

THE THORNY GATES
OF LEARNING
IN SUNG CHINA

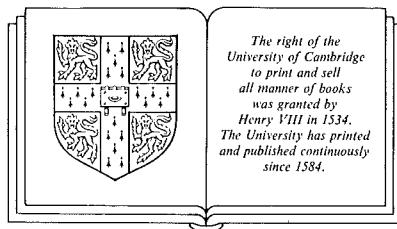
JOHN W. CHAFFEE

The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF EXAMINATIONS

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INTRODUCTION: THE EXAMINATION LIFE

Two protests

Ch'en Shu was unpopular in the late spring of 1002. A southerner and therefore an outsider in the imperial capital of K'ai-feng, which lay on the North China Plain, Ch'en had a reputation for high principles and incorruptability, and just months earlier the emperor Chen-tsung (r. 998–1022) had paid him the singular honor of naming him director of the civil service examinations.¹ The streets of K'ai-feng had filled with over fourteen thousand and five hundred 'selected men' (*chü-jen*) chosen by their prefectures to take the examinations in the capital. Their hopes were high, for when the examinations had last been held, in 1000, over 1500 had received the coveted *chin-shih* ('advanced scholar') and *chu-k'o* ('various fields') degrees, thereby qualifying for entry into officialdom.² When, after the grueling departmental examination (*sheng-shih*), Ch'en and his colleagues passed only 218, the shock and dismay of the failed candidates swiftly turned to anger, and it was directed against Ch'en. He became the subject of songs. Effigies of him were daubed with blood. Placards with his name were hung beside roads where they could be lashed by passersby.³

The abuse heaped upon Ch'en was verbal and symbolic. Some two centuries later Yang Hung-chung was not as fortunate. A young man who had early gained renown as a student leader at the Imperial University in the Southern Sung capital of Lin-an fu, Yang had received his *chin-shih* degree in 1205, and one of his first official postings was as preceptor (*chiaoshou*) of the prefectural school of Chang-chou, a coastal prefecture in southern Fu-chien.⁴ One of his duties was to help supervise the triennial prefectural examination at which Chang-chou's quota of twenty-one *chü-jen* would be selected to make the trip to the capital.⁵ In the fall of 1210 when the examinations were in progress or being graded (the source does not say which), a group of 'ruined and lost men' (*p'o-lo* – failed and frustrated candidates?) incited a riot. Armed with bamboo and wooden sticks, they burst through the gates of the examination hall, badly beat Yang, and injured the other examination officials. After they had departed, such was the townspeople's fear of

the *p'o-lo* that they refused to divulge their identities. Unable to punish the offenders, the court punished the prefecture instead: the prefect was demoted and Chang-chou *chü-jen* were barred from the upcoming departmental examination in Lin-an.⁶

As these widely separated anecdotes bear witness, the civil service examinations were critical and potentially volatile events during the Sung dynasty (960–1279). The fates of individuals, families, and often entire communities rode on their outcomes. Unlike medieval European society, where the nobility and clergy were sharply distinguished from the slowly emerging bureaucracy, in Chinese society of the imperial period, status, power, and wealth were intimately linked to government service. There were various ways of becoming an official: recommendation, purchase of office, protection (entry by virtue of the high rank of a relative), promotion from clerical status. But examination success conferred the greatest prestige and offered the best chances for bureaucratic advancement. Moreover, the examinations were transformed by the Sung emperors from the numerically minor method of recruitment that they had been since their establishment in 589 A.D.⁷ to a major, at times dominant, way of selecting officials. As a result, the promise of learning beckoned broadly, with far-reaching consequences for Chinese society.

The examination life

The Sung literati often described their 'occupation' (*yeh*) as *chin-shih*, that is, preparing for the *chin-shih* examination, and that preparation was an adult as well as adolescent endeavor. In the examinations of 1148 and 1256, the only two for which there are lists of *chin-shih* recipients together with such biographical information as ancestry, marriage connections, and residence, the average ages were 36 and 35 years (Chinese style) respectively, and the age ranges were 19 to 66 years.⁸ These were, of course, the fortunate few. The great majority of the literati spent much or most of their lives without achieving success.

Those years of study were spent in mastering a formidable curriculum, which included the dynastic histories, poetry, and the Confucian (*Ju*) classics. For most of the Sung, the last consisted of the *Analects* of Confucius, (*Lun-yü*), the works of Mencius, the classics of History (*Shu-ching*), Poetry (*Shih-ching*), and Changes (*I-ching*), the three classics of Rites (*Li-chi*, *I-li*, *Chou-li*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iü*) with its three commentaries.⁹ Together these were considered to be the ultimate source of political, social, and especially moral wisdom. Writing in 1030, the future chief counselor Fan Chung-yen described their importance in the following manner:

Now, of those things that improve the country, there is nothing that precedes the education of talent. Among the ways to educate talent,

there is nothing that precedes the encouragement of study. And of the essentials for the encouragement of study, there is nothing that is more esteemed than following the classics. If one follows the classics, the Way will be great; and if the Way is great, then talent will be great; and if talent is great, then achievements will be great. In general, the record of the Sages' regulations is preserved in the Book of History; the methods of pacifying dangers are preserved in the Book of Changes; the mirror [for seeing] gains and losses is preserved in the Book of Poetry; the discrimination of truth and falsehood is preserved in the Spring and Autumn Annals; the ordering of the world is preserved in the Book of Rites; and the feelings of the myriad things are preserved in the Book of Music. Therefore, men of refinement and wisdom gain entry through the Six Classics and thus are able to submit to the record of regulations, investigate the methods of pacifying dangers, set out the mirror [for seeing] gains and losses, analyze the discrimination of truth and falsehood, understand the ordering of the world, [perceive] exhaustively the feelings of the myriad things and cause their followers to help complete the Way of the Kings. What more does one want?¹⁰

Preparation for the examinations involved more than just the classics, however. During the Southern Sung (1127–1279), when north China was in the hands of the Jurchen, the *chin-shih* candidate took a tripartite examination either in poetry or on a classic. All candidates had to write an abstract discussion (*lun*) on political or philosophical principles and answer three policy questions (*ts'e*), often on complicated, highly technical problems of government. These demanded a broad knowledge of history and the classics. In addition, poetry candidates had to compose a poem (*shih*) and a poetic description (*fu*) on assigned themes using elaborate and precise rules of composition. Each classics candidate had to answer three questions on his classic of specialization and a question each on the *Analects* and the works of Mencius. These required an exact knowledge of the texts and discussions of their meanings.¹¹

The lengthy education leading to the examinations began at an early age, either in the home or in small informal family and community schools.¹² Students started with simple primers. The *Three Character Primer* (*San-tzu hsün*, to be distinguished from the early Yüan *San-tzu ching*), the *Hundred Surnames* (*Pai-chia hsing*), and the *Thousand Character Classic* (*Ch'ien-tzu wen*) introduced students to the most commonly used characters in the language. The *Classic of Filial Piety* gave them their first taste of moral and political philosophy. There were also anecdotal works such as the *Admonitions for the Young and Ignorant* (*T'ung-meng hsün*) by Lü Pen-chung (1048–1145), which had stories about famous Sung teachers, admonitions

on the proper approach to study, correct deportment within one's family, and so forth.¹³

Once the student had completed this initial stage of education, he began a course of study that included composition, calligraphy, and the recitation and memorization of the classics, histories, and poetry. Without textbooks and with just his teacher's guidance, he plunged forthwith into the texts. One example of what this involved is provided by a stone inscription of school rules for an eleventh century government-run primary school (so-called, for the students had obviously progressed beyond primers):

The teacher lectures daily on three pages of classics and instructs the students on the pronunciations and meaning of the passages in the classics, on the forms of the characters, on poetry and poetic descriptions, on opposing sentence structures, and on writing stories.

