

Assortative Mating in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE): Imperial Examination, Aristocracy, and Elite Adaptation

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Stratification researchers often think of assortative marriage in terms of the partners' preferences, including a preference for economic security (Xie, Raymo, Goyette, and Thornton 2003), though composition and opportunity matter, too (Xie, Cheng, and Zhou 2015). But prospective partners did not always control the union. Before 1800, marriage had more to do with powerful elders in the extended family, especially in the upper strata of society where property and titles were at stake (Shorter 1975). Prospects and resources mattered as much as they do in individualistic societies, but families held a stake in the marriage that is hard to comprehend in modern terms. In societies or social strata that worked that way, the stratification of marriage chances tells us as much about social structure as social mobility does, perhaps more (Tilly 1999).

Land was a central concern for those who owned some. Anxiety over insuring heirs but not too many comes down to us in the plots of plays and novels about those times. Officials in the civil administration of medieval empires had other concerns. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) China, some officials came from prestigious old families that held much land and benefited from institutional advantages in the bureaucracy, but, increasingly, they needed to rely on success in the Imperial Exam (*keju*) (Wen, Wang, and Hout 2024). Marriages among the sons and daughters of officials could presumably help both families. Occasionally, too, some of the old families might extend their influence by allowing one of their daughters to marry a young man who lacked that standing but had the advantage of having passed the *keju*.

Many officials from that time were immortalized after death by tomb epitaphs that recorded their family background, *keju* success (if any), and career achievements. The epitaphs (with supplementary information described in Wen et al. 2024) give us a rare window on assortative marriage long before modern times. Most epitaphs contain marriage and family details. More often, the official's wife was buried in the same tomb as him and had an epitaph of her own. From

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these sources, we have 2,830 couples. For each spouse we have information on which prominent branch of the old aristocracy they may have descended from (many did not come from a prominent branch), grandfather's office rank (if any), and father's office rank (if any). In addition, for the husbands, we know if they passed the *keju* and the highest office rank they attained.

So far, we have focused on men marrying women from aristocratic families. In our baseline model we estimate the degree to which being from a prominent branch increased a man's chances of marrying a woman from a prominent branch. This is the endogamy question, the degree to which aristocrats married aristocrats. Our estimates controlled for husband's exam success, his rank in the imperial service, his father's rank, his grandfather's rank, whether the epitaph is preserved only in transmitted texts (not yet excavated), modern province of the place of burial, ancestral regime prior to the Tang, and birth decade. The aristocracy declined in the 8th century (Wen et al. 2024), so we estimated models for two separate periods: 618-755 and 756-907 CE, corresponding to the periods before or after the An Lushan Rebellion.

Figure 1 suggests that men from aristocratic background were nine to eleven percentage points more likely to marry an aristocrat than were other men, both before 755 and after. This is a modest degree of endogamy, indicating that the aristocracy was not socially closed at any point in the Tang Dynasty.

