

"A Theory of Aristocracy"

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We study the use of patrimonial aristocrats as administrators in historical societies and their eventual replacement by an impersonal, meritocratic bureaucracy. We build a theoretical framework to show that in a world with poor technology to centralize fiscal resources, it is advantageous for a regime to employ patrimonial appointees who have a stake in the regime as administrators. Transport improvements that facilitate fiscal centralization and the advent of effective technologies to nurture and spot talent will increase the appointment of non-aristocrats in administration. Larger empires will have a stronger motivation to promote bureaucratization due to the difficulties of maintaining a large, tight-knit aristocratic class. We use the framework to explain the relationship between bureaucratization and centralization, the spatial arrangement of domains and fiefs, China's precocity in developing an administrative meritocracy, and variations in the transition from aristocracy to bureaucracy in other societies, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.