The students are all divided into three levels: In the first level, the students daily draw lots to ask [the teacher] three questions on the meanings of the classics that they have heard, read aloud two to three hundred characters, practice writing ten lines [of text], recite one five or seven-syllable regulated poem [*lü-shih*] and every three days they are examined on one poetic description (or four rhymes of one) and they read one poetic description and read three to five pages of history (memorizing three events contained therein).

In the second level, the students daily read aloud one hundred characters, practice writing ten lines, recite a four-line stanza of a poem and a matching couplet, memorize two themes of poetic description and one item of history.

In the third level, the students read fifty to seventy characters, practice writing ten lines and memorize one poem.¹⁴

As students progressed, they moved into a world of diverse educational institutions. Many were privately-run, ranging from the humble community schools mentioned above to the grand Neo-Confucian academies (*shu-yüan* or *ching-she*) of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which were at times as much centers for philosophical discussion as they were schools. Many others were run by the government. At the height of their development in the early twelfth century, government schools were organized into an empire-wide school system with a combined enrollment of some two hundred thousand students, extending from county schools (*hsien-hsüeh*) up through prefectural schools (*chou-hsüeh*) to the august Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*) with its 3,800 students.¹⁵

For the more advanced students, study was supposed to be less a matter of memorizing and understanding texts (though these tasks never ceased)

than one of applying what they had learned to specific issues and problems. In the words of one thirteenth-century writer: 'The upper school follows principle in order to illumine the affairs of the world; the lower school approaches affairs in order to view the principles of the world.'¹⁶ Using principles to 'illumine the affairs of the world,' we might note, was very much the aim of the examination policy questions.

This connection to the examinations was not accidental, for most education was oriented to the examinations and involved, moreover, frequent testing and evaluation. At the government schools from the late eleventh century on, entrance was competitive and advancement within them was determined largely by tests: monthly, seasonal (at the University), and annual.¹⁷ This was excellent preparation for the civil service examinations; indeed, the annual tests were explicitly modelled on the examinations. But to many critics, it was a perversion of genuine education. To cite just two examples, the rise of the Neo-Confucian academies in the late twelfth century was accompanied by condemnation of examination-oriented education, while in the earlier *Admonitions for the Young and Ignorant* we find the query: 'If examination preparation is used to educate human talent, [the talented] will not know the essentials of action, so how can they be employed [by the government]?'¹⁸

The life of a student involved more than slavish study and examination preparation, however. By taking a select group of boys and young men away from their families and homes and throwing them together (students usually boarded at school), schools served as powerful socializing forces. This was especially true of the University. Its students studied under famous thinkers (University professorships were prestigious positions within the bureaucracy), had opportunities to meet influential officials, and at times played an important role in court politics.¹⁹ We hardly need mention the worldly pleasure offered by the great metropoli of K'ai-feng and Lin-an.²⁰ But not the least important were the friendships they made with each other, lifelong friendships in many cases. The noted poet Yang Wan-li (1124–1206), in reminiscing about a former fellow student, Liu Ch'eng-pi, offered a rare glimpse of student life at the University in Lin-an:

When Yen-ch'un [i.e., Ch'eng-pi] and I were in school together, on every clear night, after studying to the point of exhaustion and when the markets were devoid of human traces, together we would climb into a pavilion, scoop up pond water with our hands, and play under the frosty moon. I think that the happiness of us two was promoting the happiness of the world. How could one change that happiness?²¹

Study and examination preparation were by no means limited to schools. Even apart from those who were educated entirely at home, for most *chin-*

shih there was a considerable gap between the end of formal schooling and examination success.²² During that interval, young men commonly had other concerns, most notably marriage, and returned to their studies only as the triennial examinations approached. Many took to teaching, in government schools, as tutors (*men-k'o*) in wealthy households, or more humbly, as teachers in village schools. One encounters others serving as merchants, tending to family estates, or active in community affairs. We can only guess at the psychic strains and costs that such a life entailed, with the long three year wait for the examinations and the bitter disappointment which usually attended announcement of the results. But occasionally one can hear the disappointed voices. Liu Nan-fu (1202–ca. 1238), a three-time *chü-jen* from the Chiang-hsi prefecture of Chi-chou, exclaimed to his friend, the famous teacher Ou-yang Shou-tao (b. 1209): ‘The examinations have long tired me. If in one’s life one can saunter through forests and valleys and fill one’s belly with books, that is sufficient. Of what use are other aims, alas!’ Liu finally received his *chin-shih* degree in 1238 but he died before he could take any post. ‘This can be called drowning in the examination hall,’ wrote Ou-yang.²³

We have talked thus far about the achievers, the rare survivors of the long educational process. Most of those who began their studies with dreams of a *chin-shih* pennant one day flying outside their houses dropped out along the way. Some did so quickly, like the one-time brigand and, later, Sung general, Ma Jen-yü (933–82):

When he had passed the age of ten, his father ordered him to go to school. He immediately ran away [but then] returned and was sent again to a village school where he studied the *Classic of Filial Piety*. When after more than ten days he had not learned a single character, his teacher whipped him. In the middle of the night Jen-yü went alone and burned down the school hall. The teacher barely escaped with his life.²⁴

More typical, one would hope, was the case of Wang T'ing-chen (1088–1142), also of Chi-chou, who was from a well-established scholarly family; one of his brothers became a *chin-shih* and two others were locally noted scholars. T'ing-chen ‘did not enjoy the grind of being a section-and-paragraph-writing student’ and was even less pleased upon being promoted to the prefectoral school. So he quit school and the scholarly life altogether and proved to be very good at making money.²⁵

Finally there were those who took the examinations, sometimes repeatedly, only to give up in despair or disgust. Though we have records of only that tiny fraction who made names for themselves, the unsuccessful greatly outnumbered their more successful contemporaries, especially in the Southern

