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## THE STRUCTURE OF RECRUITMENT

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### The Sung bureaucracy

By Sung times the Chinese bureaucracy had come far from its antique beginnings as a household government. Although traces of its patrimonial origins lingered on in such titles as the Left and Right Major-domos, the Sung bureaucracy possessed many of the essential features of a 'modern' bureaucracy: specialization of functions, a hierarchy of authority, a system of formal rules, and an ideal of impersonality.<sup>1</sup> Arrayed beneath the august Emperor, the Son of Heaven, whose power was in theory absolute, were a host of ministries, bureaus, commissions, and other organs whose functions and lines of authority were clearly drawn.<sup>2</sup> Outside of the capital the primary administrative units were prefectures (*chou*) and sub-prefectures or counties (*hsien*), which numbered 306 and 1207 respectively in the year 1100, though there were also some 24 circuits (*lu*) used by various commissioners for tours of inspection. To staff these offices the government employed tens of thousands of officials whose evaluation and promotion were the subject of detailed regulations,<sup>3</sup> and hundreds of thousands of clerks.

As we shall see below, the bureaucracy became bloated as the Sung progressed, as officials increasingly outnumbered the available posts. Nevertheless, what was remarkable was not the bureaucracy's largeness but rather its smallness when set against the vastness of China. The dynasty at its height ruled over one hundred million people in an area of approximately two million square miles.<sup>4</sup> Mountain ranges and forests separated the empire's major regions, each with its own regional economy, dialect groupings, and cultural traditions. Moreover, the communications and transportation systems, though complex and highly organized, were slow and inefficient. Yet despite these constraints, the government managed to maintain relative peace and order for most of three centuries.

That they accomplished this may be attributed to several factors. For the defense of the empire, the Sung depended upon both diplomacy with the various alien dynasties that occupied northeastern, northwestern, and

eventually all of northern China, and upon large, closely supervised armies and navies, which consumed a major portion of the government's budget. To manage land and population registration, tax collection, public works, and the maintenance of local order, officials and clerks made use of mandatory unpaid labor and even attempted to organize families into mutual responsibility groups to insure security and the collection of taxes.<sup>5</sup> More germane to our subject, local officials relied upon the local elite for information, support, and philanthropy, and since the elite generally dominated its locality economically and socially and virtually dominated entry into the bureaucracy, its support was generally forthcoming.

A final reason for the government's success at ruling was cultural. The cosmos implicit in the Confucian classics and preached by Sung Neo-Confucians was an interrelated and interdependent whole in which the moral and natural realms were merged. The Son of Heaven was the mediator between Heaven and the world ('all under Heaven') and the capital from which he ruled was an axis mundi, a pivot about which the four quarters revolved.<sup>6</sup> and just as that axis was symbolically recapitulated in every government *yamen* in the empire, so too was the hierarchical pattern of the emperor's dealings with his ministers infinitely repeated as officials dealt with subjects, fathers with sons, husbands with wives, and the elderly with the young. Form and substance overlapped; since a harmonious order could only be created through ritual and etiquette, breaches in them rent its fabric.

This view of a moral universe had two consequences. It certainly contributed to social stability, for while the local elites were its primary exponents and naturally its greatest beneficiaries, it was hardly limited to them. Through laws, lineage rules, educational primers, story tellers and folk lore, it percolated throughout society so that the most divergent local traditions shared a Confucian ethical core, and even among the ubiquitous Buddhist clergy (*sangha*) there was little inclination to mount a cultural or political challenge.

It also insured that the ideal of the specialist familiar to students of Western bureaucracies would not become the norm. A grasp of principles, of the larger picture, was preferred to a command of details, and thus the generalist who knew how to think and act was preferred to the specialist who knew what to do. Principles could be practical, of course, and in the eleventh century men like Wang An-shih (1021-86) argued that the larger picture required a detailed knowledge of institutions and economics, but even they agreed that knowledge of the Kingly Way was essential. And when, following the failure of reform, that Way became more exclusively moral, the ideal of the generalist became more firmly fixed than ever.

Even as social and cultural factors were contributing to the success of

Table 1. *Organization of the bureaucracy*

		Civil service	Military service
Graded:	Administrative	Court officials ( <i>ch'ao-kuan</i> ) Capital officials ( <i>ching-kuan</i> )	Major officers ( <i>ta-shih-ch'en</i> )
	Executive:	Selected men ( <i>hsüan-jen</i> )	Minor officers ( <i>hsiao-shih-ch'en</i> )
Ungraded:		Various titles	Various titles
			Clerical service

Sung government, the bureaucracy itself was profoundly shaping society and culture. Since the bureaucracy was the preeminent source of prestige and power, access to it was a pressing concern within elite society. As we shall see below, the structure of recruitment served to mold that society even while political pressures from within the elite worked to modify that structure.

### Recruitment of clerks and the military

Like the Chinese cosmos which was divided into Heaven, earth and man, the Sung bureaucracy was tripartite, consisting of civil, military and clerical services. The civil and military services were comparable in size and theoretically equal (although in fact the former was far more highly esteemed), having parallel grading systems and procedures for transfer from one to the other.<sup>7</sup> The clerical service was distinct from them and hierarchically inferior.

Two basic divisions informed the civil and military services. One distinguished graded from ungraded officials. Graded officials comprised the heart of the bureaucracy. In each service they were arranged in a hierarchy of titular offices (*kuan*) which, after 1082, was divided into nine grades.<sup>8</sup> They alone were considered to be proper officials, 'within the stream' (*liu-nei*), and they held virtually every non-clerical position of importance. 'Outside the stream' (*liu-wai*) were the ungraded officials and clerks. The ungraded officials were included in the hierarchy of titular offices and could serve in minor capacities such as assistants in local schools, but being ungraded they lacked the status of officials and could only obtain that through the regular channels of recruitment, such as the examinations.

The second division was between the executive and administrative classes. 'Admission into the administrative class was considered the most important step in the ladder of promotion,' Edward Kracke has noted.<sup>9</sup> All officials

began their careers in the executorial class and, according to the rules for promotion, could be considered for promotion to the administrative class after a minimum of six to twelve years of active duty.<sup>10</sup> But most never made the step, for as the tables which follow will show, the vast majority of officials were in the executorial class.

The executorial and administrative classes of the civil and military services were known collectively as the 'four selected [classes]' (*ssu-hsüan*) and Sung statistics for the size of the bureaucracy (such as those in Table 4) almost invariably referred to them and no others. In accordance with this, the terms 'official' and 'bureaucrat', unless otherwise specified, should be taken to refer to them alone.

The focus of this study is on the civil service, its examinations and their social functions. This has been necessary from a practical point of view but regrettable, since the social importance of the military and clerical services was obviously great. But before leaving these two groups entirely, we should consider briefly their personnel and how they were selected.

The clerical service was so large and fragmented institutionally that generalizations about it are fraught with peril. Clerks did not move about like officials but remained permanently in a single *yamen*, office or bureau, each of which was responsible for its own clerical recruitment.<sup>11</sup> At the level of county administration there was considerable variation over time in the degree of professionalism among clerks. Although they were virtually all professional during the late Northern Sung, thanks to the policies of the reformer Wang An-shih, at other times a minor but substantial portion of the clerical work was performed by workers fulfilling service obligations, who were either unpaid or paid by the family which owed the service.<sup>12</sup> Paid or unpaid, the clerical service greatly outnumbered the other services and, by all accounts, it grew throughout the Sung. Although we have no figures for its total size, an idea of its magnitude may be gained from the fact that a proposal in 1001 to reduce its size suggested a reduction of 195,000 positions.<sup>13</sup>

A great gulf separated the clerical service from the other two. Officials looked down upon the clerks, feared them,<sup>14</sup> and kept their promotions into the ranks of officials to a minimum. Although a fair number entered the military service, the civil service was largely closed to them. A handful entered through direct promotion, but this was the only avenue open to them, for in 989 they were barred from the examinations.<sup>15</sup>

Military officials served both as officers and bureaucrats. They provided the officers' corps for the army and navy, staffed the military bureaus and offices in the central government, held posts in the imperial household, and at times even filled civil posts in local administration.<sup>16</sup> The military service,

Table 2. *Classification of the military service in 1213 according to method of entry*

Method of entry	Administrative class		Executive class		Total military service	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Protection(a)	1,680	43.5	8,211	52.9	9,891	51.1
Military examination	77	2.0	415	2.7	492	2.5
Imperial clansmen	425	11.0	2,914	18.8	3,339	17.2
Clerks(b)	340	8.8	1,221	7.9	1,561	8.1
Prom. from ranks(c)	1,285	33.2	1,606	10.3	2,891	14.9
Purchase	0	0	508	3.3	508	2.6
Miscellaneous(d)	59	1.5	631	4.1	690	3.6
Total	3,866	100.0	15,506*	100.0	19,372	100.0

Source: Li Hsin-ch'uan, *Chien-yen i-lai Ch'ao-yeh tsa-chi*, 2 pts. (TSCC eds) 2.14:528.

(a) Includes entries for 'admission through recommendation' (*tsou-pu*), a term used to signify protection; 'husbands of imperial princesses' (*tsung-nü-fu*); and 'relatives of imperial concubines' (*hou-chi ch'in-shu*). The great majority were from the first category.

(b) The former clerks of court and capital grade are designated 'non-irregular clerks from miscellaneous services' (*tsa-liu fei-fan li-chih*). The others are merely labeled 'clerks' (*li-chih*).

(c) Includes those listed simply as 'military company' (*chün-pan*) designating troop leaders, perhaps, and those selected for their military accomplishments (*chün-kung*).

(d) Includes those 'returning [from rebel or enemy armies] to serve the Sung' (*kuei-ming kuei-cheng*); 'sons-in-law of those killed in action' (*chen-wang nü-fu*); 'recipients of grace for [relatives of] those killed in action' (*chen-wang en-tse*); and 'managers of tribute' (*chu-kuan chin-feng*).

\*The source gives a subtotal of 15,606, but this must be a copying error for the entries add up to 15,506.

like the civil service, had examinations (*wu-chü*) and, in theory, a network of military schools (*wu-hsüeh*) at the capital and in prefectures, though the schools were often just appended to the prefectural schools. But both of these were relatively unimportant avenues to advancement, as we can see from Table 2.

Military examinations aside, this table suggests two important, rather paradoxical characteristics of the military service. First, it was staffed primarily by those entering through some form of kin-based privilege. The imperial clan is particularly noteworthy in this respect, reflecting the considerable political importance and visibility that it was gaining in the late Southern Sung.<sup>17</sup> Second, a sizeable minority (23%) of the military service entered from either the ranks or the clerical service. This suggests significant social mobility, for because these men were promoted from branches of government

considered socially inferior, their promotion probably involved substantial inter-class mobility.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as the great Ming novel, *The Water Margin*, so vividly depicts in its account of the Sung bandit leader Sung Chiang and his fellow 'heroes', the line between rebel and government soldier was a fine one that was frequently traversed.

Finally, civil service recruitment privileges were available to military officials. Both entry to the special preliminary examinations and protection were available to the relatives of appropriately ranked military officials. To determine how many families used this circuitous route into the prestigious civil service would require a separate study, but given the propensity of the literati to employ every competitive advantage available, its use was undoubtedly considerable.

### Recruitment of the civil service

There were a number of ways by which men entered the civil service,<sup>19</sup> but two predominated. The imperial grace of protection (*yin-pu, en-yin*) allowed certain capital rank officials to name one or more of their relatives and sometimes even family tutors as officials.<sup>20</sup> The process was not automatic, for those named had to take a placement examination (*ch'üan-shih*). But even at its most competitive, half of those taking it passed.<sup>21</sup> The initial rank of the protected officials varied but was always low.<sup>22</sup> The number one could name depended on one's rank. The proportion of officials with this privilege was small but because it was granted liberally to the highest officials, many entered the bureaucracy by means of it.<sup>23</sup>

Examinations were the alternative. In terms of hierarchical complexity, the Sung examination system falls somewhere between those of the T'ang and the Ming. In the T'ang system, there was only one examination and it was open to recommended prefectural candidates and students in the capital schools.<sup>24</sup> The Ming and Ch'ing systems had three levels of examination — prefectural, provincial, and metropolitan — and the prefectural level was itself divided into three consecutive examinations. The Sung system, by contrast, had just two levels. One first had to pass either the prefectural examination (*chieh-shih*, 'forwarding examination' — a term also used generically for all preliminary examinations), or at one of the less competitive special preliminary examinations.<sup>25</sup> Those who passed were 'presented men' (*chü-jen*) but they were not as a rule qualified to hold office as were Ming and Ch'ing *chü-jen*, who were graduates of the provincial examination. They went to the capital where they took the departmental examination (*sheng-shih*), and those who passed it proceeded to take the palace examination (*tien-shih, yü-shih*), a largely pro forma examination used primarily for ranking individuals.<sup>26</sup> These graduates received either the *chin-shih*

(‘advanced scholar’) degree or, until the 1070s when they were abolished, a degree in one of several fields such as law, history, and rites, known collectively as the *chu-k’o* (‘several fields’). Only then were they eligible for office.

