This book opens with the observation that relatively little research has been conducted on Five Dynasties (907-960) history. The era is short, perplexingly chaotic, and overshadowed by the much longer Tang and Song dynasties that came before and after. However, the Five Dynasties should not be overlooked, as it was a time of rapid change. Nicholas Tackett has demonstrated the significance of the massacre of the medieval aristocracy during the Huang Chao Rebellion (874-84) at the end of the Tang dynasty.¹ The abrupt disappearance of China’s elite set off decades of upheaval that eventually gave rise to Song institutions. Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866-1934) famously identified the Tang-Song transition as a major turning point when China became a “modern” (kindai 近代) society.² If passage from the aristocratic Tang to the more meritocratic Song was so important, than surely the Five Dynasties at the center of this shift should be recognized as a decisive era in Chinese history.

A relative paucity of sources has hindered the study of Five Dynasties history. However, in the last two decades, scholars have published several compendia of inscriptions from the period, making a large quantity of new material readily accessible. Most notable is the collection Wudai shike jiaozhu 五代石刻校注 (Five Dynasties stone inscriptions, verified and annotated), which has 2,316,000 characters.³ The recent appearance of so much information

¹ Nicolas Tackett, The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 105; 196.
has stimulated research on this era. The book discussed in this review is the work of a reading group established to study Five Dynasties epitaphs. This group of scholars has also published two other volumes that examine the epitaphs of military men, civilians, and clerics.4

This book scrutinizes twenty of the fifty-five women’s epitaphs in recently published collections. The authors emphasize that understanding these texts can be challenging. Epitaphs relate historical narratives but shape them by imposing emotive literary qualities on the material. The authors note the differences between the contents of epitaphs and so-called “biographies” (zhuan 傳). Zhuan usually focus on one episode in a woman’s life that conveys her character. In contrast, epitaphs describe events that occurred at different times, providing a more inclusive view of the subject’s life. Five Dynasties epitaphs of women follow a standard format. The text opens with an introduction, followed by a description of the woman’s natal family, significant actions, death, children, burial, and a conclusion. This formal structure guides the presentation of biographical and ideological material.

Because this book was written by a group of scholars, they employ a common methodology to provide consistency. They note that their method is an outgrowth of Qing dynasty evidential scholarship (kaqjuxue 考據學). Each epitaph is analyzed using a three-part method. First, the researcher does basic philological groundwork. To read the text correctly, punctuation is inserted, the text is divided into paragraphs, and rare or unclear terms are deciphered. Next, the text is carefully interrogated by asking six questions about the deceased: when, where, who, what, why, and how. This process clarifies important features of her life and motivations. Finally, the researcher interprets the subject by constructing a frame of reference, determining the main themes of the subject’s life, and organizing the source material according to the resulting conceptual framework.

Although epitaphs are often treated as first-hand material, the authors emphasize that many were constructed from previous writings, and these should be considered second-hand sources. Epitaphs were composed according to genre conventions, so they often portray their subjects in stereotypical terms. Various factors influenced how an epitaph was written. These include the amount of available source material, the status of the deceased, the

relationship between the author and subject, stylistic norms, and contemporary values and circumstances. When writing an epitaph, the author identified the social position of the deceased by inserting relevant facts, such as her ancestors, family members, achievements, virtues, and the conduct of funeral and burial. He associated her with the traditional female social roles of individual, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother.

Even though these epitaphs have a standard format, some display distinct features. For example, one was written by a Buddhist monk. Interestingly, the structure and contents of this text do not differ from epitaphs written by laymen. The monk emphasizes the Confucian virtues of the deceased, attesting to the secularization of Buddhist clerics at the time.

Epitaphs show that husbands and wives related to one another in various ways. Some couples had common aspirations, and the wife devoted herself to furthering the family’s fortunes. Although she might spend time playing the lute and chanting poetry, her main goal was advancing the careers of her husband and sons. In other cases, the husband prioritized his own goals and sidelined his wife. And some wives put their own interests first and marginalized their husbands. Some epitaphs even hint that the wife was superior to her husband in some way. Scholars often interpret the lives of pre-Ming women by imposing values from the rites or late imperial gender norms, downplaying female agency. Yet some of these epitaphs portray the deceased not as an appendage of her husband but as an autonomous individual.

Some of these texts downplay female autonomy by focusing on the male family members of the deceased rather than the purported subject of the epitaph. One epitaph of 688 characters devotes 161 characters to the subject’s role as wife and another 214 to her husband and son. The goal of this text is not to portray the deceased as a unique individual but to laud her as a virtuous wife and emphasize the martial qualities of her male family members.

The authors argue that scholars have sometimes exaggerated the differences between the epitaphs of women and men. Some researchers have asserted that many women lacked self-sufficiency and relied on others to handle important matters on their behalf. But men also relied on others to help them get things done. Also, it is common to note that women were portrayed as moral stereotypes such as a chaste widow, implying that men were treated as unique individuals and women as moral archetypes. Yet writers frequently portrayed men via stereotypical roles such as the loyal official, filial son, good husband, or benevolent father.

Historians often assume that because women inhabited the domestic realm, information about them has little to do with larger trends in the public sphere. This book argues to the contrary that women’s epitaphs can be used to address
key issues in Five Dynasties history. Women’s epitaphs provide information not just about the deceased but also about people surrounding them, including parents, siblings, husband, and children. Some were important historical actors, so these facts can be used to understand social mobility and the shifting interplay between civil and military power at the time.

The authors posit a fresh view of Five Dynasties society. Whereas historians have previously emphasized the supremacy of militarism and downplayed civil power, these sources reveal a complex interplay between martial and civil values. The authors argue that military men were not just harbingers of chaos, but also often provided stability and decent governance. Epitaphs show that military men initially succeeded due to martial prowess, but their children and grandchildren needed education to maintain high status. While some of these ideas have been discussed previously, others have received little attention.

This book is not easy to read. The writing is often opaque and many passages are difficult to comprehend. Moreover, much of the information is presented as fragmentary facts and observations that seem like preparatory notes. It is up to the reader to connect this material together and draw conclusions. Also, although the authors use these epitaphs to understand major trends in Five Dynasties history, they make few observations about the general standing of women at the time.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a very significant work that deserves careful study. The methodology is highly refined. Anyone conducting research on Chinese epitaphs will benefit from examining these exacting techniques. Moreover, by making the epitaphs of Five Dynasties women easily accessible, the authors have opened up a new field of Chinese women’s history. Other historians can combine these sources with other information to construct satisfying accounts of Five Dynasties women. Hopefully they will eventually be able to answer a key question – the influence of the Tang-Song transition on women’s history.

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