Sung. Some were extolled as exemplars; Wu Shih-jen of Lin-an returned home after failing the examinations and gained renown as a teacher. He 'willing [accepted] poverty and held to the Way, concentrated on mastering the study of sincere righteousness and clear principles, and did not engage in heretical talk.'²⁶ For others, retirement was intellectually liberating precisely because it freed them from the strictures of the Confucian curriculum. Thus Liu Chi-ming (1059–1131) of Chi-chou turned from the examinations to a broad array of interests which, in addition to the classics, philosophers, and history, included strange and unusual tales, works on astronomy, geography, divination, medical nostrums, Buddhism, and Taoism.²⁷ And Wang Lo-hsien of T'an-chou (in Ching-hu-nan) upon failing the departmental examination, angrily tore up his (scholar's) cap and became a Taoist monk.²⁸ In yet other cases retirement led to drink and, occasionally, to ruin. Indeed, in the anecdotal literature popular in Sung elite society one encounters such somber figures as a University student murdered in a brothel and the ghost of an impoverished *chü-jen* haunting a Buddhist monastery.²⁹

The examination literature

The voluminous literature dealing with examinations and education in Sung and, more generally, late traditional China has primarily been of two varieties: institutional history and that concerned with the composition and mobility of the ruling elite. The former is the more venerable, with its origins in the treatises of dynastic histories, a genre that was well established by Sung times. When archivists, historians, encyclopedists and local historians dealt with these topics, they usually wrote institutional histories of them, thereby providing us with the bulk of our information about them. In this century this tradition has been very fruitfully continued by such historians as Ch'en Tung-yüan,³⁰ Terada Go,³¹ Araki Toshikazu,³² and Thomas H.C. Lee,³³ to cite just a few examples. With discrimination and a sure grasp of the major sources, they have produced detailed histories of the development of government recruitment and examinations, and of schools. Yet informative as they are, these internalist approaches suffer from a certain narrowness, for they do not as a rule relate the institutions to their social contexts.

Such is not the case with the latter approach, which has produced a vigorous debate over the nature of Chinese society. A few decades ago Edward A. Kracke, Jr. and Ping-ti Ho created a stir in the scholarly world by arguing that traditional Chinese society was far more mobile than many scholars had believed was possible for a premodern society.³⁴ In their studies based upon *chin-shih* lists for the Sung (Kracke) and *chin-shih* and *chü-jen* lists for the Ming and Ch'ing (Ho),³⁵ they found that a majority had no officials among their paternal great-grandfather, grandfather and father, and thus were

upwardly mobile. They concluded that the late traditional Chinese elite was dependent upon office-holding and the examinations for its position and, given the difficulties of examination success, very fluid in its composition.

The lasting achievement of this mobility approach has been its demonstration of the centrality of education and academic achievement in elite and even non-elite society, for the promise of learning did beckon broadly.³⁶ However, the mobility thesis and its accompanying model of Chinese society has come under challenge in recent years, for it is vulnerable on at least two counts.

First, by making elite membership a function of examination success and/or government service, it confuses status group with class.³⁷ While the examination system clearly constituted the preeminent status hierarchy in Chinese society and high status usually (though not always) entailed power and wealth, it does not follow that degree holders (and their families) constituted a ruling class or social elite. Much more persuasive is the concept of upper class membership based upon land ownership which then could lead to education and office.

Second, by its narrow focus upon direct patrilineage, the mobility thesis ignores such critical factors as lineage, marriage relationships, and even siblings and uncles. This is partly a function of the information given by the examination lists, but it is also the result of using a Western model predicated upon the nuclear family as *the* significant social unit. Given the well-known importance of kinship and lineage in Chinese society, such an approach is bound to be misleading.

Even before Kracke and Ho published their studies, there were those whose conceptions of Chinese society were quite different. Karl Wittfogel, in an article on the uses of protection (*yin*) in Liao and Sung times, concluded that the Chinese ruling class was relatively stable in its composition.³⁸ Hsiao-tung Fei, writing about the rural gentry in the early twentieth century, stressed both its stability and its economic basis in landowning.³⁹ More recently, Hilary Jane Beattie,⁴⁰ Robert M. Hartwell,⁴¹ and his students Robert Hymes⁴² and Linda Walton⁴³ have argued that late traditional China was dominated by a landholding upper class of elite lineages remarkable for their ability to perpetuate themselves and from whose ranks the great majority of officials was drawn. Because of their importance for the present study, Hartwell's findings, which concern the lineages that provided incumbents to the Sung fiscal bureaucracy, demand special consideration.

Hartwell argues that for most of the Northern Sung, the fiscal bureaucracy and, by extension, the government were dominated by a small group of lineages which he calls the professional elite. These lineages, which claimed descent from the great T'ang lineages,⁴⁴ maintained their positions by marriage

alliances, by optimum use of the examinations and protection, and by factional alliances that gave them control over promotions. Their domination began to weaken in the late eleventh century, however, when the increasing severity of factional disputes resulted in the exclusion of a large number of these lineages from high office. As a consequence, the fiscal bureaucracy from the early twelfth century on was characterized by a larger number of less dominant lineages whose marriages were primarily local in character and whose ability to use protection was relatively limited.⁴⁵

This thesis contributes significantly to our understanding of Sung society. By systematically introducing the variables of lineage, marriage patterns and factionalism, it is able to explain much more than the mobility model, which emphasized the two factors of wealth and examination success for the achievement of status and power. Hartwell, in fact, regards the examinations as a virtual non-factor in social mobility:

There is not a single documented example, in either Su-chou or in the collective biographical material on policymaking and financial officials, of a family demonstrating upward mobility solely because of success in the civil service examinations. Indeed, in every documented case of upward mobility, passage of the examinations *followed* intermarriage with one of the already established elite gentry lineages.⁴⁶

In other words, marriage, not examinations, was the critical criterion for entrance into a socially-defined elite. Such a position, however, is open to qualification on three counts.

First, even if Hartwell's observation of the temporal priority of intermarriage is borne out by future research, it does not prove that examinations were unimportant, but only that elite intermarriage was a necessary if informal precondition to examination success and office-holding. In fact, most upwardly mobile families also invested in education at an early stage in their rise. A wealthy but uncultured merchant would typically hire teachers for his sons and try to marry them to women from established, respectable families.⁴⁷ In the Southern Sung especially, such an academic strategy was socially expected and it provided the most likely means for the achievement of official status. Although members of some rising families may have entered the bureaucracy via the protection privileges of their affinal kin, for most the initial entry had to come via the examinations. Indeed, for many, perhaps most such families, examination success was not achieved. Respectability and local prominence could still be had, but there were clear limits to their potential status and power.⁴⁸

Moreover, it is not clear that examination success was the completely dependent variable that Hartwell makes it out to be. For some young literati

from humble backgrounds, the promise of success was the deciding factor in making advantageous marriage matches.⁴⁹ In other cases, success itself was the necessary condition for marriage. Chen Ying of Chi-chou, who was from a 'guest' family (*kuan-k'o*) bound to a magistrate's family, was unable to get the latter's permission to a marriage until after he passed the examinations.⁵⁰ Even more remarkable is the story told by Hung Mai about a county clerk who learns through a dream that the son of a neighboring doctor (an inferior occupation) would pass the examinations. Approaching the doctor, who has already registered his son for the examinations, the clerk promises his daughter in marriage if the son succeeds. He does and the marriage is concluded.⁵¹ Therefore even as marriage could aid one in the examinations, so could examination success be of benefit for social climbing through marriage.