There were also special ‘facilitated degrees’ (*t’e-tsou-ming chin-shih*, *t’e-tsou-ming chu-k’o*) given to elderly multiple repeaters of the departmental examination, who were given a separate and easier palace examination. These degrees constituted a distinctive and important feature of the Sung examination system. As we shall see, facilitated degree holders constituted a sizeable proportion of the civil service. Because they were usually over 50 years old and their degrees had little prestige, they were a rather insignificant force within the bureaucracy, but socially these degrees were very important, for they conferred official status with its attendant benefits upon many who would never have passed the regular examinations.

Finally, certain special degrees were conferred upon a few select individuals. The degree for youths (*t’ung-tzu-k’o*) was given to boys who displayed precocious talents, usually involving memorization of the classics. There were also decree examinations (*chih-k’o*), extremely prestigious examinations given mainly to active officials for the purpose of promotion, but on occasion to highly recommended non-officials as well.<sup>27</sup> Because these examinations were extraordinary and numerically insignificant, we will not consider them further.

As Table 3 indicates, examinations and protection accounted for 93% of the civil service in 1213. Former clerks and imperial clansmen were both scantily represented, though the absence of the latter may be more apparent than real, for from around the turn of the thirteenth century on, they were receiving *chin-shih* degrees in large numbers and so would have been included under that category.<sup>28</sup> Purchase of office, too, was remarkably unimportant, though this may have changed in the closing decades of the Sung.<sup>29</sup> This table, then, demonstrates the crucial importance of the examinations as virtually the only method of bureaucratic entry for those from nonofficial families. At the same time it points to the great importance of kin-based privilege, which accounted for four-tenths of the civil service and over half of those of administrative grade.

But was this also the case at other times during the Sung? Although there are no data for other periods comparable to those of 1213, it is possible to detect general changes in the relative importance of different methods of civil service recruitment.

### Patterns of recruitment

One of the recurring themes in Sung writings on government was that of an oversized bureaucracy: there were too many officials for the available

Table 3. Classification of the civil service in 1213 according to method of entry

Method of entry	Administrative class*		Executive class		Total civil service*	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Chin-shih degrees	975	40.8	4,325	25.4	5,300	27.4
Facilitated degrees	50	2.1	5,065	29.8	5,115	26.4
Degrees for youths	0	0	68	0.4	68	0.3
Protection (a)	255	52.5	6,366	37.4	7,621	39.3
Purchase	3	0.1	429	2.5	432	2.2
Imperial clan (b)	24	1.0	560	3.3	584	3.0
Prom. from clerk (c)	8	0.3	165	1.0	173	0.9
Irregular status	2	0.1	28	0.2	30	0.2
Miscellaneous (d)	75	3.1	0	0	75	0.4
	2,392	100.0	17,006	100.0	19,398	100.0

Source: CYTC 2.14:528.

\*Includes only administrative officials in grades six through nine. The number of officials in grades one through five was undoubtedly much smaller and their omission, therefore, should not greatly compromise these findings, although at the same time these figures cannot be taken as representative of the highest officials.

(a) Several kinds of protection are specified for the administrative officials: those conferred upon the protector's retirement (529), upon his death (92), on the occasion of the Great Rites (623), and upon tutors (*men-k'o*) (11). Protected executive officials are all grouped under the heading 'recommended' (*tsou-chien*). This term is ambiguous but elsewhere in the same work it is clearly used to mean protection. Ibid. 2.14:532; 15:540.

(b) These appear to have entered through protection privileges specially granted to certain imperial clansmen. The administrative officials are listed as 'admission to office for imperial clansmen who have gone through the [Great] Rites' (*tsung-shih kuo li pu-kuan*), while the executive officials are simply listed as 'imperial clansmen deserving of grace' (*tsung-shih kai en*).

(c) The classification of the 8 administrative officials is problematical. Their entry reads, 'admission to office [through] the Three Departments' (*san-sheng pu-kuan*), that is, the three departments of the Secretariat-Chancellery. My interpretation is that this refers to ex-clerks of those departments. See WHTK 30:285 and HCP 30/12a for an example of a clerk at the Secretariat becoming an official, and SS 169/17b-18a on the promotion procedures for clerks in those departments.

(d) This includes 21 listed as 'admission to office upon the special receipt of the title of literatus' (*t'e shou wen-hsileh pu-kuan*), 2 admitted because of their families' perpetual right to office (*hsie-feng pu-kuan*), and 52 listed as *feng-piao pu-kuan* ('admission to office for demonstrations of service'). This last term may refer to yet another form of protection (it follows the entry for protection on the occasion of the Great Rites), but I have found no other references to it.

posts. This problem arose throughout China's imperial history, but it was marked during the Sung, particularly as the dynasty progressed. In 1160, the future chief councilor Chou Pi-ta (1126–1204) wrote:

In general, when posts are first created [at a dynasty's outset], the paths to entering service are few and the vacancies many. After prolonged peace, the paths to service are many and officials then become superfluous.<sup>30</sup>

As for current conditions, which were considerably better than they were to be a generation hence, Chou described the plight of newly qualified officials:

Lined up at the gate they gather to enter the appointments office. With 'selected men' almost surpassing two thousand [every three years], several score of men vie for each vacancy and five or six years is the wait for each post. A scholar coming to this pass may be said to be 'delayed and impeded, missing official duties.'<sup>31</sup>

In Table 4, a compilation of reports and estimates of the number of those with official status, we can observe this process of bureaucratic accretion. The drop after 1119 was caused by the loss to the Jurchen of northern China, and with it some 35% of the population, but it is interesting to note that by the early thirteenth century the civil service had surpassed its Northern Sung peak. Clearly the problem of supernumerary officials (*jung-kuan*), as they were called, had not been solved.

How were these officials recruited? Except for the year 1213 (see Table 3) we cannot say with any precision. But since there are reliable degree totals for most of the Sung, we can calculate the importance of recruitment by examination at different times in the dynasty. In Table 5, the estimated career length of thirty-six years is based upon the 5,300 degree holders who were officials in 1213.<sup>32</sup> It may be high, but if we are to assume that the average career length for degree-holding officials remained constant throughout the dynasty, and there is little evidence to the contrary,<sup>33</sup> then that makes little difference. Lowering the career length would lower each of the percentages but not change the trend.

The trend is remarkable: the proportion of the civil service recruited via the regular degrees was shrinking progressively during the course of the dynasty, so that in 1213 it was less than half of what it had been in 1046. This does not mean that degree holders were decreasing in number (except for the drop between Northern and Southern Sung the degree numbers were fairly constant), but rather that other channels were becoming more important. Which? The evidence suggests both facilitated degrees and protection.

Table 4. Estimates of numbers of Sung officials

Year	Civil service Administrative grade	Executive grade	Military service	Total officials	Sources
997–1022				9,785	a, b
1023–1031	2,000		4,000		a, b
1046	2,700+	10,000	6,000+	18,700+	a, b
1049–1053				17,300	a, b
1064–1067				24,000	b, c
1080				34,000+	a
1119		16,500	31,346		c
1165–1173	3,000–4,000	7,000–8,000			b, c
1191	4,159	12,859	16,488	33,516	b, c
1196	4,159	13,670	24,595	42,000+	b, c
1201	3,133	15,204	19,470	37,800+	b
1213	2,392*	17,006	19,472	38,864*	d

Sources: (a) YH 117/24a, 119/30b–31a; (b) WHTK 47:441; (c) Hung Mai, *Jung-chai sui-pi* 4.4/1a–2a, 5.4/12b–13a; (c) CYTC 2.14:528.

\*Does not include officials in grades one through five. See Table 3 note \*.

Table 5. Estimated percentages of regular degree holders\* within the civil service assuming an average career length of 36 years

Year	Civil service qualified officials(a)	Degree holders from the previous 36 years Number(b)	Percent
1046	12,700+	7,207	57%
1119	16,500+	7,494	45%
1170	10,000–12,000	4,805	40–48%
1191	17,018	5,268	31%
1201	18,337	5,396	29%
1213	19,398+	5,256	27%

Sources: (a) See Table 4; (b) WHTK 32; SHY:HC 7–8 or Appendix 2. These are 36 year aggregates of the individual examination totals given in the sources.

\*Includes *chin-shih* and *chu-k'o* degrees for 1046 and *chin-shih* degrees alone for other years.

The premier source for Sung governmental institutions, the *Sung hui-yao*, provides facilitated degree totals by examination for most of 1020–1094, and for all but one examination during 1132–1172, and for 1196–1223.<sup>34</sup> During these three periods, the triennial average of facilitated degrees was 498, 374, and 622 respectively. These figures must be used with caution, however, for unlike the *chin-shih* (or *chu-k'o*) degree, the facilitated degree did not automatically carry official status with it.

When a man received a facilitated degree, unless he was one of a small group who had ranked highest in the facilitated departmental examination, he was given a low titular office. Through 1079, the offices conferred were usually those of prefectural associate official (*pieh-chia*), office chief (*ch'ang-shih*), assistant office chief (*ssu-ma*), educational inspector (*wen-hsieh*), or assistant instructor (*chu-chiao*). Thereafter only the last two were used.<sup>35</sup>

Although these offices could denote actual positions and duties, they were primarily indicators of rank. For most of the Northern Sung, they ranked at the bottom of the graded civil service,<sup>36</sup> but with the Yüan-feng Regulations of 1082, educational inspectorates and assistant instructorships became *ungraded* offices.<sup>37</sup> Whether facilitated degree holders were considered officials prior to 1082 and not thereafter is unclear, however, for the sources do not say.

In 1128, facilitated degree recipients were for the first time grouped into five classes. The first two received various graded offices, the third and fourth were made graded educational inspectors, and the fifth assistant instructors. Hence the critical break came after the fourth class. Fifth class men, although facilitated degree holders and included in the degree totals, were not counted as officials.<sup>38</sup>

While the five class grouping probably increased the representation of facilitated degree holders in the civil service somewhat, the greatest change seems to have come in the late twelfth century. Government discussions from the late 1170s and 1180s betray a concern that facilitated degrees had been conferred too liberally and that too many of the recipients were claiming official status.<sup>39</sup> Hung Mai (1123–1202), an elder statesman whose views on contemporary affairs were widely read and respected, complained in 1196 that three-time *chü-jen* were all receiving special grace in the facilitated examinations, for in the past most recipients had been four- to eight-time *chü-jen*. ‘Even assistant instructors,’ he wrote, ‘are becoming officials and returning [home] as proper men. In every prefecture there are a hundred or more of them.’<sup>40</sup> The impact of facilitated degrees upon patterns of recruitment thus appears to have been substantial in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as large numbers attained the coveted status of officials.

But facilitated degrees alone cannot explain the declining representation of *chin-shih* in the civil service. Protection was an equally if not more important factor. The evidence relating to its use is less direct than that concerning the examinations, for there are no comparable quantitative data. But what there is strongly suggests that protection was more important in the twelfth century than it had been in the eleventh. While there were few complaints about protection in the earlier period, during the first half of the Southern Sung alone there were not only complaints but also at least two attempts to cut it

back.<sup>41</sup> But the practice was not easily controlled, and yet another attempt in 1201 to reduce it was just a few years later by a relaxation in its limitations.<sup>42</sup> The problem was simple: protection was a cherished privilege which mainly benefited the most powerful officials, the very ones who would have had to lead any successful attempt to curb it. As Chou Pi-ta cautiously noted in 1160:

Now it is certain that we should reduce protection and stop the inheritance of rank, but if we remedy this abuse precipitously, then there will be many complaints. If [we act] lightly with regard to set laws, then it will be easy to upset [them all].<sup>43</sup>

There are also indications that the *chin-shih* degree was less of a requirement for high office in the twelfth century than it had been previously. According to the work of that great pioneer of Chinese economic and social history, Sudō Yoshiyuki, the percentage of *chin-shih* holders among chief councilors (*tsai-hsiang*) and assistant councilors (*chih-cheng*) dropped substantially after the reign of Che-tsung (1085–1100), averaging 90% in the years 997–1100 and just 72% in the succeeding century (1100–1195).<sup>44</sup> Sudō has also shown that, in six southeastern prefectures, the ratio of *chin-shih* who reached high office to the total number of *chin-shih* dropped sharply between the Northern and Southern Sung, which suggests that the career value of the degree had eroded.<sup>45</sup> Finally, there is the striking fact that in 1213 (see Table 3) protection accounted for 55% of the administrative officials compared to just 41% for *chin-shih*. Clearly the political importance of protection grew as the dynasty progressed.

