Abstract

During the period of medieval China (from the Jin 晋 to Tang 唐 dynasty) there was an aristocratic class that has commonly been identified as the "medieval gentry." Members of this aristocratic class had not only managed to dominate the bureaucracy but also restrict people of other classes to be appointed to high ranking official posts.

Historians have made detailed studies on this subject by trying to define the characteristics of this elite social class of medieval China. Many terms have been used to define this group of people, such as the medieval oligarchy or the aristocratic families of medieval China.

This dissertation aims to study the characteristics of this social class of medieval gentry, to determine the factors that allowed them to dominate the bureaucracy, and to understand how these people maintained their upper class status. I intend to approach the subject by first doing a review on the authoritative works in this field of studies. I shall begin with analyzing the works of three representative Chinese scholars followed by that on another three Western scholars. As the writings of these scholars were published over a span of over thirty years it thus enables us to see the development in this particular area of study. Along this process of literature review I will attempt to formulate my views on the issues of how did the class of medieval gentry rise to prominence, perpetuate their superior status, and finally fall from power. The period of medieval China has always been identified as the "period of gentry society"; therefore the fall of the medieval gentry signifies important social and political changes as it serves as a mark of the end of the medieval and the beginning of the early modern period in China. I shall thus devote a chapter of my thesis to detail on how the gentry fell from power during the period of "Tang-Song transition."