Second, there is an inherent imprecision in speaking of 'elite lineages,' for Chinese lineages could be extremely heterogeneous bodies, as their common charity provisions for poor members bear witness.⁵² To belong to an elite lineage did not mean that one was elite, although the connection undoubtedly conferred many benefits upon the poor member unavailable to his unconnected neighbors. Thus under the umbrella of the lineage and perhaps concealed by it, there was ample opportunity for individual and family mobility, both upwards and downwards.

Third, Hartwell's view of the examinations does not take into account the growing centrality of schools and examinations in Sung society. The changes underlying the very different conditions of the two protests described earlier are reflected by many Sung writers. Consider the following entries in the Sung dynastic history (the *Sung-shih*). Describing the beginnings of the central government's significant involvement in local education (ca. 1022), it says:

In the time of Jen-tsung [r. 1022–63], scholars who pursued Confucian learning had been unable to proliferate. So early in his reign he endowed the Yen-chou school [in Ching-tung-hsi circuit] with school fields and also ordered border and capital regions all to establish schools.⁵³

Two hundred years later, in 1231, we find the observation that 'the scholars in the examination halls of the time were daily increasing and the rolls of scrolls were like mountains.'⁵⁴ We might note, too, an essay by one Li K'ang of Ming-chou (in Liang-che-tung) commemorating the building of a library in 1090:

Nurtured and nourished by the imperial Sung, the people have increased greatly. Those who study esteem the years and months of grinding [effort] and scholars daily increase. Good people consider not educating

their sons to be shameful and their posterity consider the lack of renown to be a disgrace.⁵⁵

The change, in short, lay in the greatly increased value accorded education and in the growing predominance of an elite lifestyle that was rooted in education and oriented towards examination success.

The examination system occupied a critical nexus in Sung society. A complex institution, it served many interests and performed many functions, not merely of bureaucratic selection but also of elite advancement and representation, social and intellectual control, and imperial symbolism, to name just a few. Yet none of the studies mentioned above has focused upon that conjunction between institution and society. Such is the aim of this study.⁵⁶ While questions of institutional history, social mobility and social structure will not be ignored, the emphasis will be upon the social functions of the examination system and people's perceptions of it, and especially how those changed during the three century span of the Sung.

The plentiful sources that have been used are largely those of past studies — government documents, histories, encyclopedias, the writings of individuals — but they will be used in at least two different ways. First, the sources have been combed for data to make possible quantitative generalizations about the impact of the examinations on Sung society. In particular, the use of over one hundred Sung, Yüan, Ming and Ch'ing local histories has allowed a perspective which emphasizes the humble as well as the exalted and the prefecture as well as the capital. Second, the institutional literature has been read with an eye to its social ramifications. Did certain groups or regions benefit more than others from the examinations' rules, and if so, why? Upon what theory or theories of education were the examinations predicated? And how did China's elite culture adapt to the powerful organizing force of the examinations? It is with such questions that subsequent chapters will be concerned. But first we should consider how society was generally changing during Sung times.

The historical context

The characterization of the Sung as a period of major social and economic change has by now gained widespread acceptance. It was an age of great contrasts, the most remarkable being the coexistence of military (and often political) weakness with economic and cultural vigor. Since the middle of the T'ang, China had been undergoing what some have called the 'medieval economic revolution.' In the countryside, the growth of estates (*chuang-yüan*), the rise of the lower Yangtze region as the empire's economic center and, in the early Sung, advances in techniques of rice cultivation all contributed to a rise in agricultural production. This, together with the growth

of a cash economy, the increasingly common payment of taxes in cash, the spread of paper money and the beginnings of industrial development, contributed to a rapid growth in commerce. For the first time fairs and periodic markets appeared in the countryside. In the cities, the walled wards and controlled markets of the early T'ang disappeared. From K'ai-feng south along the Grand Canal and throughout the southeast, sprawling cities emerged, whose size reflected their economic and not necessarily their political importance.⁵⁷

This was an age of great technological advances, not the least being the development and spread of printing. Invented by the Buddhists in the eighth century or before, wood-block printing was first used by the government in the tenth century to produce authoritative versions of the classics.⁵⁸ During the Sung it rapidly spread throughout the empire, most especially in the prosperous southeast, as temples, schools and private enterprises set up their own shops (by one count there were some 173 printers during the Southern Sung).⁵⁹ The impact of printing on Sung China was profound, and profoundly different from that on Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For where the latter led through the vernacular Bible to the Reformation, the former led through the classics to the examinations.⁶⁰ Although this study will be concerned primarily with the institutional factors behind the growth of the literati, that growth would certainly never have happened without printing to make books less expensive and more available.

The social changes of the T'ang—Sung period were equally noteworthy. During the middle and late T'ang, the overwhelming political and social dominance of a small number of aristocratic lineages had given way, at least partially, to the rising power of provincial lineages. According to Denis Twitchett, this was made possible by

... the greatly increased and diversified possibilities for employment in provincial governments of specialized government agencies, which followed the decay of central civil authority and the transfer of effective political and military authority from the central government to the provinces a century or more later.⁶¹

During the Five Dynasties (907–60), many of the aristocratic lineages disappeared under the repeated onslaught of wars and rebellions, rebellions noteworthy for their expressions of class hatred.⁶² Soldiers and wealthy merchants played an unusually prominent role in government,⁶³ and in general political fragmentation provided opportunities for advancement to many local groups. Thus by the early Sung elite groups were various, including the remnants of the T'ang aristocracy, bureaucratic and military

lineages from the north and wealthy southern lineages that had flourished under the relative tranquility of the southern kingdoms.

This diversity was a far cry from the homogeneity of the eleventh century's national elite which, according to Professor Hartwell, dominated the bureaucracy. Why the change? Peace and prosperity, urbanization (especially that of K'ai-feng, the great imperial metropolis), and the increasing availability of books all played a role. So too did the examination system. An old institution even in the tenth century, it was put to new uses by the early Sung emperors who saw it as an instrument for reordering elite society. If the results were complex and often unintended they nevertheless had far-reaching consequences for the development of Chinese society.