Brian McKnight has recently argued that there was a general trend toward favoritism during the Southern Sung. Chief ministers packed the upper ranks of the bureaucracy with their protégés and they made great use of protection.<sup>46</sup> Through imperial acts of grace on occasions like the imperial suburban sacrifices, there were ample opportunities for favoritism to be translated into protection.<sup>47</sup> But it should also be noted that more families received major protection privileges in the Southern Sung than in the Northern Sung. Holding a court-level position was a risky affair in the Southern Sung. Chief ministers were very powerful but also very transient, as constant factional struggle took its toll. This made it virtually impossible for a family to perpetuate itself in high office over several generations, as Robert Hartwell has noted,<sup>48</sup> but it also meant that more families reached high office and thus gained, at least momentarily, the great protection privileges that that entailed. The net effect was therefore to increase protection even though no single family could have compared with some of the great Northern Sung families or lineages in their uses of it.

One further factor had a profound impact upon changing patterns of recruitment: the examinations, as we shall shortly see, were becoming increasingly competitive. Protection and the facilitated examinations offered very different paths to office, with one serving the young scions of the powerful and the other the old survivors of the examination halls. They were alike only in being easier than the regular examinations, but in the shifting landscape of twelfth-century society, that was a crucial quality, and many who in earlier times would have taken regular degrees had to settle for something less.

This in turn suggests a different perspective by which to view civil service recruitment. Our attention thus far has been on the effects of sociopolitical changes upon recruitment, but in the remainder of this chapter we shall turn that around and consider how recruitment, specifically the examinations, affected society. For by creating large groups with varying educational status and a huge group of undistinguished literati, the examinations made themselves felt in every corner of elite society and beyond it as well.

### **Students and *chü-jen***

Among the literati, several groups stood out from their examination-oriented peers by virtue of having achieved some measure of academic success. Most visible of these, and unique in having a degree of political power, were the students of the Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*) and, for the early Northern Sung, of the other schools in K'ai-feng such as the Directorate of Education (*Kuo-tzu-chien*). Initially these schools were restricted to students from official families, but this began to change in the 1040s, and by the reign of the emperor Hui-tsung (1101–25), the majority of students entered through routes open to non-officials, although substantial channels for privileged entry continued to exist for the rest of the dynasty. Entrance procedures varied. The most common method, used for much of the Southern Sung, was an entrance examination (*pu-shih*), which was held shortly after the results of the departmental examination were announced. This gave *chü-jen* who had failed the departmental examination as well as certain non-*chü-jen* an added chance for advancement and, in effect, made the entrance examination an extension of the examination system. Once in the University, the student had great advantages in the examinations, for the University qualifying examination was far less competitive than those in the prefectures, and on occasion large numbers of University students were exempted from passing the preliminary examination.<sup>49</sup>

The University students were a remarkable and highly visible group in K'ai-feng and, later, in Lin-an. Predictably, they had a reputation for conviviality and numerous accounts of their exploits have survived from

contemporary writings.<sup>50</sup> Because they were highly selected and had a history of producing statesmen from their ranks, their power was considerable if informal. On at least one occasion they took on the local officials. In 1210, after the prefect of Lin-an fu had, quite rightfully, arrested four students for profiteering in real estate, both students and educational officials protested that this was an intrusion into the jurisdiction of the Directorate, which oversaw the University. In the end the emperor agreed with the students and the prefect was removed from office.<sup>51</sup> Even more significant was the active role in advocating state policies which students took during periods of national crisis. Using petitions and sometimes even marches, they were on occasion (most notably at the end of the Northern Sung) successful in getting ministers dismissed and policies changed.<sup>52</sup>

University students also received certain material benefits, including free room and board when in residence. Under Hui-tsung, exemptions from service obligations were granted to some students in 1107, and apparently to all in or by 1117, though these provisions probably did not survive his reign.<sup>53</sup> In 1149, exemptions were given to all University students who were the only adult males in their households.<sup>54</sup>

As the quotas in Table 6 indicate, University student numbers grew dramatically during the Northern Sung and again during the Southern Sung after the University had been reconstituted in Lin-an in 1142. In the context of the empire, however, these students were a tiny group, and outside of the capital their importance was not great.

A second group consisted of the preliminary examination graduates, the *chü-jen* or *kung-shih* ('tribute scholars') as they were sometimes called. A creation of the Sung examination system, they were the most prominent semi-official group outside of the capital, but their position was ambiguous. New *chü-jen* were feted by the local officials after the examination results had been announced and then they journeyed to the capital where they presented their credentials at the Board of Rites, went through welcoming ceremonies, and took the departmental examination. There were material benefits as well. The government sometimes gave travel aids such as postal station passes and in the Southern Sung many communities established examination estates to help cover *chü-jen* travel expenses. The government also gave them the right to convert certain punishments into fines and exempted some, though not all, from the service obligations that families and individuals owed to the state.<sup>55</sup>

Nor did the benefits cease with the metropolitan examinations. Unsuccessful *chü-jen* kept their *chü-jen* status and had the right to participate with officials in local feasts and ceremonies. More important, the government routinely announced exemptions allowing past *chü-jen* (usually those who

Table 6. University student quotas

Northern Sung		Southern Sung	
Year	Quota	Year	Quota
975	70*	1142	300
1044	300*	1143	700–900
1050	100	1145	830–916**
1051	200	1148	1,000
1068	900	1200	1,400
1071	1,000	1266	1,636**
1079	2,400		
1093	2,175		
1101	2,400		
1103	3,800		
1120	2,400		
1127	600		

Source: Wang Chien-ch'iu, *Sung-tai T'ai-hstieh yu T'ai-hstieh-sheng*, pp. 108–11.

\*The entries for 975 and 1044 are actually for the Directorate of Education. Following 1044, the Directorate continued to exist as a school for the children of officials exclusively and had 200 students in 1078. Also, the School of the Four Gates had 450 students in 1058 and 600 in 1062. None of these figures is included in the table above. *Sung hui-yao chi-kao: Ch'ung-ju* section 1/32a–b. This section will be cited hereafter as SHY:CJ.

\*\*Probably represents the actual number of students.

had become *chü-jen* fifteen or more years before) to go to the metropolitan examinations without again qualifying.<sup>56</sup> This, combined with the provisions for the facilitated examinations, meant that a young *chü-jen* had a very good chance of receiving at least a facilitated degree at some future point, even without further success in the regular examinations.

Still, with the exception of *chü-jen* from Kuang-nan in the far south who could hold minor office as 'irregular status officials' (*she-kuan*),<sup>57</sup> *chü-jen* were not officials and indeed had to repass the preliminary examination or gain exemption from it in order to keep what legal privileges they had.<sup>58</sup> Like the Ming and Ch'ing licentiates (*sheng-yüan*) they were a marginal group, esteemed by some but ridiculed by others. At one extreme we find Liu Ch'eng-pi, whose idyllic student days were described earlier.<sup>59</sup> From a famous family of officials in Chi-chou, Liu was a two-time *chü-jen* and retired scholar whom the government honored for his virtue with a banner twelve feet in height. This was in response to a nominating petition from 1,353 of his fellow literati in Chi-chou.<sup>60</sup> But there were others like Lu T'ang of Fu-chien, a *chü-jen* and one-time University student in the late

Northern Sung, who was forced to become a merchant to support himself, thereby incurring the scorn of his acquaintances.<sup>61</sup> In the opinion of at least one official, Ch'en Kung-fu (d. ca. 1140), *chü-jen* were generally an objectionable lot:

As soon as they pass the prefectural examination, they begin to search for connections in order to gain a means of livelihood. They are local bullies when they stay at home and roaming vagrants when they wander about in the empire.<sup>62</sup>

The reference to roaming is noteworthy, for in a society that valued immobility and distrusted unattached outsiders, the travels of *chü-jen* and scholars generally were viewed with some suspicion.<sup>63</sup>

Because of the complex nature of examination procedures, the data on the size of the *chü-jen* population and changes in it are difficult to interpret. There are two aggregate figures for the prefectural *chü-jen* quotas: 2,334 (or 1,604 for prefectural quotas including K'ai-feng) for 1106<sup>64</sup> and 2,026 for the late Southern Sung.<sup>65</sup> Given the smaller territory and population of the Southern Sung, the latter figure actually represents an increase for the prefectures involved. Still, we may reasonably take the figure of two thousand as a rough standard for the number of prefectural *chü-jen* who qualified in each examination in the late Northern and Southern Sung. There were others as well: *chü-jen* from the special qualifying examinations and those exempted from qualifying. In fact, given the figures in Table 7, non-prefectural *chü-jen* must have predominated in the departmental examinations.

*Chü-jen* numbers did not grow over time. Except for the high figures of the early Sung, a period of institutional flux, the numbers remained remarkably stable, in the range of five to ten thousand.<sup>66</sup> There was a good reason for this: numbers had to be limited to keep the departmental examination manageable. More speculatively, if we generously assume that for each *chü-jen* at a given departmental examination, there were two who either qualified and did not go<sup>67</sup> or were past *chü-jen*, then the empire's *chü-jen* population would have been in the range of fifteen to thirty thousand after the early Northern Sung. Given a population of roughly one hundred million in the late Northern Sung and sixty million in the Southern Sung, thirty thousand *chü-jen* would have constituted 0.15 and 0.25% of the adult male population respectively, assuming adult males to have constituted twenty percent of the population.

Compared with the Ming and Ch'ing licentiates, who alone constituted an estimated one and two percent of the adult male population respectively,<sup>68</sup> Sung *chü-jen* were a small group. But more relevant is the fact that no lower degree holders at all existed before the Sung. Thus the Sung creation of

Table 7. *Chü-jen taking the departmental examination*

Year	Number of <i>chü-jen</i>	Sources
977	5,200	a, b
983	10,260	a
992	17,300	a, c
998	10,000+	a, c
1002	14,500+	a, c
1005	13,000+	a, c
1048	5,000+	c
1086-94	4,732	d
1109	7,000	c
1124	15,000	b, c, e
1211	4,311	c
Late Southern Sung	10,000+	f

Sources: (a) HCP passim; (b) WHTK 30-31; (c) SHY:HC 1-6; (d) Hung Mai, *Jung-chai sui-pi* 4:8/3a; (e) SS 155; (f) Wu Tzu-mu, *Meng-liang lu* 2/3a.

*chü-jen*, a prominent if marginal semi-official group rivalling the civil service in numbers, was a crucial step in the development of an examination-oriented elite.

Finally there were the students in the government's prefectural and county schools, who numbered around two hundred thousand at their height in the early twelfth century. Although they lacked the status of either the *chü-jen* or University students, they were a selected group, having passed an entrance examination (*pu-shih*), and they received certain financial benefits, chief among which were free room and board. During the late Northern Sung students were also exempted from service obligations, but this seems to have been short-lived.<sup>69</sup>

Government schools were associated with the examinations both through their education, which was geared to the examination curriculum, and through their personnel, who managed much of the examination preparation. On several occasions the government tried to make attendance in the local schools a prerequisite to taking the examinations, and under Hui-tsung it abolished the prefectural examinations altogether, using instead promotion through the school system. In addition, for much of the Southern Sung permission to take the University entrance examination was especially extended to selected prefectural school students. Thus while connections between schools and the examination system were numerous, they tended to be secondary, not directly involving the critical qualifying examinations.

### The growth of the literati

In 1184, Tseng Feng, a minor official serving in the southeasternmost circuit of Kuang-nan-tung, bade farewell to an elderly colleague who was departing for the capital in hopes of a promotion:

Now when men are few, the quest for advancement is easy. When men are numerous, the quest for advancement is difficult. When men are few and the quest is easy, [even if one's talents are] ordinary and mediocre, one can spread one's wings. When men are many and the quest difficult, unless one has greatly surpassing achievements, one will not obtain advancement.<sup>70</sup>

Although Tseng was referring to advancement in business and religion as well as in the examinations and office holding, his concern was clearly with the latter endeavors. And well it should have been, for examination competition was dramatically on the increase.

