestation of this open differentiation, marking the first large-scale intra-aristocracy conflict in Chinese history. This struggle centred on the implementation of the Imperial Examination System and the criteria by which the royal authority selected officials. The two factions are basically divided based on their backgrounds. The resolution of this conflict shows the unparalleled and unassailable status of the examination system in the selection of talent during the Tang Dynasty and its enduring legacy in subsequent dynasties. By dismantling the exclusivity within the scholarly community and disrupting the hereditary nature of bureaucratic appointments, the Imperial Examination System effectively undermined the Fengjianist of aristocratic prestigious families. This transformation laid the foundational groundwork for a significant shift in societal values, facilitating a transition from an emphasis on familial lineage to a greater appreciation for individual literary and scholarly professional abilities. As a result, this evolution had far-reaching implications, influencing the Ancient Literature Movement of the Tang and Song Dynasties and fostering a relatively open cultural environment among the scholar-official class in the Song Dynasty.

3.2. Resettlement and Migration: the Eclipse of the Antagonism

The establishment and evolution of the Imperial Examination System served to effectively undermine and disrupt the exclusive and hereditary advantages that aristocratic families had maintained since the Eastern Han Dynasty. However, the decisive blow to these aristocratic families can be attributed to the system's profound impact on economic production. Although this effect was indirectly linked to the implementation of the Imperial Examination System, it not only severed the monopolistic opportunities and practices that these families had cultivated through their entrenched dominance in their respective localities but also transformed them into vassals of imperial authority. As a result, they became increasingly reliant on imperial patronage, thereby diminishing their capacity to assert

autonomy or mount resistance against the central power. This phenomenon contributes to an understanding of why, beginning in the mid to late Tang Dynasty, there was a notable absence of powerful officials who sought to usurp state authority.

The destruction of the aristocratic families' capacity for antagonization by the imperial examination system is primarily evident in two aspects: the promotion of these families as the most mobile social class in Chinese society and the fluctuations of family fortunes resulting from the inability to establish a fixed inheritance of bureaucratic privileges. The traditional Chinese cultural principle of stability in residence was largely shaped by an agricultural-based economic model and the dual influence of the household registration system, so-called "bian hu qi min," which emerged during the Qin and Han Dynasties. Grounded in this tradition, during the Qin and Han Dynasty, aristocratic families typically returned to their ancestral homes to live out their old age and be buried there, regardless of whether they had left their families' settled regions for study or official duties. Moreover, their properties rarely extended beyond the counties where their families were settled. This phenomenon was a common practice during the Han Dynasty. However, with the onset of chaotic times, migration became the norm for aristocratic families. Although the unification under the Sui and Tang Dynasties again urged the populace to settle on the land, the imperial authority recognized the advantages of migration: aristocratic families could no longer leverage their privileges to establish relationships of dependency akin to the Fengjian system of the Western Zhou Dynasty within their settled regions.

The functioning of the Imperial Examination System played a crucial role in maintaining the migratory status of the aristocratic clans. Unlike the pathways to officialdom under the Recommendation System, the Imperial Examination System established a central-local-central trajectory: scholars first gathered in the central region to complete the imperial examinations, then entered various local bureaucratic systems through the selection process administered by the Ministry of Personnel, thereby initiating their careers (notably, based on official tradition, scholars were not permitted to serve in their native regions). Ultimately, they accumulated experience and transitioned back into the central bureaucratic system. This process necessitated that the aristocratic families leave their long-established homes and move to the unfamiliar capitals. Moreover, the concurrent implementation of the selection system required officials to return to the central region after completing their terms, awaiting reappointment from the Ministry of Personnel to continue their careers. This situation led aristocratic clans to migrate continuously in pursuit of proximity to the core of power, making it difficult to establish long-term residence in any one area. According to research by scholar Mao Hanguang, a significant number of aristocratic families completed their migrations in the early Tang period, settling in the capital cities or regional administrative centers [9]. Consequently, births and deaths for many of these families no longer occurred in their ancestral homes but rather in official residences. This phenomenon ultimately precluded the possibility of aristocratic clans establishing long-term residence in a single area, allowing them to utilize bureaucratic privileges for land annexation and wealth accumulation to a degree that could challenge imperial authority. Thus, the economic basis for the antagonism of aristocratic families was significantly weakened. On the other hand, the empire also ensured the collection of taxes and labour by restricting the unlimited expansion of the aristocratic families in terms of land and economic production. This effectively undermined the ability of these families to erode the imperial finances through unlimited land annexation and the incorporation of displaced populations. Although the tax system of the Tang Dynasty, like those of other dynasties, deteriorated over time, it was precisely due to the continuous decline of the aristocratic families within the Tang that the dynasty could implement various financial reforms to varying degrees, even in the face of repeated blows and conflicts. However, once the regional warlords gained irreversible power, it ultimately led to financial losses and the downfall of the dynasty. Thus, it is evident that the promotion of the Imperial Examination System indirectly