The examination system inherited by the Sung had been founded by the Sui in 589 and had changed rather little in the intervening four centuries, when it was characterized by its variety of degrees, its exclusive provisions for candidacy, and its numerically small but prestigious impact upon the bureaucracy. The Sui-T'ang system had six different degrees. Three were specialized, concentrating on law (*ming-fa*), calligraphy (*ming-shu*) and mathematics (*ming-suan*), while the remainder, the *hsiu-ts'ai*, *ming-ching* and *chin-shih* degrees, tested a broader, more traditional corpus of knowledge. From early on, the degrees were sharply differentiated by their prestige and importance. The *hsiu-ts'ai* ('cultivated talent') degree was so difficult that it never had many graduates and disappeared after the early years of the T'ang. The *ming-ching* ('understanding the classics') degree tested one's knowledge of the classics and had the largest numbers of candidates and graduates. But most important was the *chin-shih* ('advanced scholar') degree, the only one that tested poetic abilities, which eclipsed the classics degree in prestige and all of the others in numbers and prestige.⁶⁴

The T'ang examinations were held annually in the capital. There were two ways to qualify for them: through recommendation from prefectural officials — 'district tribute' (*hsiang-kung*) or 'tribute selection' (*kung-chü*) — and through *hsiao-chü*, attendance at one of several schools in the capital, which with one exception were open only to the relatives of officials. The latter route appears to have accounted for the great majority of the graduates.⁶⁵

The pre-Sung examination system constituted a small and prestigious route of bureaucratic entry. Although its graduates accounted for only six to sixteen percent of the civil service,⁶⁶ their career prospects were high and they frequently predominated at the highest levels of government.⁶⁷ By introducing literary achievement as a significant factor in political success, the examinations may have helped undermine the position of the great

lineages. But contrary to the assertions of some historians, they did not facilitate social mobility, for the system insured that degree holders would come either from the great lineages or from locally prominent lineages with traditions of office-holding.⁶⁸

Beginning in 977, the Sung government began conferring examination degrees in the hundreds rather than scores; the annual average of degrees given went from approximately thirty for the preceding three centuries to 192 for the years 997–1272.⁶⁹ In expanding the examinations and instituting other critical reforms, the early Sung emperors were acting upon several concerns. They wanted to fill the civil service of the just reunited empire with bright and educated men. They wanted to control the military which had grown dominant in court politics and curb the power of those great lineages that had survived the wars. And they were not unmindful, if somewhat wary, of providing opportunities to men from the developing south.⁷⁰

Most of these concerns were met. The government of the mid-Northern Sung was dominated by an energetic group of men who by and large owed their positions to examination success. Coming from both established northern families and 'newly risen' families of the southeast,⁷¹ their social stratum was much broader than that of the T'ang elite but still small enough to be centered on the imperial capital of K'ai-feng, cosmopolitan in character, and interlaced by marriage ties. This was possible not only because this elite group dominated the recruitment process, as Hartwell has argued, but also because they were relatively unchallenged by others. Many families of means which could have engaged in education and the examinations chose not to do so.

During the late Northern Sung, however, a rapid spread in government schools to most prefectures and counties made education more available and popular than ever before. Thus as factional struggles eroded the political position of the eleventh century elite, it began to merge into a larger and growing stratum of local elites. As a result, Southern Sung elite society was much larger but more parochial than its Northern Sung predecessor, and tended to be socially centred at a regional or even prefectural level. Economically based upon landowning and, to some extent, commerce, it nevertheless was deeply involved in education and in the bitterly competitive rigors of examination life. As will be shown in the next chapter, several hundred thousand typically took the prefectural examinations in the early thirteenth century, compared with a few tens of thousands two centuries before.

Given these social changes, one would expect very different relationships between the examinations and society in early, mid, and late Sung, and indeed, the subsequent chapters will be devoted to showing how this was the case. Much of the argument rests upon the numbers presented in Chapter 2,

for the manifold increase in candidates points to an increasingly profound involvement in the examinations by the landowning upper class, and with that involvement came many attendant problems.

Who took and passed the examinations? In Chapter 3 we shall see how the institutional developments of the early Sung were shaped largely by an imperial ideal of fairness in support of the earlier mentioned aims of creating an able civil service and controlling potential rivals. This policy worked fairly well so long as candidate numbers remained modest, but, as we will see in Chapter 5, when competition became acute in the Southern Sung, relatives of officials used their right to take special examinations to subvert the essential fairness of the system. These privileges also served to give the region or prefecture with many native officials an advantage over others, as we will see in Chapter 6. With successes breeding success, a few regions such as the southeastern coast and northern Chiang-hsi were able to gain unparalleled representation in the civil service.

What should the relationship be between education and the examinations? It might seem strange that this question arose, for examinations required years of education to master their Confucian curriculum and they were justified by the Confucian principle of government by the virtuous and talented. Yet Confucian critics asked, first, how the virtuous could be selected when the anonymous examination procedures of the Sung made considerations of character impossible, and second, how moral education could be pursued when students set their sights on examination success and not the Way. As we shall see in Chapter 4, reform minded statesmen in the Northern Sung answered the first question by advocating and then creating an empire-wide school system which, for a time, took over the functions of the examinations, only to see the unwieldy system with its two hundred thousand students fall under charges of favoritism, cheating and poor education. Southern Sung Neo-Confucians, by contrast, reacted to the unprecedented examination competition (caused, in part, by the educational programs of the Northern Sung) by arguing for disinterested study and moral cultivation, or in other words, for a separation between education and examinations.

Finally, as examinations became established in society, they had to be integrated into culture. As Chapter 7 will show, the examinations spawned popular stories, portents and myths. With burgeoning numbers of failed candidates, such social roles as the aging candidate and the wandering literatus were developed and popularized. But most important were the ceremonies, clothing, buildings and community support organizations with which Southern Sung local leaders created visions of examination honor even as they subverted the examinations. The myth of opportunity was as important for social stability as its lie was to the elite's privileged position.

THE STRUCTURE OF RECRUITMENT

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.¹ 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.² 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,³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

A great gulf separated the clerical service from the other two. Officials looked down upon the clerks, feared them,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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-ye ts'ai-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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ The initial rank of the protected officials varied but was always low.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Purchase of office, too, was remarkably unimportant, though this may have changed in the closing decades of the Sung.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.'³¹

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 1213.³² 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,³³ 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 1196–1223.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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,³⁶ but with the Yüan-feng Regulations of 1082, educational inspectorates and assistant instructorships became *ungraded* offices.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.’⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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].⁴³

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).⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Through imperial acts of grace on occasions like the imperial suburban sacrifices, there were ample opportunities for favoritism to be translated into protection.⁴⁷ 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,⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.⁵³ In 1149, exemptions were given to all University students who were the only adult males in their households.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ 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*),⁵⁷ *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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶²

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.⁶³

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 1106⁶⁴ and 2,026 for the late Southern Sung.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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 go⁶⁷ 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,⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

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).⁷² 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.⁷³ 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*.⁷⁴

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.