Candidates attempting the prefectural qualifying examinations numbered approximately twenty to thirty thousand in the early eleventh century and seventy-nine thousand in the examinations of 1099, 1102, and 1105 a century later. By the middle of the thirteenth century, candidates from southern China alone (i.e., the Southern Sung empire) probably numbered four hundred thousand or more.<sup>71</sup>

As candidates increased, so did competition in the examinations. After 1009, when prefectural *chü-jen* quotas were instituted, quota increases (they were seldom decreased) were supposed to be made according to an imperially legislated quota-ratio, that is, a ratio of *chü-jen* to the average number of candidates in recent examinations. There were many exceptions to this practice, but still the fact that the government had to decrease the legislated ratio from 5/10 to 1/200 (see Table 8) in order to limit *chü-jen* numbers as we saw earlier that they did, clearly reflects a manifold increase in examination competition over the course of the dynasty.

In practice, competition could be even worse than these legislated ratios would indicate. The Fu-chien prefecture of Fu-chou, the leading producer of *chin-shih* during the Southern Sung, had some 40 *chü-jen* places for its 3,000 candidates in 1090 (1/75) and just 54 places for 18,000 or more candidates in 1207 (1/333).<sup>72</sup> Yen-chou in Liang-che-hsi had a quota of 18 for 1,781 candidates in 1156 (1/100) and the same quota in 1262 when there were over 7,000 candidates.<sup>73</sup> Further west in modern Anhui, officials from Kuang-chou complained in 1231 that, since the Ch'un-hsi reign period (1174-89), their candidate numbers had increased ten-fold but their quota had only been increased from three to five *chü-jen*.<sup>74</sup>

Figure 2 gives the *chü-jen* to candidate ratios for all of the cases I have

Table 8. *Legislated quota-ratios for prefectural examinations*

Year	Quota-ratio
997	2/10
1005	4/10
1009	5/10*
1023	5/10
1026	4/10
1032	2/10
1045	2/10
1066	1/10
1067	15/100
1093	1/10
1156	1/100
1275†	1/200

Sources: SHY:HC 15–16; SS 156/22a for 1275.

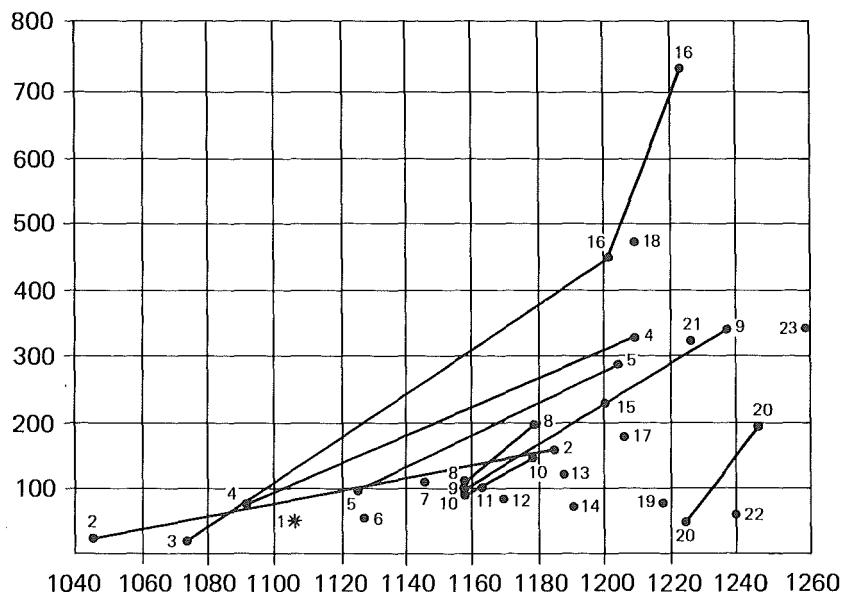
\*Empire-wide prefectural quotas first set.

†According to local histories, quotas were also set in 1234.

They do not say what quota-ratio was used, but it must have been 1/100 or less. Fang Jen-jung, *Yen-chou hsü-chih* 3:33; Lo Chün, *Pao-ch'ing Ssu-ming chih*, 21 ch. (Sung Yüan Ssu-ming liu chih ed.) 2/19b. The latter will hereafter be cited as PCSMC.

found in which both quota and candidate figures are available. Examination competition was clearly increasing, especially during the Southern Sung. Indeed, if we look only at the prefectures from the southeast, a region which dominates the historical records much as it seems to have dominated the political and intellectual life of the Sung, the rate of increase became exponential in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Even in the less advanced southern and southwestern prefectures, where competition was less severe, there was without exception greater competition than there had been in the empire at large in 1106.

These findings are further supported by a comparison of candidate numbers with population figures. In Figure 3, reports of actual candidate numbers have been used to calculate the candidates' percentage of the adult male population. The percentages are rough, for prefectural population estimates have to be used for the Southern Sung.<sup>75</sup> They demonstrate, however, that the literati were increasing relative to the rest of the population and not merely keeping pace with Sung population-growth. The increase was most dramatic in the southeast but is also evident, to a lesser extent, in the central and upper regions of the Yangtze River Valley. When we consider that these

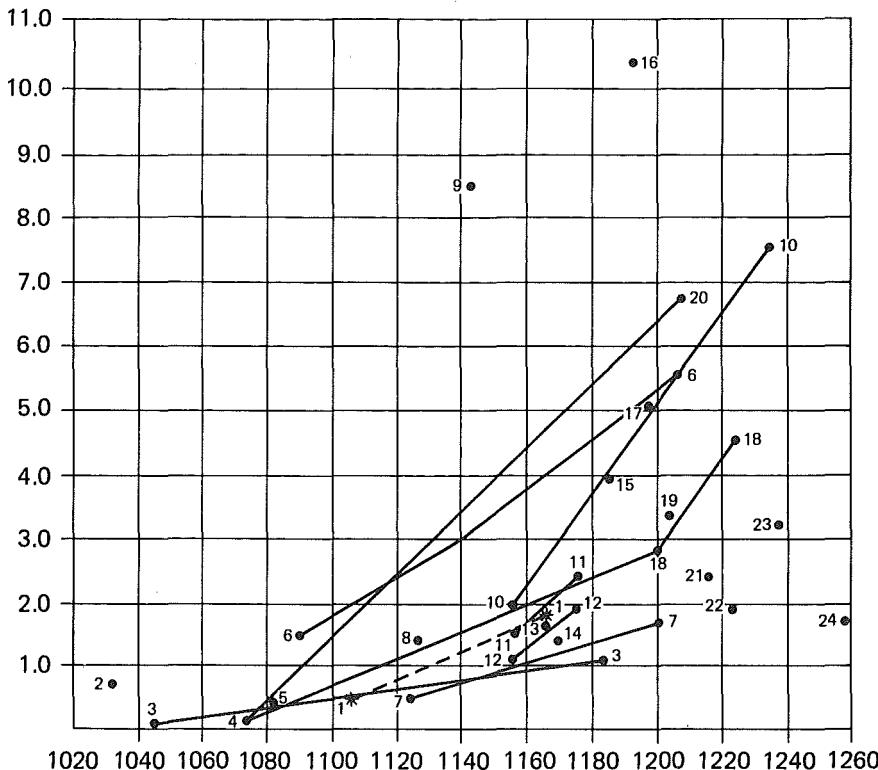


1. Empire
2. Su-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
3. Ming-chou, T'ai-chou and Wen-chou (Liang-che-tung)
4. Fu-chou (Fu-chien)
5. Hu-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
6. Ch'ang-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
7. Chi-chou (Chiang-nan-hsi)
8. Chien-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu)
9. Yen-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
10. Hui-chou (Chiang-nan-tung)
11. Wan-chou (K'uei-chou lu)
12. Jun-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
13. Chien-chou (Fu-chien)
14. Lung-chou (Li-chou-lu)
15. Chia-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu)
16. T'ai-chou (Liang-che-tung)
17. Hsing-chou (Li-chou lu)
18. Wen-chou (Liang-che-tung)
19. Hua-chou (Kuang-nan-hsi)
20. Shou-ch'ang chün (Ching-hu-pei)
21. Yüeh-chou (Liang-che-tung)
22. Tao-chou (Ching-hu-nan)
23. T'an-chou (Ching-hu-nan)

Fig. 2. Prefectural examination candidates per *chü-jen* in assorted prefectures for the years 1040–1260.

figures do not include those taking the special preliminary examinations, those who had quit taking the examinations or had already passed them, or those who began their studies with thoughts of the examinations but dropped out along the way, we can begin to appreciate the impact the examinations came to have upon society.

Who were these literati and what are we to make of their appearance in the examination halls? Most simply, they were those who could afford the lengthy education required for the examinations and then pursued it, and that, as we noted earlier, excluded most of the population. Did the literati



- 1. Empire
- 2. K'ai-feng fu
- 3. Su-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
- 4. Ming-chou, T'ai-chou and  
Wen-chou (Liang-che-tung)
- 5. Hsin-chou (Chiang-nan-tung)
- 6. Fu-chou (Fu-chien)
- 7. Hu-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
- 8. Ch'ang-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
- 9. Chi-chou (Chiang-nan-hsi)
- 10. Yen-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
- 11. Chien-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu)
- 12. Hui-chou (Chiang-nan-tung)
- 13. Wan-chou (K'uei-chou lu)
- 14. Jun-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
- 15. Chien-chou (Fu-chien)
- 16. Lung-chou (Li-chou lu)
- 17. Chia-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu)
- 18. T'ai-chou (Liang-che-tung)
- 19. Hsing-chou (Li-chou lu)
- 20. Wen-chou (Liang-che-tung)
- 21. Hua-chou (Kuang-nan-hsi)
- 22. Yüeh-chou (Liang-che-tung)
- 23. Tao-chou (Ching-hu-nan)
- 24. T'an-chou (Ching-hu-nan)

Fig. 3. Percent of adult males taking the prefectural examination in the empire and in assorted prefectures, 1020–1260.

then define the elite? In some ways, yes, for education and examinations were preeminently elite activities. In Confucian political culture, the scholar interpreted the will of Heaven for the emperor, and as an official mediated between the emperor and the people. When the elite engaged in unofficial activities, it was its connection with the government that gave it its great authority, and that connection was predicated upon study. Wrote one thirteenth century official:

Now scholars assuredly constitute the stairway to high office and learning assuredly constituted the stairway to [becoming] a scholar. Therefore those who are high officials must have [become so] through learning and those beneath officials must persevere in their learning. . . . If the scholars of this town are able to achieve learning, then their stairs will be those to high office.<sup>76</sup>

Strictly speaking, however, scholars were an occupational rather than social group, the first of the four traditional occupations or peoples (*ssu-min*), the others being farmers, artisans, and merchants. As such their relationship to the social elite changed during the Sung.<sup>77</sup> In the early unsettled years of the dynasty when many types of people were active in government, a deliberate attempt was made to constitute scholars as a social elite, for a number of groups (most of them potential rivals to the scholars) were barred from the examinations: government clerks, artisans, merchants, and Buddhist and Taoist monks.<sup>78</sup> These were *not* hereditary prohibitions; there was nothing to stop the son of a merchant or artisan from receiving an education and, assuming that he could obtain the requisite guarantees, taking the examinations. Yet the intent clearly was to create and maintain a purely scholarly group of families to staff the civil service. To quote an edict from 989: 'The examinations were created in order to serve the scholarly classes [literally, 'stream']; how can we permit clerks to advance falsely and stealthily take degrees?'<sup>79</sup>

But the attempt was not lasting and by the mid to late eleventh century the prohibitions, with the exception of that against clerks, had lapsed. Even while the very scholarly professional elite was dominating the upper ranks of the bureaucracy, literati from non-scholarly families began appearing in the examinations, spurred at least in part by the government's growing sponsorship of education. 'Why complain that assorted artisans and merchants advance? The scholarly class is mixed and without distinctions, is it not?' queried Ou-yang Hsiu (989–1052), who was himself from a bureaucratic family of modest means.<sup>80</sup> Slightly later, Su Ch'e (1039–1112), the great poet Su Shih's brother who was known for his political criticism, wrote in an unhappier vein:

In all of today's peasant, artisan, and merchant families, there are those who have forsaken their past [i.e., their family occupations] and became scholars. Those who are scholars daily increase, but the world is increasingly ungoverned. [In the examinations, we] are now selecting those who live at home without managing [their family's] produce. Looking up, they do not support their parents, and facing down, they are inconsiderate of their wives and sons. They wander through the four quarters [of the empire] disturbing the prefectures and counties and fabricating slander. [True] peasants, artisans, and merchants do not take part in this.<sup>81</sup>

By the Southern Sung yet another phenomenon appeared, that of literati families engaging in non-literati activities.