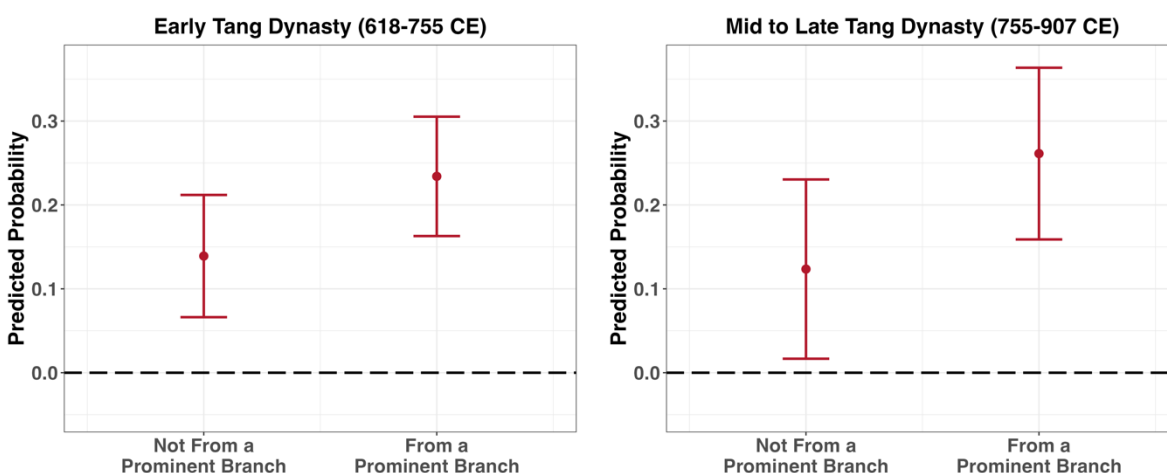


Figure 1. Predicted Probability of Marrying an Aristocratic Wife, by Branch Status and Period
Notes: Models control for office rank, exam success, father's rank, grandfather's rank, whether the epitaph is preserved only in transmitted texts (not yet excavated), and fixed effects for modern province, ancestral regime prior to the Tang, and birth decade; error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Stratification researchers care about status exchange at least as much as endogamy. The *keju* was a novel status indicator early in the Tang but essential by late in the Tang Dynasty (Wen et al. 2024). Our second model estimated the interaction between passing the *keju* and coming from a prominent branch. We expected that men who lacked aristocratic status but passed the *keju* could exchange that new status and marry the daughter of an aristocrat, especially after 755, when the *keju* was more established. The data surprised us (see **Figure 2**). Passing the *keju* had no effect on the (uniformly low) probability of non-aristocrats marrying aristocrats' daughters in the early period, but it modestly increased the chances of endogamy, as men from a prominent branch who passed the *keju* were about 9 percentage points more likely to marry an aristocrat than men from a prominent branch who did not pass the *keju*. The interaction became even stronger after 755, when *keju* continued to matter only for men from a prominent branch but the margin of difference increased to 22 percentage points.

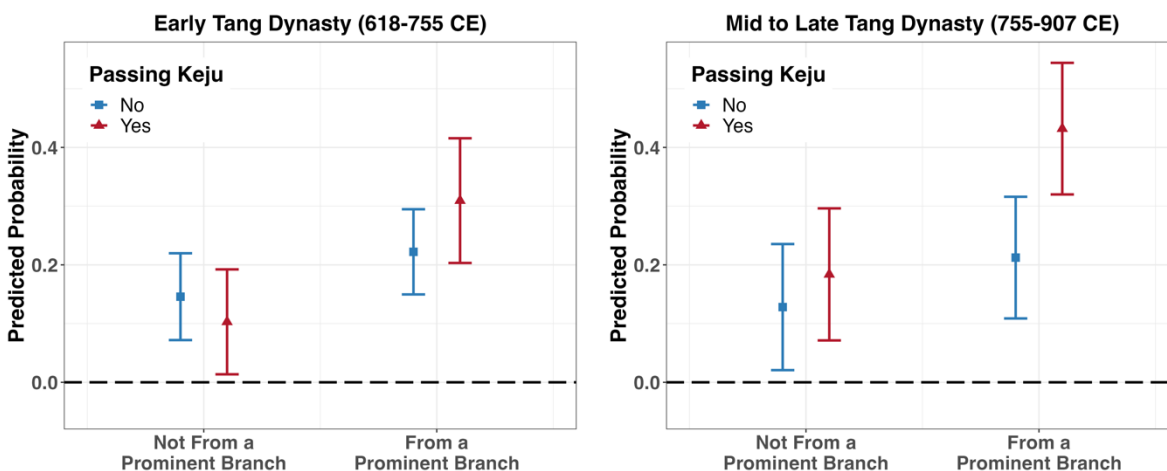


Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Marrying an Aristocratic Wife, by Branch Status, Exam (Keju) Success, and Period

Notes: Models control for office rank, father's rank, grandfather's rank, whether the epitaph is preserved only in transmitted texts (not yet excavated), and fixed effects for modern province, ancestral regime prior to the Tang, and birth decade; error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Concerned that the *keju* interaction might be misestimated due to failing to capture some other kind of exchange, we replaced it with an interaction between ancestry and father's rank. The results were interesting. In the Early Tang, for someone not from a prominent branch, having a father who was a high-ranked government official helped improve the chances of marrying a

woman from a prominent branch. But for someone already from a prominent branch, the office rank of his father seemed to negatively correlate with the probability of marrying with a woman from a prominent branch. That is, there seemed to be a substitution effect of father status among aristocrats on endogamy. On the other hand, in the mid-to-late Tang, even for aristocrats, having a high-ranked father still helped improve the chances of marrying with another aristocrats. In other words, as we move to the 9th century, the marriage market in the Tang appeared to give additional premium to those who "checked all the boxes."