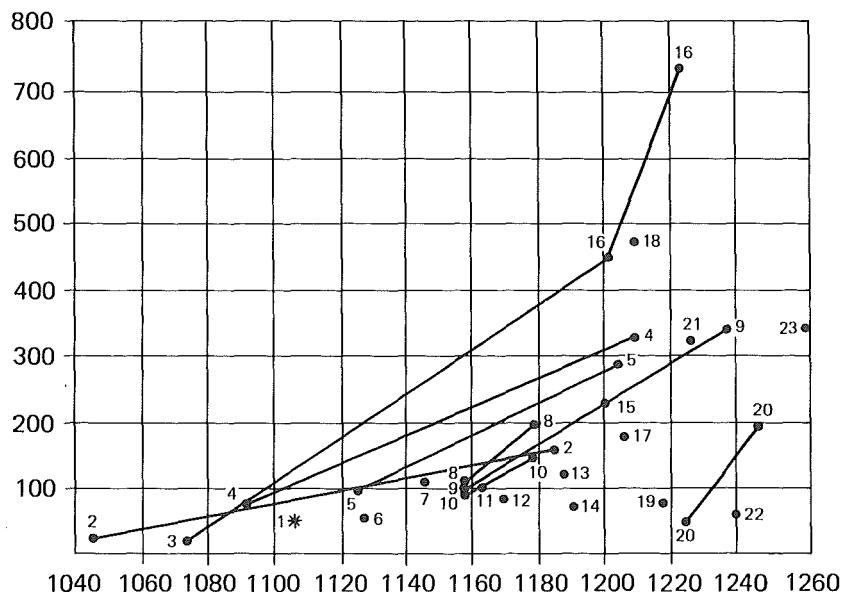
*Empire-wide prefectural quotas first set.

†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 Chun, *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.⁷⁵ 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

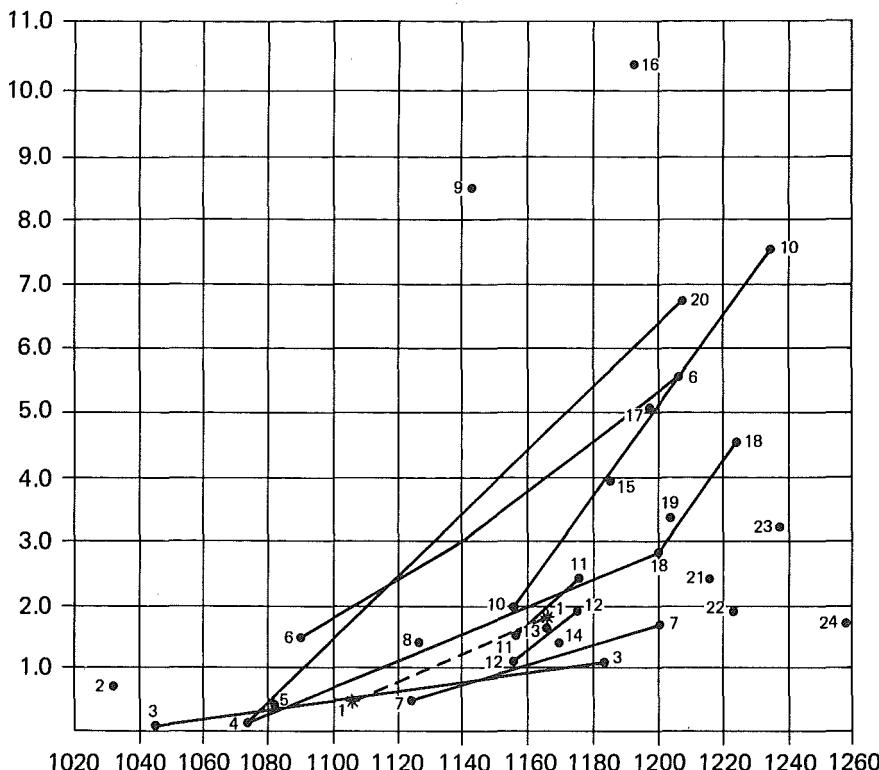


1. Empire
2. Su-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
3. Ming-chou, T'ai-chou and Wen-chou (Liang-che-tung)
4. Fu-chou (Fu-chien)
5. Hu-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
6. Ch'ang-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
7. Chi-chou (Chiang-nan-hsi)
8. Chien-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu)
9. Yen-chou (Liang-che-hsi)
10. Hui-chou (Chiang-nan-tung)
11. Wan-chou (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)
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- 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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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?'⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

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.⁸²

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.⁸³

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.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷

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],⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰

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?⁹¹

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,⁹² 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 1210,⁹³ 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.'⁹⁴

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.

FOR THE UTMOST GOVERNANCE: EXAMINATIONS IN THE EARLY SUNG

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.¹ 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.² 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.'³ 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.'⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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,⁷ 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 prefectoral officials who had recommended them be punished.⁸

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.⁹

On another occasion he said, 'For chief councilors one must use men of learning (*tu-shu-jen*).'¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

In the following days, 109 *chin-shih*, 207 *chu-k'o*, and 184 facilitated degrees were given.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.'¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Under T'ai-tsú the average fell to 19.2, while 10.2 of them were *chin-shih*.¹⁷ 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*.¹⁸ 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 977,¹⁹ 10,260 took it in 982²⁰ and 17,300 in 992.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.'²⁴ Wang Yung in the thirteenth century ascribed it to the large number of positions which were vacant in the newly expanded empire.²⁵ And Ch'en Tung-yüan in this century has argued that T'ai-tsung was attempting to gain the allegiance of the scholarly class.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ This was extended to the departmental examination in 1007³⁰ and to the prefectoral examinations in 1033.³¹ 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.³² This practice, known as *t'eng-lu*, was extended to the prefectoral examinations in 1037.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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].'³⁶ A year later he remarked that southern scholars were delighted with the 'complete fairness' of covered names.³⁷ 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,³⁸ 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,³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ The reasons actually given were more prosaic but instructive.⁴¹ 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*.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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 trip⁴⁸ or favoring localities that were either backward or strategic militarily.⁴⁹ 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*).⁵⁰

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).⁵¹ A complaint from 992 concerning frequent violations of this rule⁵² and a further prohibition in 1015⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹
- 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*).⁶⁰
- 7 One was an artisan, merchant or clerk⁶¹ or had been a Buddhist or Taoist priest.⁶²

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,⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ ‘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.⁶⁵ In 989, following a report that a clerk in the Secretariat-Chancellery had received a degree, clerks were also barred,⁶⁶ and three years later a more sweeping prohibition mentioned artisans, merchants and clerks, as well as the diseased and those with criminal records.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

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 1064,⁷² 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.'⁷³ 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.'⁷⁴ With this went a change in terminology; the earlier terms, which had connotations of social superiority,⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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;⁷⁷ at other times, the examinations were opened to those who had moved and registered in the past⁷⁸ or even to those who had no registration so long as they obtained special guarantees.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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].'⁸²

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.'⁸³

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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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'.⁸⁶ Again in 1057 the court specified that county officials check on the past conduct of candidates and report on it to the officials.⁸⁷

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.'⁸⁸ 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*).⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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').⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶ He presents little evidence, however, to show that the guarantees were actually used in an exclusionary fashion.⁹⁷ 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,⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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 1063.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰²

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.¹⁰³ 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	%
Total <i>chin-shih</i> numbers						
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.'¹⁰⁴ 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,'¹⁰⁵ for again and again one finds complaints and measures dealing with the problem of provincial literati improperly claiming K'ai-feng residency.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

But this explanation is not entirely convincing, for while K'ai-feng's quota dwarfed all others, numbering 335 at its peak in 1075,¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹²

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.¹¹³

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.¹¹⁴ 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'.¹¹⁵ 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,¹¹⁶ 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*).¹¹⁷ This was replaced in 1044 by the Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*), and it soon developed into the premier educational institution at the capital.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹

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.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ 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 500.¹²² 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.