If the sons and younger brothers of an official have no hereditary stipends by which they can be maintained, and no landed property on which they may depend, and they want some way of serving their parents and caring for their dependants, the best thing for them to do is to become Confucian scholars. Those of them who are endowed with outstanding talents and able to pursue the calling of a scholar fitting himself for appointment will, if of the first quality, gain riches and honors through success in the examinations, and, if of the second quality, give instruction to disciples and receive the offering due to a master; while those who are not able to pursue the calling of a scholar fitting himself for appointment will, if of the first quality, be able to fulfill the tasks of writing letters and drawing up documents for others, and if of the second quality, be able to give primary instruction to boys in the arts of punctuating and reading. Those who are not capable of being Confucian scholars may make their living without disgracing their ancestors by working as spirit-mediums, doctors, Buddhists, Taoists, farmers, merchants or experts of some sort. It is the greatest disgrace to the ancestors if sons or younger brothers degenerate into beggars or thieves.<sup>82</sup>

Yüan Ts'ai, a thirteenth century official from Che-tung and author of this remarkable passage, was concerned with the problem of how an elite family could maintain its position or, failing that, decline as respectfully as possible, and as Robert Hymes has argued in the case of Fu-chou in Chiang-nan-hsi, his advice to the not-so-talented children of officials was both realistic and heeded. For as access to office became increasingly difficult, elite families diversified occupationally, allowing their less promising (or less bookish) children to pursue occupations that would have been scorned in the past.<sup>83</sup>

If not all elite members were literati, then were all literati from the elite

(i.e., from the small group of socially established families that dominated local society)? Hymes believes that they were, that examination candidacy, which required guarantees from the prefectoral school preceptor and others as to the respectability of one's family, gave the local elite control over who took the examinations.<sup>84</sup> But such a view overstates the degree of control the elite could exercise in such matters and ignores the masses of Southern Sung literati who crowded the examination halls, especially in those south-eastern prefectures where thousands of candidates at a time took the prefectoral examinations.<sup>85</sup>

There are other reasons for believing that the great majority of literati may have had elite forebears, however, for Sung literati families were very large. *Chin-shih* had an average of more than three brothers each in 1148 and almost two in 1256, which means that their families were more than doubling in size with each generation.<sup>86</sup> Given such growth, the pressures of downward mobility were intense and produced an abundance of poor cousins of the rich and powerful, of families that had seen better days. Moreover, as we observed in Chapter 1 there is clear evidence of non-elite literati in the Southern Sung who aspired to elite status, adopted its values, invested in education, and tried to marry into its ranks. I would suggest that together, these ex-elite and non-elite families formed a considerable fringe about the edges of elite society. Most of them never succeeded and remain invisible to the historian. But their presence and constant pressure upon the local elites made achievement more important than ever. Unless a family could distinguish itself economically, socially, or educationally — through the examinations or scholarship — it ran the risk of sinking into that fringe.

### **Recruitment and the social order**

The dual trends that we have observed above — of an increasing reliance on facilitated degrees and protection as channels of bureaucratic recruitment on the one hand and of a manifold growth in the literati on the other — present us with an interesting paradox. Even as the examinations were becoming more popular they were becoming less important bureaucratically.

That the use of facilitated degrees and protection was on the rise is understandable. When examination candidates began outnumbering the available *chü-jen* positions by better than one hundred to one, even wealthy and renowned official families could no longer be sure that their sons would pass the examinations. The turn to privileged and/or easier methods of recruitment was thus natural and, as we will see in Chapter 5, occurred within the examination process as well.

But why did the great unsuccessful majority of literati put up with this situation? The conditions appear to have been ripe for a revolution of rising

expectations among the literati and for a subsequent frustration of those expectations. And indeed, Sung documents contain ample evidence of social strain engendered by the examinations, especially in the Southern Sung. It is hardly unanimous, for there were those who celebrated the academic climate of the day. Chou Pi-ta wrote in commemorating the renovation of a Chi-chou county school in 1198:

Now the dynasty has established schools, and the teachings of the Duke of Chou and Confucius have been illumined, the Way of Yao, Shun and King Wen has been met. Although those who are scholars register for examination occupation in order to enter the official class, they still live peacefully, fathers encouraging their sons, elder brothers encouraging their younger brothers. Beginning with sprinkling, sweeping and answering questions [i.e., the earliest stage of education], they are filled with filiality, fraternal love, loyalty and trustworthiness.<sup>87</sup>

And a couple of generations later, the encyclopedist Wang Ying-lin (1223–96) could write of Ming-chou:

In our town, since Ch'ing-li [1041–8], all of our elders have been pure and cultivated, and since the great Confucian unfolding of orthodox learning in Ch'ien-tao [1165–73] and Ch'un-hsi [1174–89],<sup>88</sup> filiality and brotherly love have been cultivated in families and humanity and obedience have flourished. Age and virtue have been exalted in the villages and customs have been rich. Principle and righteousness have been manifest in the heart and so sagely talent has been abundant.<sup>89</sup>

But such optimistic voices were rare. More common were those like Wang T'ing-chang (1086–41), an unsuccessful examination candidate noted for his lectures at community gatherings:

In recent generations, customs have decayed. Even among scholars who are related, evil has prospered and wrangling has upset the peace. They can almost be compared with hairs, those who dispute and fight within the [family] courtyard.<sup>90</sup>

As we will see in Chapter 4, the examinations were criticized for having perverted education, for making people study for the wrong reasons. The Hunanese philosopher Chang Shih (1133–80), unlike Chou and Wang Ying-lin, felt that heterodoxy was holding sway in the schools:

In general, since heretical doctrines became current, scholars have confused basic truths, texts have been selected to study [for the purpose of] excelling, and scholars have been interested in learning the vulgar. And in normal times when they gather and live together, how

much does their work become that of looking for ways to be selected [in the examinations] or scheming for profit?<sup>91</sup>

Not surprisingly, frustrations and anxieties were most evident at the examinations themselves. When candidates were numerous, just getting into the hall and finding a place became an accomplishment in itself, and at times violence could erupt. The examination riot described in Chapter 1 is the most dramatic example,<sup>92</sup> but there are also reports of people being trampled to death in the midst of commotion at the gates in T'an-chou in 1186 and Heng-chou (both in Ching-hu-nan) in 1210,<sup>93</sup> and Wang Yen-wu (1252–1324), who took the Chi-chou examinations as a youth, wrote of them: 'Every year, in the struggle at the gate [as people] pushed and fought to enter, there were those who were trampled to death.'<sup>94</sup>

But despite these disturbances, the many bitter attacks upon examination-oriented education, and complaints about the size of the bureaucracy, the Sung social order does not seem to have been threatened by its institutional tensions. Why this was will be a central concern of the subsequent chapters. Here I would merely suggest that the answer lay in the increasingly elaborate articulation of the examination life. As the *chin-shih* degree became more elusive, lesser successes gained in status and alternative roles became acceptable, from the respected retired scholar down to Yüan Ts'ai's doctors, monks, farmers and merchants. Academic promise, moreover, increased one's marriageability as well as one's chances of obtaining an influential sponsor. When one considers, finally, that the literatus's personal interests were held to be subservient to those of his family, then it is more understandable why individual frustrations were not, as a rule, translated into rebellion or violence.

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## FOR THE UTMOST GOVERNANCE: EXAMINATIONS IN THE EARLY SUNG

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### Sung examinations and the Confucian tradition

Philosophically and culturally, the Sung examination system was a curiously un-Confucian hybrid of Confucianism. It was an imperial creation and therefore reflected imperial interests which, as Joseph Levenson has shown so well, tended to be Legalist.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Confucianism loomed large within the system, most notably in the curriculum. The aspiring student, once he had worked through the primers, set out to master and memorize the huge corpus of classical Confucianism, and while candidates for the prestigious *chin-shih* degree were also examined on contemporary policy issues and poetry composition, the greatest part of their education was spent with these Confucian texts. Confucian principles also helped to justify the examination system. Confucius (550–479 B.C.) lived at a time when the aristocratic order of the early Chou was breaking down and rulers were increasingly looking to educated commoners and men of noble but humble birth for aid in governing. Although he viewed social hierarchy as natural, he also believed in the natural equality of people and held that rulers should select superior men of virtue and ability as ministers.<sup>2</sup> This idea was most clearly stated by Mencius: 'If a ruler gives honour to men of talents and employs the able, so that offices shall all be filled by individuals of distinction and mark; — then all the scholars of the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to stand in his court.'<sup>3</sup> Thus the examination system's ideal of selecting the best men to serve as officials was thoroughly Confucian.

Un-Confucian, however, were the Sung criteria used for selection: instead of virtue and ability, which required evaluation of an individual's character, memory and the literary skills of argumentation and poesy were used, which did not. Indeed, as we will see, the early Sung emperors' concern for impartiality and fairness (*kung*) meant that character could not be seriously considered in the examinations. Yet the eminent eleventh century Confucian Chang Tsai (1020–77) argued that the truly moral route to government was by the kin-based privilege of protection (*yin*), which had been used by

rulers 'to select men of achievement and honor men of virtue, to love them and treat them generously, so as to show that their imperial kindness is unlimited.'<sup>4</sup> Scholars pursuing the examinations, however,

. . . do not realize that selecting an official position is incompatible with moral principles. On the contrary they look down upon those who follow principles as incompetent. They do not realize that hereditary principles are a glory. On the contrary, they consider a hollow fame as a good way to continue the accomplishment of their ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

Although this passage is taken from a famous twelfth century anthology of Neo-Confucian writings, Chang's view was not generally accepted. Still it demonstrates that the examinations were vulnerable to Confucian attack. For in the *impersonality* of the examinations lay the danger of producing alienated and selfish men pursuing 'hollow fame.' Thus the vehicle of Confucian orthodoxy was open to the charge of making men un-Confucian.

Finally, un-Confucian were the political uses to which the examinations were put, for they were made to serve imperial, regional, and elite interests. Quite overt in the opening decades of the Sung when institutional patterns were taking shape, in later times these uses were often disguised as logical, integral parts of the examination system. This is not to deny the impersonal and universalistic norms that have long impressed both Chinese and foreign students of the examination system; in fact, those norms were largely Sung creations. It simply means that politics mattered. As we shall see in this and the following two chapters, the development and evolution of the Sung examination system involved unceasing interaction between it and the social and political forces of the day.

### **Examinations under the early emperors**

The examination system that the Sung founder Chao K'uang-yin (the emperor T'ai-tsü, r. 960–76) inherited from the Latter Chou dynasty (951–60) was a far cry from that which flourished later in his family's reign or, for that matter, from that of its antecedent in the T'ang.<sup>6</sup> In theory it was much like the T'ang system, with annual examinations, a variety of degrees, and small numbers of graduates, but in practice the wars of the tenth century had taken their toll upon both examinations and literati. The lack of standards was such that in one examination candidates were ordered to box each other,<sup>7</sup> while in another, in 975, the lack of *military* prowess among 270 specially recommended *chü-jen* from P'u-chou in Ching-tung-hsi so exasperated T'ai-tsü that he threatened to have them all conscripted into the army. When they tearfully begged for mercy he dismissed them but ordered that the prefectural officials who had recommended them be punished.<sup>8</sup>

T'ai-tsú was well aware of the potential importance of the examinations. In 962 he declared:

The country has fastened upon examinations to select scholars, choosing men to become officials. Since picking and ranking men in the public court is preferable to [receiving their] thanks for favors in private halls, this will serve to rectify customs that have been lacking.<sup>9</sup>

On another occasion he said, 'For chief councilors one must use men of learning (*tu-shu-jen*).'<sup>10</sup> Most significantly, in 973 he initiated a palace examination (*tien-shih, yü-shih*) under his own personal supervision as the final stage in the examination process, thereby elevating the examinations from a purely internal affair of the civil service to one emanating from the Son of Heaven himself.<sup>11</sup> However, apart from this innovation T'ai-tsú left the examinations unchanged, for he was preoccupied by other matters: the expeditions against the Khitans to the northeast, the conquest of the southern kingdoms, and the problem of controlling the northern generals out of whose ranks he himself had risen.