facilitated the centralization of the aristocratic families and their adaptation to a migratory lifestyle. This effectively curbed their ability to form monopolies based on bureaucratic privileges in their long-established settlements, thereby severing their path toward increasing feudalization and the evolution toward a feudal system.

Finally, because the Imperial Examination System was based on the principle of "talent-based selection," the likelihood of bureaucratic privileges being inherited within a specific family significantly decreased. Since the outcomes of the Imperial Examination System were determined solely by examination results, the uncertainty associated with the exams and the demands for individual talent made it difficult for aristocratic families to ensure that each generation of family members could successfully pass the exams and attain sufficient official ranks (above the fifth rank) to secure enough bureaucratic privileges for the safety and continuous expansion of their family properties. As a result, the notion that "the benefits of virtuous men last only five generations" was ultimately realized through the promotion of the Imperial Examination System. Consequently, Chinese society could no longer sustain families that lasted for centuries, as their economic foundations could no longer effectively guarantee that continuity.

4. Conclusion

Such discussions on how the Imperial Examination System specifically weakened the Fengjian characteristics of the aristocratic prestigious families, the power of the aristocratic clans largely derives from their monopolization over the unreformed imperial educational discourse before. This had been achieved by continuously suppressing and integrating professional bureaucrats to control the appointment of imperial officials, ensuring the patrimonial inheritance of the privileges affiliated with their bureaucratic positions. The final situation is that the patrimonial inheritance led to a comprehensive monopoly over wealth, administrative privileges, and social discourse, which are the clear characteristics of feudalism. The Imperial Examination System purportedly came out to confiscate the comprehensive control of aristocratic families over bureaucratic appointments, so as to achieve the objective of dismantling the power base of these families. The reform significantly demonstrated a principle of selecting talent established since the Qin Dynasty. This restoration of the autocratic bureaucratic system established since the Qin Dynasty also marked the establishment of a standardized method for talent selection: the principle of 'selecting officials based on their talent.' Thus, the history of medieval China completed a long-standing confrontation between bureaucrats and intellectuals, while also enabling the monarchy to exert complete control over all social strata beneath it. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the Fengjian nobles in China completely exited the historical stage, and the term 'Fengjian' became a vague label used to summarize the forms of Chinese society prior to modern history, exceeding its original meaning of 'granting fiefs and establishing kinship'. The restoration of this norm, and the complete disruption and eradication of attempts to revert to 'Fengjianism,' was achieved through the imperial examination system.

However, this paper focuses specifically on the mechanisms by which the Imperial Examination System contributed to the decline of the power base of the aristocratic prestigious families. As a result, it does not delve deeply into the interactions between the development of the examination system in different periods of the Tang Dynasty and the aristocracy, such as the phenomenon of a sample examination poem or paper, an act that later generations regarded as a blatant interference with the fairness of the examination process. Additionally, the issue of the regional defence commands or military commissioners in the mid to late Tang Dynasty is excluded from this discussion. On one hand, this exclusion aims to clarify the interaction between the examination system and the power of the aristocracy; on the other hand, the complexity of this issue could warrant a separate study. The impact of the Imperial Examination System on medieval China is not limited to the decline and fall of the aristocratic prestigious families; it also had a significant influence on the shaping of societal

values and the underlying logic of social operations. Therefore, future research should explore the specific mechanisms by which the examination system affected various aspects of society.

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