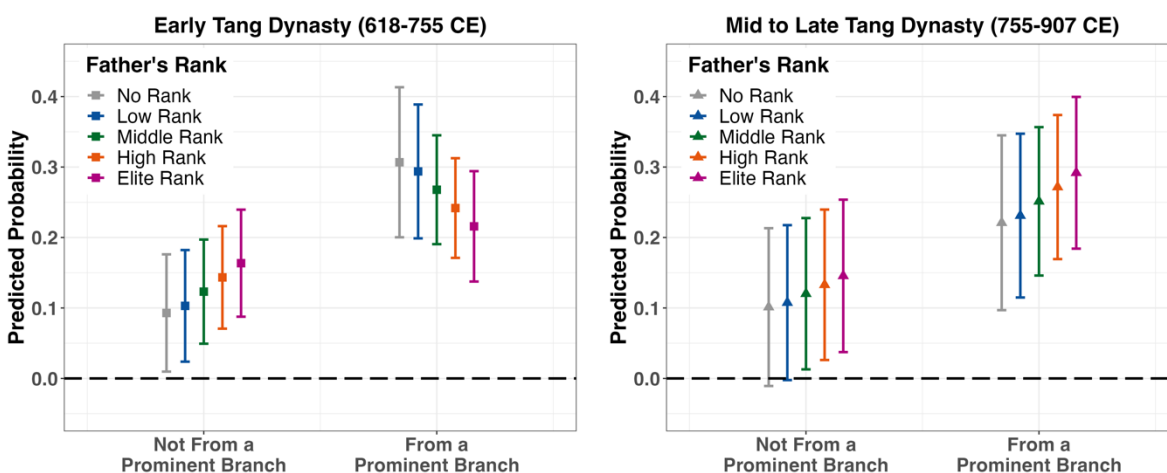


Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Marrying an Aristocratic Wife, by Branch Status, Father's Rank, and Period

Notes: Models control for office rank, exam success, grandfather's rank, whether the epitaph is preserved only in transmitted texts (not yet excavated), and fixed effects for modern province, ancestral regime prior to the Tang, and birth decade; error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

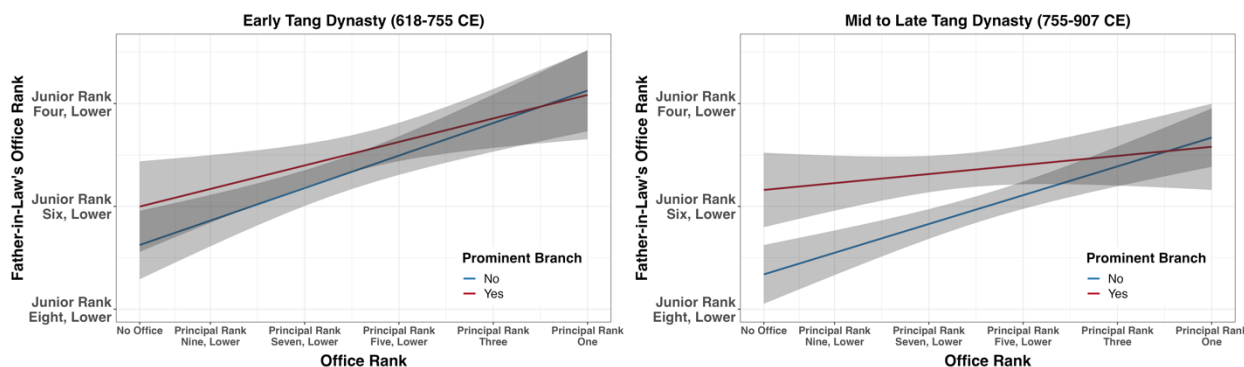


Figure 4. Predicted Office Rank of Father-in-Law, by Office Rank, Branch Status, and Period

Notes: Models control for office rank, exam success, grandfather's rank, whether the epitaph is preserved only in transmitted texts (not yet excavated), and fixed effects for modern province, ancestral regime prior to the Tang, and birth decade; error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, we regressed a man's office rank and whether he came from a prominent branch on his father-in-law's office rank. As shown in **Figure 4**, in the early Tang period, the effect of a man's office rank on father-in-law's office rank did not vary by branch status. In contrast, in the mid-to-late Tang period when the Imperial Examination System became more developed, an aristocratic background facilitated men without office and lower-ranked officials to marry a wife with a higher-ranked father. This finding implies that as career success became more determined by competitive exams, family pedigree was independently valued in the marriage market, suggesting the persistence of the old elites' social advantages.

To summarize, our results suggest that by the 9th century, men who combined aristocratic lineage with exam success had become the most sought-after suitors in the Tang marriage market. In an era of rising meritocracy, we identify a phenomenon in which the old elites culturally adapted despite the ever-shrinking political privileges.

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