So it was only after the accession of T'ai-tsú's younger, more bookish brother, T'ai-tsung (r. 976–97), when the reunification of the empire was virtually complete, that the dramatic transformation of the examinations began. Early in 977 T'ai-tsung proclaimed:

I wish to search broadly for the superior and accomplished within the examination halls. I dare not aspire to select five out of ten, but if only one or two [out of ten] are chosen, even that may be considered preparation for the utmost governance.<sup>12</sup>

In the following days, 109 *chin-shih*, 207 *chu-k'o*, and 184 facilitated degrees were given.<sup>13</sup> Even without counting the facilitated degrees, this was more degrees than had been given during the entire sixteen years of T'ai-tsú's reign.<sup>14</sup> This action did not escape criticism; the scholarly privy councilor Hsüeh Chu-cheng protested that 'If the selection of men is excessive, the employment of men will [increase] too rapidly.'<sup>15</sup> But T'ai-tsung persevered and in subsequent years continued to grant large numbers of degrees. In fact, in retrospect it is clear that the 977 examination marked a major change in government recruitment patterns. During the Five Dynasties, an average of 33.0 degrees were given each year, with 12.5 of them *chin-shih* degrees.<sup>16</sup> Under T'ai-tsú the average fell to 19.2, while 10.2 of them were *chin-shih*.<sup>17</sup> By comparison, during the period 977–1271 an average of 192 regular (i.e., non-facilitated) degrees were given, of which 141 were *chin-shih*.<sup>18</sup> In addition, facilitated degrees, for which we have only incomplete records, accounted for at least another 120 degrees per year.

The initial effect of the expansion in degree numbers was to throw examination practices into disarray. There was an immediate growth in candidate numbers: whereas approximately 5,200 men took the departmental examination (*sheng-shih*) in K'ai-feng in 977,<sup>19</sup> 10,260 took it in 982<sup>20</sup> and 17,300 in 992.<sup>21</sup> Severe stresses were placed upon the now antiquated examination machinery which, with few precedents to rely upon, operated erratically. Examinations were variously held every year, every other year, every third year, and once, from 992 to 998, there was a six-year hiatus.<sup>22</sup> Degree numbers also varied greatly. For example, in A.D. 1000 over 1,500 degrees, 409 of them *chin-shih*, were given, more than in any other year in Chinese history.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, in reaction to this flooding of the bureaucratic pool, only 38 *chin-shih* and 186 *chu-k'o* degrees were given, a drop which met with the popular protest described at the beginning of the book.

Why did T'ai-tsung increase degree numbers so sharply? A century later Ssu-ma Kuang suggested that it was 'to promote civil culture and restrain military affairs.'<sup>24</sup> Wang Yung in the thirteenth century ascribed it to the large number of positions which were vacant in the newly expanded empire.<sup>25</sup> And Ch'en Tung-yüan in this century has argued that T'ai-tsung was attempting to gain the allegiance of the scholarly class.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the need both for control and to provide opportunity were involved.

In the early years of the Sung, when it was still just another northern dynasty attempting to consolidate its position, the issue of control was paramount, for its rivals were legion and powerful: foreign states, generals, and wealthy merchant and military families. To that end, the dynasty's power over office-holding was crucial, its primary carrot to balance its military stick. What is remarkable about the early Sung emperors is that they used that power not so much to selectively employ and coopt their rivals as to win the allegiance of the empire's scholarly families. They were attempting to create a meritocratic elite beholden to the emperor and large enough so that its own most powerful members could not threaten the dynasty. This policy was visible in T'ai-ts'u's creation of the palace examination, for as Japanese historians have long pointed out, that served to further imperial power:

The creation of the palace examination as the final examination, given directly under the emperor's personal supervision, . . . was a necessary step in the strengthening of imperial autocracy.<sup>27</sup>

The policy was perhaps most evident in T'ai-tsung's opening of the examination floodgates in 977, but it did not stop with that. In the succeeding decades as the examination system adapted to cope with the new demands placed upon it, the meritocratic principle of fair impartiality informed its

development.<sup>28</sup> And although that impartiality was ultimately compromised and subverted, the attempt to create a meritocratic order was nevertheless remarkable.

### Institutional innovations

As *chü-jen* began to flood K'ai-feng and threaten the archaic examination system in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the government instituted a number of reforms designed to make the examinations impartial, equitable, and manageable. Most renowned of these were the measures designed to insure the anonymity of the candidate. In 992 the practice of covering up the names on the examination papers (*feng-mi* or *hu-ming*) was initiated for the palace examinations.<sup>29</sup> This was extended to the departmental examination in 1007<sup>30</sup> and to the prefectoral examinations in 1033.<sup>31</sup> As an added precaution against the possible recognition of calligraphy, beginning in 1015 clerks copied out the examination papers in the palace and departmental examinations and examiners read only the copies.<sup>32</sup> This practice, known as *t'eng-lu*, was extended to the prefectoral examinations in 1037.<sup>33</sup>

These procedures constituted a sharp break with the past. During the T'ang it was deemed not only permissible but desirable for candidates to submit samples of their prose and poetry to examiners before the examinations, so that both reputation and character could be taken into account.<sup>34</sup> During the early Sung this practice had been continued in the form of poetical compositions called 'public essays' (*kung-chüan*) which *chü-jen* had to present to the Board of Rites upon their arrival in K'ai-feng so that the Board could 'pick those with reputations.' But in 1041 the essays were discontinued on the grounds that covered names and copied examinations had made them unnecessary.<sup>35</sup>

Why, apart from providing seasonal employment for thousands of clerks, did the Sung give up such eminently Confucian considerations as an individual's character and reputation? Discussing the use of covered names in 1007, the emperor Chen-tsung (r. 997–1022) declared that 'We must strive for the utmost fairness [*chih-kung*] and select the cultivated amongst the poor landlords [i.e., humble scholars].'<sup>36</sup> A year later he remarked that southern scholars were delighted with the 'complete fairness' of covered names.<sup>37</sup> We shall see in Chapter 4 that these practices were briefly challenged in the late Northern Sung, but thereafter the policy of absolute impartiality in the grading process was maintained.

The problem of scheduling the examinations was also resolved, though slightly later. Through the first half of the eleventh century, two-, three-, and four-year intervals were all tried, until in 1066 a three-year period was

decided upon,<sup>38</sup> and this remained the standard up until the examinations were abolished in 1905, providing for Chinese society a distinctive triennial periodicity. One suspects antiquarian motives, for according to the Han dynasty *Classic of Etiquette and Ceremonial*, during the Chou 'district wine-drinking ceremonies' (*hsiang yin-chiu li*) were held every three years,<sup>39</sup> and that, according to later Sung interpretations, was held on the occasion of the triennial 'great comparison' (*ta-pi* – a colloquial Sung term for the examinations), at which the census was taken and tribute men were sent for service to the government.<sup>40</sup> The reasons actually given were more prosaic but instructive.<sup>41</sup> A four-year period was thought too long, providing insufficient incentive for study and encouraging idleness. The two-year period, however, had been tried from 1057 to 1065 and had created difficulty for literati from distant prefectures who had had to spend much of their time in travel. Thus three years was settled upon, with the autumn and winter of one year devoted to qualifying examinations, spring of the next year to the capital examinations, and with no examinations at all in the third year.

During the early Northern Sung, the examinations also underwent a major structural change: the development of the prefectoral examination (*chieh-shih*) into a major part of the examination system. At the dynasty's outset, prefectoral examination procedures specified that *chin-shih* candidates be tested by the staff supervisor (*p'an-kuan*) and that of *chu-k'o* candidates by the executive inspector (*lu-shih ts'an-chun*). Qualification was determined by the number of questions correctly answered and all candidates who qualified were permitted to go to the capital as *chü-jen*.<sup>42</sup> This alone marked a major break with the past, for in the T'ang the number of 'district tribute' scholars (*hsiang-kung*) a prefecture could send to the capital depended upon its bureaucratic status: superior, middling and inferior prefectures respectively sent three, two and one a year.<sup>43</sup> But further changes followed as the numbers of *chü-jen* escalated in the late tenth century.

In 997, a quota-ratio of two *chü-jen* (who had to have qualified) for every ten candidates was decreed, thereby making the prefectoral examination more selective, at least in theory, for it no longer consisted merely of sorting out the qualified from the unqualified.<sup>44</sup> In fact, one finds complaints in subsequent years that unqualified *chü-jen* were being sent to the capital, but these stop after the early decades of the eleventh century.<sup>45</sup> Presumably, advances in education had created a surplus of qualified candidates.

In 1009, direct quotas were substituted for quota-ratios in determining how many *chü-jen* each prefecture was permitted.<sup>46</sup> The quotas were based upon a standard quota-ratio and candidate statistics from recent examinations and, as we saw in Chapter 2, they were readjusted from time to time.<sup>47</sup>

There remained, then, a relationship between *chü-jen* and prefectoral candidate numbers, although since special quota increases were granted frequently to individual prefectures, quotas could easily be changed for extraneous reasons, such as rewarding prefectures through which the emperor had passed on a trip<sup>48</sup> or favoring localities that were either backward or strategic militarily.<sup>49</sup> But even with these exceptions, the principle of fairness was not forgotten. In 1037, for example, the emperor ordered a return to the old prefectoral quotas because the current ad hoc quotas were 'unfair' or 'unequal' (*pu-chiin*).<sup>50</sup>

Two further developments in the prefectoral examinations should be mentioned. As early as 972, the government tried to require that *chü-jen* be selected only in their home prefectures (though they could petition for a waiver).<sup>51</sup> A complaint from 992 concerning frequent violations of this rule<sup>52</sup> and a further prohibition in 1015<sup>53</sup> suggest what we shall see below, that the problem of residency was controversial and intractable. But the court's determination to curtail the more lenient T'ang practice is clear.<sup>54</sup> Second, as was noted above the use of covered names and copied examinations was extended to the prefectoral examinations during the 1030s, so that they mirrored the capital examinations in their formality and impersonality.

Like the thread that tied Confucius's teachings together, the common theme behind these reforms was the provision of opportunity. If the examinations were truly to select the cultivated and talented, they would have to attract men from throughout the empire and avoid being monopolized by the powerful. One need not ascribe altruistic motives to the emperors, for the control of powerful families and the political integration of the empire that could result from the realization of this policy were quite practical goals. Nor should we think that they were trying to draw from all levels of society, for as we now turn to the question of becoming a candidate, it should become clear that their intentions were somewhat more limited.

### Qualifying for candidacy

In 1149 the emperor Kao-tsung (r. 1127–62) issued an edict outlining the steps that local officials were to take in determining who was eligible for the examinations.<sup>55</sup> Prefectural and county officials, operating through the county schools, were to draw up a list with the names of those who would be taking the examinations by the second month of 1150, the year when the qualifying examinations would be held. County officials were to obtain each would-be candidate's family guarantee certificate (*chia-pao-chuang*), which gave such information as the candidate's ancestry and residence, and deliver them to the prefectoral officials for forwarding to the prefectoral school (*chou-hsüeh*). The school personnel would verify the

information in the certificates and report to the preceptor (*chiao-shou*), who would then guarantee the candidates. This would allow them to participate in the district wine drinking ceremony and they could then take the examinations.<sup>56</sup>

It is clear from this edict, the only description of the preparation of candidate lists that has survived, that that process was elaborate and time consuming, involving large numbers of people who would then be responsible for their veracity, and placing great weight upon the respectability of the candidates' families. But this account says nothing about the criteria used for judging families or individuals and for our purposes, that issue is critical. For knowing how 'broadly' the dynasty intended to 'search for the superior and accomplished' is surely essential to any understanding of the social context of the examinations.

In this regard, a proposal from 1044 for reforming the examinations by the Han-lin academician, Sung Ch'i (998–1061), is revealing.<sup>57</sup> It suggested, in part, that candidacy be limited to students who had attended a government school for at least three hundred days and past *chü-jen* with one hundred days of attendance as of the day before autumn taxes were due, though special exceptions were made for only sons and for relatives accompanying officials who were stationed away from their homes.<sup>58</sup> Once the *chü-jen* were selected they were to be grouped into mutual guarantee groups of three men each. If any of the following seven conditions was later discovered, the offender was to be exiled to the border regions and the other two were to be barred from the next two examinations:

- 1 One was secretly mourning (*yin yu ni fu*).
- 2 One had a criminal record (*tseng fan hsing-tse*).
- 3 There were allegations or evidence of unfilial, unfraternal behavior.
- 4 One had violated regulations either twice with redemptions made or once without having made redemption and having harmed one's community.<sup>59</sup>
- 5 One was not a resident of the prefecture but had falsified one's household or taken the name of another person.
- 6 One's father or grandfather had committed any of the first four of the Ten Abominations (*shih-o*).<sup>60</sup>
- 7 One was an artisan, merchant or clerk<sup>61</sup> or had been a Buddhist or Taoist priest.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, local officials were to investigate the background of each *chü-jen* as well, making sure that none of the above conditions held.