TO BE ROOTED IN SCHOOLS: EXAMINATIONS IN THE LATE NORTHERN SUNG

The Ch'ing-li reforms

In the summer of 1043, the third year of the Ch'ing-li reign period, the Sung empire was in a state of crisis. The long-time Chief Councilor, Lü I-chien, had that spring suffered a stroke, and while he continued to be consulted on affairs of state, he no longer handled the day-to-day affairs of government. More critically, to the northwest the Tangut Hsi-Hsia invasion was being stemmed but only after a major mobilization of military forces, in the northeast the Khitan Liao were threatening to break their peace of forty years, and in central China the rebellion of Wang Lun was posing the first significant internal challenge to Sung rule. According to the draft biography of Ou-yang Hsiu in the *Veritable Records*,

While the war in the northwestern border was going on, many groups of bandits rose in the areas to the east and west of the capital. Both externally and internally, the empire felt disturbed. Emperor Jen-tsung, in replacing his leading councilors, wished to see due changes made to cope with various matters.¹

The men whom Jen-tsung promoted to positions of leadership were an exceptional group. With the prominent exception of Han Ch'i (1008–75), a pragmatic and aristocratic northerner, they were southerners of modest, often local official, background. Their leader, Fan Chung-yen (989–1052), was an exceptional administrator whose bold and moralistic policy criticisms had made him the center of controversy and cost him demotions on more than one occasion in the past.² In fact, the distinguishing feature of Fan and such proteges as the brilliant and flamboyant Ou-yang Hsiu, the respected political thinker Li Kou (1009–59), the historian Sun Fu (997–1057), and the acerbic Shih Chieh (1005–45) was their common belief that Confucian principles could be used to reform institutions and improve society.

Thus it is not surprising that when Jen-tsung, on the advice of Ou-yang Hsiu, asked Fan and Han for suggestions on policy, they responded not with

ad hoc proposals but by submitting a Ten-Point Memorial outlining a broad series of reforms.³ Half of the points (6–10) dealt with aspects of local administration such as land reclamation, local militias, corvee labor, and law, but the rest dealt with the recruitment and advancement of officials. Most controversial and significant for our purposes were the second and third items. The second proposed limiting the privilege of protection, cutting back on the number of relatives high officials could name to official rank.⁴ The third proposed changes in the examinations.

Complaining that too many literati concentrated either on writing elegant poetry for the *chin-shih* examination or in memorizing passages for the *chu-k'o* examination, which emphasized the elucidation of passages (*mo-i*), Fan and Han suggested changing the emphasis in both examinations. For the *chin-shih*, they proposed reversing the customary order of subjects and putting discussion and policy questions (*lün* and *ts'e*) first and poetry (*shih*) and poetic descriptions (*fù*) last, and in fact not allowing candidates who had not passed the former to take the latter, although candidates who had already sat for three or more examinations were to be exempted from the last requirement. Similarly, *chu-k'o* candidates were to be tested on the meaning of the classics in addition to their elucidations of passages. In support of this change in emphasis, they urged that experts in the classics be appointed as teachers in the local government schools. Finally, in order to insure the selection of the virtuous, they proposed that anonymity be abandoned in the prefectural examinations and that the candidate's moral character be considered in the selection of *chü-jen*.⁵

Five months after the Ten-Point Memorial, in the third month of 1044, another of the reformers, Sung Ch'i (998–1061), submitted a lengthy proposal for reform of the examinations which spelled out the earlier suggestions and then broke new ground.⁶ The changes in both the *chin-shih* and *chu-k'o* curriculum were reiterated in a detailed section on the precise content of the examinations, as was the decision to weed out departmental examination candidates after the policy and discussion questions.⁷ Along with the abandonment of anonymous grading procedures in the prefectural examinations went the provisions for checking into the backgrounds of all *chü-jen*.⁸

New, however, were the provisions concerning schools. All prefectures without prefectural schools were to establish them and those with over two hundred students were allowed to establish county schools as well. Preceptors (*chiaoshou*) were to be selected by the fiscal intendant and prefect from among the local civil officials to teach in the prefectural schools for terms of three years.⁹ Most significantly, in order to take the prefectural examination, the literatus had to have attended the prefectural school for at least

three hundred days (or one hundred days for past *chü-jen*), or failing that be guaranteed by an official or three *chü-jen* who had taken the departmental examination.¹⁰ The reason for these measures was clearly stated:

'If teaching is not rooted in schools and scholars are not examined in villages, then it is impossible to investigate thoroughly the reality behind reputations. If there are teachers who restrain [students] by proclaiming [their] shortcomings and students concentrate on recitation from memory, then human talent is not fully being realized.' This is the common counsel of the discussants. We have explored the accumulated theories and selected those which are beneficial today. Nothing is better than making all scholars be natives and educating them in schools. But when their prefectures and counties examine their conduct, students will cultivate and prepare [themselves]. Thus we make rules for establishing schools, mutual guarantees and sending [up candidates by] recommendation.'¹¹

The following month saw one further educational proposal. Citing Han and T'ang precedents, it suggested that the Hsi-ch'ing Hall be converted into an Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*), for the Directorate School was insufficient to the educational demands being made upon it.¹²

Although Jen-tsung expressed agreement with all of these reform memorials and accepted their proposals in full, the reforms proved to be shortlived. Placing their faith in principles and imperial support rather than persuasion, the reformers proved inept politicians, quickly alienating many highly-placed officials. They, by contrast, were adept at arousing Jen-tsung's suspicions as to the reformers' loyalties and intentions. In the summer of 1044, Fan Chung-yen, Ou-yang Hsiu and Fu Pi (1004–83), another leading reformer, were all given assignments outside of the capital, and the following year the reform proposals were repealed.¹³ Indeed, the only thing to survive was the University, and even it was taken out of its quarters at the Hsi-ch'ing Hall and placed under the supervision of the Directorate of Education.¹⁴

Despite this brevity, the Ch'ing-li Reforms as they came to be called marked a major turning point in the history of the examinations. The idea that Confucian principles could and should be invoked to reform society proved attractive to young idealistic literati, who saw in Fan a hero worthy of emulation. As a result, two major and sustained efforts at reform arose in the late Northern Sung, one in the 1070s under the emperor Shen-tsung (r. 1068–86) and the Chief Councilor Wang An-shih (1021–86), the other after 1100 under the emperor Hui-tsung (r. 1101–26) and his Chief Councilor Ts'ai Ching (1046–1126). So too, we must add, arose vigorous reactions to the reform movements thus, making the era one of bitter and increasingly

severe factional struggles. But what is interesting, for our purposes, is the fact the later reformers agreed with their Ch'ing-li predecessors that the examinations were the key to producing better officials and thus a more properly governed empire. And how was this to be accomplished? Through controlling the curriculum and, even more important, by linking selection to schools so that the government could nurture as well as choose the talented of the world.