Although Sung Ch'i's full proposal criticized past practices and was only briefly enacted,<sup>63</sup> his approach to candidacy reflects three concerns that were already well developed in the examination regulations. First, the

candidate should not have practiced certain undesirable occupations. Second, his residence had to be where he claimed it was and he had to take the examinations in his home prefecture, unless he had some acceptable reason for taking it elsewhere. Third and most important, he had to be of good character.

### Occupational prohibitions

The occupational prohibitions had their origin in the years following the expansion of the examinations. In 983, in response to reports that recent *chü-jen* had included many Buddhist and Taoist monks in their ranks, all present and former monks were barred from the examinations.<sup>64</sup> ‘They only understand yellow-silk [i.e., religious] doctrines and do not know the meaning of the classics. How could they govern men?’ stated the proclamation.<sup>65</sup> In 989, following a report that a clerk in the Secretariat-Chancellery had received a degree, clerks were also barred,<sup>66</sup> and three years later a more sweeping prohibition mentioned artisans, merchants and clerks, as well as the diseased and those with criminal records.<sup>67</sup> There was a loophole in this last prohibition, however:

If among the artisans, merchants and clerks, there are those whose talent and conduct are unusual, who eminently stand out from the crowd, then they may qualify and be selected.<sup>68</sup>

These prohibitions, which spanned less than a decade, are remarkable when taken together, for the groups involved were all potential rivals to the literati. The monks and clerks constituted two large and predominantly literate groups, the one with a great popular following and the resources of the monastic estates behind it, the other with its bureaucratic expertise and considerable local power. Similarly, the wealthier among the merchants and artisans exercised great economic power. Yet the significance of these prohibitions is not that they denied advancement to the families engaged in these occupations, for they did not. One’s social background was irrelevant, at least in the eyes of the government. Rather, the government was insisting that those who wished to take the examinations become literati by receiving the education and assimilating the values of scholars. Its cultural aim was to civilize and unify those diverse and rather uncivil elites that had emerged during the disorders of the preceding century.

Not surprisingly, this process entailed changes in occupational status. As that of the literati rose, those of the prohibited occupations fell. Sung Shee has observed that an official’s engaging in commerce, which was socially tolerated at the dynasty’s outset, was by the reign of Jen-tsung (1023–64) considered unacceptable.<sup>69</sup> Even more noteworthy was the altered status of clerks, for during the T’ang the clerk/official, *liu-wai/liu-nei* distinction,

though important, was blurred, both because many clerks were appointed as minor officials and because officials frequently began their careers in clerical jobs.<sup>70</sup> The result of the Sung prohibitions was to constitute clerks as a separate class, isolated from the officials administratively and socially. To quote Ma Tuan-lin, the thirteenth century encyclopedist:

Confucian scholars [*Ju*] and clerks have divided into two paths. The scholars take themselves to be cultivated and disparage the clerks as vulgar . . . The clerks take themselves to be knowledgeable and ridicule the scholars as impractical . . . Thus those who cherish and superficial and are unknowledgeable revert to the scholar's [path]; those who are wasteful and without shame revert to the clerk's [path]. Yet both paths are unsatisfactory for obtaining men.<sup>71</sup>

An intriguing feature of the prohibitions is that they ceased after a time. They were restated in the 1044 reform proposal quoted above, but thereafter, except for a passing reference from 1064,<sup>72</sup> the only official mention of the prohibitions that I have found is from 1118, when the 989 prohibition of clerks was cited in a bitter complaint about eunuchs receiving degrees. The complaint was to no avail and the account ends: 'By this time the excellent law of the founding emperors was lost.'<sup>73</sup> This silence may reflect the disuse of the prohibitions or, alternatively, their routine use. But in either case I would submit that their aims had largely been achieved by the late Northern Sung. The examinations had become a focal point of elite culture, schools had multiplied to accommodate the greater demand for education, and the increasing difficulty of the examinations helped to insure that preparing for them was a full-time occupation. Thus the groups in question no longer threatened the literati and the promise, at least, of social mobility through education and the examinations could be countenanced, for these endeavors only reinforced the literati's now dominant position.

### **Residency requirements**

In contrast to the occupational prohibitions, the provisions dealing with residency appeared throughout the dynasty. The basic dilemma they confronted was simple: the government wanted people to take the examinations only in their home prefectures, but many would move and then try to take them in their new prefectures. Although this group probably comprised only a small proportion of all the candidates, they were too numerous to be ignored, especially during the Northern Sung when they congregated very visibly in K'ai-feng. The result was a great deal of vacillation by the government as strict regulations alternated with more lenient ones.

It had long been a practice for prominent families to be associated with

specific places, usually counties. From the Six Dynasties to the T'ang, these place-names or choronyms (*chiün-wang*, *pen-wang*) were used to identify the families such as the Lis of Chao-chün or the Changs of Ch'ing-ho. They denoted not where a person lived but his ancestral home, and the two frequently differed. According to David Johnson, however, by the tenth century 'the nature of choronyms had changed from the traditional clan identification to a more purely geographical one.'<sup>74</sup> With this went a change in terminology; the earlier terms, which had connotations of social superiority,<sup>75</sup> gave way to the more value-free 'native place' (*pen-kuan*).

Although this new choronym primarily denoted residence, the older notion of ancestral homes did not disappear entirely. When people moved and settled in a different county, their 'native place' remained the same and they were considered to be temporarily residing (*yü-chi*) in their new homes. Such people worried the examination officials. On the one hand, the officials generally suspected them of moving for selfish reasons (better educational opportunities, easier quotas, etc.) and therefore tried to bar them from the examinations. On the other hand, not only were the temporary residents too numerous (and sometimes too well connected) to be ignored, but it was also recognized that at some point they had to be considered permanent residents, or at least be allowed to take the examinations.

Just where that point lay was a source of frequent contention and contradictory edicts, so we cannot identify a single set of requirements. However, three factors were considered both relevant and important. First was household registration (*hu-chi*), which required the ownership of a house and/or land on which taxes were paid. Its importance, even for those who had not moved, is indicated by an edict from 1041 which provided that those who had not originally had a household but had now purchased taxable property and those who had taxable property but had sold it be allowed to take the examinations, so long as they were guaranteed by a capital-grade official.<sup>76</sup> We should note the assumption that a candidate would normally be a property-owner or from a property-owning family. Since buying property enabled one to register one's household, it was an essential step in establishing temporary residency, and as such concerned examination officials. Yet the government had no consistent policy regarding it. Sometimes aspiring candidates were prohibited from registering their households away from their native places;<sup>77</sup> at other times, the examinations were opened to those who had moved and registered in the past<sup>78</sup> or even to those who had no registration so long as they obtained special guarantees.<sup>79</sup>

Ancestral tombs were a second factor. Their main importance for the examinations lay in demonstrating that a given place was one's ancestral home, that one was a native. Such demonstrations, of course, could be

fraudulent. One Southern Sung complaint describes students going to distant prefectures where competition was relatively light and claiming old military graves as the tombs of their ancestors.<sup>80</sup> In another case, bookstores were reported to be selling lists of those buried in lineage cemeteries, enabling the buyers to fabricate genealogies and falsely claim residency.<sup>81</sup> But on at least one occasion, in 1058, ancestral graves were used to help legitimize a change in residency: 'Among those who have had a household residence for seven years, those who own no house or fields and yet have ancestral graves are permitted [to take the examinations].'<sup>82</sup>

The third factor, as this last quotation suggests, was that of time or length of residency. As competition in the examinations increased, concerns were voiced about students opportunistically moving to where they were easier and taking them there. Some argued for a return to the non-mobile conditions of antiquity by requiring that candidates only take the examinations in the prefectures of their native places. In 1222 the Right Policy Monitor Hsi Kai-ch'ing contended that only by insisting that literati not move about could the empire 'nourish the skills of the many literati and enrich the customs.'<sup>83</sup>

But the prevailing opinion was more tolerant of movement, for Sung elite society was quite mobile. Not only were officials constantly moving about, often with family and relatives accompanying them, but as we shall shortly see, Northern Sung K'ai-feng acted as a magnet to literati throughout the empire. And of course the Southern Sung empire was full of refugee scholars from the north who could not possibly return to their native places. We shall see in Chapter 7 that there remained a feeling of considerable disdain towards what was regarded as the needless travel of 'wandering literati' (*yu-shih*), but a family's move from one place to another was more tolerantly regarded. As one official wrote in 1177:

I would suggest that when the country makes laws it tries to [provide] convenience [for] the people. If there are households that wish to settle in [more] spacious neighborhoods, then they should be permitted to do what is convenient.<sup>84</sup>

### **Character qualifications**

While occupation and residency were matters of concern in Sung Ch'i's reform proposal, his central objective was to keep out any with past histories of criminality or immorality (especially unfiliality). Such a concern with character is neither surprising (most institutions have character qualifications in one form or other) nor was it isolated. In 1000, an edict ordering an investigation into the backgrounds of all K'ai-feng *chü-jen* stated that, 'There are those whose literary skills are acceptable but whose uprightness of character

is wanting, [who do things] like writing and sending anonymous and spurious attacks on their superiors.' Any such who were discovered were to be barred forever from the examinations.<sup>85</sup> In a similar proclamation in 1026 which expressed alarm at moral defects among officials, prefectoral officials were ordered to examine their *chü-jen* and not send up any who displayed 'manifestations of perversity'.<sup>86</sup> Again in 1057 the court specified that county officials check on the past conduct of candidates and report on it to the officials.<sup>87</sup>

It is possible from the examination records to get some idea as to just what kinds of behavior were considered especially reprehensible. Unfilial or anti-family behavior drew predictably harsh condemnation. A memorial from 1029 describes two cases of literati illicitly attempting to gain K'ai-feng residency by making false kinship claims. One claimed his older brother (a K'ai-feng landowner) as father; the other, a Wang, claimed to be a member of the Chi family with which he was staying and took their ancestral names as his own taboo names. Stated the outraged memorialist: 'I have never seen anything so damaging to filial conduct as this example of changing personal taboos.'<sup>88</sup> Less predictable and thus more interesting was the outcome of the case of thirteen *chü-jen* from K'ai-feng who, after unsuccessfully attempting the departmental examination in 1014, were accused of being only temporary residents of the capital. The men fled the city, were captured and jailed. The Chief Councilor Wang Tan (957–1017) protested, however, saying that having them in jail was damaging to the country's customs. In a personal judgement, the emperor Chen-tsung (r. 998–1022) forgave the thirteen and then sent their accuser Liu Kai, a K'ai-feng native who had passed the examinations, into exile to a distant prefecture where he was to be kept under guard. The reason given, when this decision was itself protested, was that Liu's accusation had occurred only after the examination results were announced and thus had been selfish or un-public spirited (*fei kung-hsin*).<sup>89</sup> This reason, which invoked the same *kung* that we earlier encountered as 'fair', is instructive, for it suggests that disruptions of social harmony for selfish purposes were regarded as worse than fraudulent claims of residency in K'ai-feng.

Curiously, measures for investigating the past conduct of candidates ceased after 1057; at least I have found no later instances of them.<sup>90</sup> It may be that character requirements were difficult to enforce and therefore not stressed in later years, but in all likelihood they remained in effect, for obviously no emperor was going to welcome immoral candidates. Moreover, the most important method of assuring the respectability, at least, of candidates remained in effect, and that was the guarantee.

At least three different kinds of guarantees were used in the examinations

at one time or another. One was the mutual guarantee group of *chü-jen*, in which each was responsible for the background and/or behavior of the others. Sung Ch'i's proposed groups of three actually represented a decrease from current practices, for earlier in the eleventh century groups of five were used.<sup>91</sup> In the Southern Sung there was a great latitude in numbers, which ranged from three to twenty. There was also a difference in emphasis, for whereas Sung Ch'i was concerned primarily with the backgrounds of *chü-jen*, twelfth-century officials were more concerned with cheating and rowdy behavior in the examinations.<sup>92</sup> Second were the guarantees required of those given special dispensations in the examinations, such as temporary residents of K'ai-feng who took the K'ai-feng prefectural examination or relatives of officials who took a special avoidance examination, who were typically required to get guarantees from two executors rank officials. But these cases, which did not concern character per se, will be dealt with later, so we will not consider them further here.

The third form of guarantee was the family guarantee certificate (*chia-pao-chuang*) provided by the family and endorsed by the prefectural school preceptor (an official) described in the 1149 provisions cited earlier. As Araki Toshikazu has shown, these commonly involved guarantees or recommendations by community notables as well.<sup>93</sup> Although we have no descriptions of these certificates, it seems that they consisted of biographical data: one's age, marital status, residence (including temporary residence when that were applicable), the names of one's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather and their official ranks, if any, a statement on whether one's father and mother were still living, and the number of brothers that one had.<sup>94</sup> In 1186 complaints about the counterfeiting of kinship and residency information led to the requirement that the branches of one's lineage be identified as well and that the certificate be guaranteed by one's eldest living ancestor (*tseng-tsu*, literally 'great-grandfather').<sup>95</sup> Thus this was designed more to guarantee the respectability of the candidate and his family than to provide assurances of his good character, although in many cases that distinction may have become blurred.

The social and political significance of these guarantees for candidacy is a matter of some interest. Robert Hymes has argued that they served as a mechanism for the political self-perpetuation of the local elite, since the guarantees had to come from the elite which could refuse them to those who were not elite.<sup>96</sup> He presents little evidence, however, to show that the guarantees were actually used in an exclusionary fashion.<sup>97</sup> During the Southern Sung, at least, the huge candidate numbers common to much of the southeast and anecdotal literature describing candidates coming from non-elite families of doctors and nouveaux riches merchants,<sup>98</sup> indicate that

qualifying for the examinations was neither an exclusive privilege nor an insurmountable problem for non-elite literati. Although some connection to the elite was undoubtedly necessary in order to obtain a guarantee, elite patronage of promising students as well as plain money could serve as well as ties of kinship or marriage in securing guarantees. The elite indeed used the examinations for their own self-perpetuation, as we shall see, but they did this through privileged movement through the examinations rather than by controlling entrance to them.

### The role of K'ai-feng

During the Northern Sung, there was one apparent exception to the early emperors' policy of fairness and impartiality in the examinations: the literati of K'ai-feng were treated differently. Much as it commanded the empire militarily, this sprawling metropolis which was at once the center of a thriving northern Chinese economy and a rapidly growing national economy, dominated the examinations and the bureaucracy.<sup>99</sup> In 998 when fifty-one *chin-shih* degrees were conferred, for example, K'ai-feng residents accounted for thirteen of the first fourteen places and a comparable proportion of the subsequent twenty-five.<sup>100</sup> Even more impressive are the statistics from a 1064 essay by Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–86) in which K'ai-feng accounts for a quarter to a third of all *chin-shih* in the examinations of 1059, 1061 and 1063.<sup>101</sup> And if we include *chü-jen* from the Directorate of Education (*Kuo-tzu-chien*) initial examination, then we find that the capital accounted for as many as one half of all *chin-shih* (see Table 9).

This record of success appears not to have been the result of outstanding accomplishments by K'ai-feng natives, but rather reflects the achievements of those who settled there. Edward Kracke, Jr., has observed that

In the realms of thought, literature and scholarship the natives of K'ai-feng did not seem outstanding among Sung Chinese. But the Northern Sung capital seems to have drawn outstanding minds to itself rather more than its Southern Sung counterpart would do.<sup>102</sup>

To fully explain why this was the case is beyond the scope of the present study, for it was related to a general decentralization of power from Northern to Southern Sung observable in politics, society, the military and the economy.<sup>103</sup> Our concern, rather, is with the role played by the examinations, and it was substantial.

Northern Sung records make it clear that taking the initial examinations in K'ai-feng was regarded as highly desirable. Lü Pen-chung (1048–1145) tells a story of Li Chün-hsing (Li Ch'ien, a 1064–7 *chin-shih*), an official from Ch'ien-chou in southern Chiang-nan-hsi who was making a trip to the

Table 9. Percentages of *chin-shih* in 1059, 1061 and 1063 who had passed the K'ai-feng and Directorate of Education examinations

	1059		1061		1063	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total <i>chin-shih</i> numbers</b>						
numbers	165		183		193	
K'ai-feng pref. examination	44	26.7%	69	37.7%	66	34.2%
Directorate examination	22	13.3%	28	15.3%	30	15.5%
Capital examinations total	66	40.0%	97	43.0%	96	49.7%

Sources: Ssu-ma Kuang, *Ssu-ma kung wen-chi*; WHTK 32:306 for degree numbers.

capital. His brothers and sons wanted to go too and their reason was that: 'The examinations are imminent. We want to proceed first to the capital, establish residence in K'ai-feng, and take them there.' Chün-hsing was scandalized: 'You are men of Ch'ien-chou but would establish residence in K'ai-feng. Can it be that you seek to serve as rulers yet would first cheat the ruler? I would rather that you delayed [your success] for several years. You may not go.'<sup>104</sup> Most literati, however, were not as high minded as Chün-hsing, who is described elsewhere as 'regarding the avoidance of covetousness to be the basis of learning,'<sup>105</sup> for again and again one finds complaints and measures dealing with the problem of provincial literati improperly claiming K'ai-feng residency.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the problem of defining the meaning of residency which we discussed above arose because of the desire by literati to settle in K'ai-feng and take the examinations there.

What made the K'ai-feng examinations so attractive? Su Sung (1019–1101) explained it in terms of quota differentials:

In the selection of candidates by the prefectures of the empire, local aspirants are many and quotas are small. [Students] frequently go to the capital to study and then request residency. There is no greater problem with prefectural selection than this. Although the court sends out stern warnings, it has not been able to stop them, for the aspirants in K'ai-feng are not many [yet] the quota has expanded until it has reached one hundred.<sup>107</sup>

But this explanation is not entirely convincing, for while K'ai-feng's quota dwarfed all others, numbering 335 at its peak in 1075,<sup>108</sup> so too did its candidate numbers. In fact, the quota ratios used for determining *chü-jen* quotas were consistently more stringent for K'ai-feng and the Directorate than they were for the empire at large.<sup>109</sup>

K'ai-feng and the Directorate of Education were, to be sure, the frequent recipients of imperial largess, and this may have had a significant impact on their examination fortunes. In 1008, 1011 and 1014, for example, special initial examinations were held in K'ai-feng and other prefectures through which the emperor Chen-tsung (r. 998–1022) had passed in the course of imperial trips.<sup>110</sup> Much more common were special exemptions from the initial examinations granted to past *chü-jen* from K'ai-feng, allowing them to proceed directly to the departmental examinations.<sup>111</sup> While other places such as Ho-pei (the scene of frequent fighting with the Liao), Ssu-ch'uan and Kuang-nan were also frequently favored in exemption announcements, none could compare with the capital.<sup>112</sup>

Largess aside, the explanation for the capital's success would appear to lie in less tangible factors such as the quality of the education to be had there, particularly the kind of examination preparation that one could only do in a social milieu which included many of the examiners themselves. This is the substance of Ssu-ma Kuang's oft-quoted explanation for K'ai-feng's residency problem:

In this dynasty's system for employing men, unless one is a *chin-shih* one will not become an outstanding official; unless one is good at poetry, discussions and policy questions, one will not obtain a *chin-shih* degree; and unless one goes and studies in the capital, one will not become good in poetry, discussions and policy questions. For this reason, the scholars of the four quarters are all made to abandon their homes, illegally leave their parents, and grow old in the capital without ever returning again.<sup>113</sup>

Ssu-ma's own figures on the examinations of 1059, 1061 and 1063 lend qualified support to this thesis, for whereas only one in thirty or worse of *chü-jen* from the north, southwest and far south (he provides no figures for the rapidly developing southeast) received *chin-shih* degrees in those examinations, the ratio for K'ai-feng and the Directorate ranged from one in six to one in four.<sup>114</sup> The fact that *chü-jen* from the capital outshone most of their provincial peers goes far towards explaining the allure of K'ai-feng among Sung literati.

K'ai-feng was not equally accessible to all literati, however, for there is reason to believe that the Directorate and K'ai-feng examinations were predominantly patronized by the relatives of officials, especially during the early Northern Sung. Prior to 1042 the Directorate of Education served as a school for the instruction of the sons and grandsons not merely of any officials, but of 'court and capital rank officials of the seventh rank and above'.<sup>115</sup> In 975 when the school's student quota was set at seventy, that

rule was breached slightly as *chü-jen* in the capital area were permitted to fill unoccupied places at the school,<sup>116</sup> although it is unlikely that this provided much opportunity for literati from commoner backgrounds. Almost seventy years later, reformers criticized the Directorate as a place where as many as a thousand would appear to enrol at examination time, only to disappear afterwards. Such was the popularity of the Directorate examination, moreover, that many falsely claimed official relatives of the seventh grade or above. To remedy this situation, in 1042 the government established the School of the Four Gates (*Ssu-men-hsüeh*) for those from commoner and low grade official families, with admission determined by an annual entrance examination (*pu-shih*).<sup>117</sup> This was replaced in 1044 by the Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*), and it soon developed into the premier educational institution at the capital.<sup>118</sup> But the 'national youth' (*kuo-tzu*) category remained for children of higher officials, at times as students of the Directorate School usually called the *Kuo-tzu-hsüeh* and at other times as a group with privileged entry into the University.<sup>119</sup>

The K'ai-feng prefectural examination, by contrast, was used by three different groups of literati. First were those whose families were truly native to K'ai-feng, and they undoubtedly contained a fair share of those with commoner backgrounds. But since as we observed above, K'ai-feng natives did not play a prominent role in K'ai-feng's examination successes, those commoner literati could not have been a very significant group. Second were those whose families had come to K'ai-feng for reasons of state and then settled there, thus qualifying them for the K'ai-feng examination. Most notable among them was that group described by Robert Hartwell as the 'professional elite' which dominated the eleventh-century civil service.<sup>120</sup> One suspects that they dominated the K'ai-feng examination as well, but they did not monopolize it, for the third group consisted of literati drawn to K'ai-feng by the examinations. What is interesting about this group, which we have discussed extensively above, is that when they were permitted to stay and take the K'ai-feng examination, they were invariably required to provide a guarantee, and the guarantor usually had to be either an official at their native prefectures or a capital or court grade official. Officials, moreover, were limited to providing one or at most two guarantees per examination.<sup>121</sup> While there were no limitations concerning the status of the candidate, it seems likely that the guarantees would have gone primarily to family, affinal relations, and friends.

If the examinations in K'ai-feng were dominated by literati from official families, as we have argued, then it would appear that this was indeed an exception to the Sung imperial policy of striving for the 'utmost fairness' in the examinations. But it was a limited exception, for although it provided

privileged access to the Directorate and, to some extent, the K'ai-feng examinations, we have seen that they were comparably competitive with prefectoral examinations elsewhere.

Compared with earlier dynasties, moreover, the Northern Sung is remarkable for the high degree of provincial participation in the civil service. We saw in Chapter 1, for example, how in the T'ang examinations the great majority of graduates came from the schools in the capital. Against that background, the 40–50% accounted for by K'ai-feng and the Directorate in the mid-eleventh century looks modest. It is only when one looks forward to the Southern Sung and subsequent dynasties that one can see the Northern Sung as a pivotal period between the domination of the government by a capital-centered elite which was typical of the early dynasties and the predominance of local elites characteristic of the late dynasties. I would submit that the early Sung emperors' willingness to cast broadly through the examinations was a crucial factor in this change.

Finally, we should point out that as the Northern Sung progressed, privileged access to the Directorate and K'ai-feng examinations was curtailed at least partially. The creation of the Imperial University not only provided literati from humble backgrounds access to capital schools but also heralded a trend towards making a greatly expanded University the preeminent school in the land and the goal of students everywhere. And as the University became more important in the late eleventh century, the K'ai-feng examination became less so; from a peak of 335 in 1075, K'ai-feng's examination quota was reduced to 160 in 1079, so that the Directorate's quota could be increased from 160 to 500.<sup>122</sup> This was the work of the Northern Sung reformers who had their own vision of a fair and moral society, one in which schools rather than examinations played the central role. It is to them that we will now turn.