Curriculum changes

Following the aborted Ch'ing-li reforms the examinations continued unchanged, but the idea of change had not been stilled. One source of continuing reformist influence came from Hu Yüan (993–1059), a close friend of Fan Chung-yen's, who after years of teaching in prefectural schools around Lake T'ai in Liang-che-hsi had been brought by Fan Chung-yen to the capital to head the newly created university. Hu survived the general demotion of reformers in 1045 and was a major influence upon young scholars studying at the University, truncated and weak though it was.¹⁵ Indeed, his pedagogy is frequently cited as the epitome of reformist education, representing a marriage between principle and practical application:

His teaching method was detailed and completely prepared. He established two classes, one on the meaning of the classics and one on the management of affairs. In the classics class, he selected those with purified moral natures who had the ability and style to handle great affairs, and had them elucidate the Six Classics. In the class on affairs, each person would manage one topic and assist in another, such as governing the people in order to bring peace to their lives, discussing the military in order to guard against bandits, damming up water in order to improve fields, and calculating the calendar in order to understand numbers.¹⁶

Many of those who had participated in the reform such as Ou-yang Hsiu, Han Ch'i, Sung Ch'i and Fu Pi (but not Fan Chung-yen) eventually returned to positions of power, although they generally did so with a notable lack of reforming zeal. Ou-yang was a partial exception for although his policies as a Chief Councilor in the 1060s were generally conservative, in 1057 he gained renown and notoriety for his reforming zeal when he served as chief examiner in the departmental examination. With little forewarning and without permission from the throne, he decided to change the criteria for grading, putting special emphasis upon the discussion and policy questions and failing those who engaged in the ornate and eccentric writing style then in vogue among many literati. Among those who passed were Tseng Kung (1019–83)

and the brothers Su Shih (1036–1101) and Su Ch'e (1039–1112), thus making the examination one of the most famous in Chinese history. The failed candidates were enraged, however. A group of them accosted Ou-yang in the street, bitterly cursing him, and someone wrote up a false obituary notice of him, reviving some scandalous allegations from his past.¹⁷

Ou-yang's action is credited with resulting in a 'change' in the writing of examinations. Later in the same year, 1057, several more formal though related changes occurred. Additional questions were added to the examinations: policy questions on current affairs for *chin-shih* candidates and discussions on the general meanings of the classics for *chu-k'o* candidates. In addition, a new degree was introduced on 'understanding the classics' (*ming-ching*), after a T'ang degree of the same name.¹⁸ It differed from the other *chu-k'o* degrees with which it was classed in two significant ways. First, while it used elucidations like the others, it gave equal weight to questions on the broad meanings (*ta-i*) of the classics. Second, it divided the classics into major, medium and minor works and allowed the candidate to choose among several combinations of these.¹⁹ Although this new degree hardly constituted a major change, its format was to serve as a model in the future.

In 1067, with the ascension of a new emperor, Shen-tsung (r. 1067–86), and his selection of Wang An-shih to serve as Second Privy Councilor and effectively take over control of the government, a new era of reform began. Wang had received his *chin-shih* in 1042 and had, by his own choice, served almost exclusively in provincial posts, repeatedly turning down invitations to accept offices in K'ai-feng and developing an enviable reputation as a leading proponent of reform in the process. Many of his New Policies, as his substantial and far-reaching reform program was called, dealt with the economy, defense, and local administration, but like the Ch'ing-li reforms, they also placed great weight upon schools and examinations.²⁰

At the beginning of 1071, an edict was issued at the urging of Wang An-shih which profoundly altered the form and content of the examinations. Like Fan Chung-yen, Wang believed that the classics and their application to problems of government should be of primary importance in the examinations, but his solutions were more radical. First, the *chu-k'o* degrees were abolished, the *ming-ching* immediately with its candidates entering the ranks of *chin-shih* candidates, and the other degrees following the examination of 1073. Second, poetry (*shih* and *fu*) was eliminated from the *chin-shih* examination. In its place, each candidate was to specialize in one of the five classics (of Poetry, History, Changes, Rites and the Rites of Chou) and all were to master the *Analects* and the works of Mencius.²¹

The scope of this edict was impressive and it affected everyone involved in the examinations. Its effects were uneven, however, for its two provisions

met different fates. Even at the outset, they were enacted in different ways. Whereas poetry was simply eliminated from the examinations, special measures were taken to ease the transition for *chu-k'o* candidates. Not only were they given a final chance to take the *chu-k'o* examinations, but they were also considered separately as a special group when they took the *chin-shih* examination. In addition, later in 1071 a new specialized degree, the *hsin-k'o ming-fa* ('new degree in law'), was created for past *chu-k'o* candidates.²² Its significance was indicated in a later report that 39 such degrees had been given in 1076 and 146 in 1079.²³

An important regional consideration was involved in this special treatment of *chu-k'o* candidates. By the reign of Shen-tsung, southerners had come to dominate the *chin-shih* examination (see Figure 7) and as a consequence northerners had concentrated on the *chu-k'o* examination. Therefore the elimination of the *chu-k'o* degrees could have been viewed as a threat to the already precarious position of northern officials. If so, then the special provisions mentioned above and also the elimination of poetry may have been, at least in part, compensatory measures, for the southerners' predilection for literature and poetry was proverbial.²⁴ That such regional balancing in fact took place is suggested by the fact that, included with the past *chu-k'o* candidates taking the *chin-shih* examination who were to be given special consideration were all of the *chin-shih* candidates from the northern circuits of Ching-tung, Shan-hsi, Ho-pei, Ho-tung and Ching-hsi, in short, the entire north.²⁵

If the 1071 reforms were aimed at a regional balance, the death of Shen-tsung in 1085 and the ensuing fall of the reform faction quickly upset it. In 1086, poetry was restored to the *chin-shih* examination while the degree numbers for the *hsin-k'o ming-fa* were reduced.²⁶ In 1089, this was changed, to the advantage of the northerners, by the division of the *chin-shih* into two sub-degrees, one in poetry (*shih-fu chin-shih*) and the other in classics (*ching-i chin-shih*).²⁷ The latter borrowed from the earlier *ming-ching* degree the notion of major and medium classics and required candidates to prepare two classics instead of the one required by the 1071 edict.

When the reform faction returned to power in 1094, poetry was once again eliminated and it remained so for over thirty years, throughout the period of the Three Hall System.²⁸ In 1127, citing the need to attract 'truly loyal and unusually talented scholars,' it was reintroduced in accordance with the 1089 provisions.²⁹ From then until the end of the Sung it not only remained in the examinations but also consistently attracted the most candidates, despite repeated efforts by the government to encourage the classics degree.³⁰

What accounted for this remarkable tenacity of poetry as an examination

topic? Few scholars were willing to come to its defense. In 1071 even Wang's arch-antagonist, Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–86), favored its elimination and its only noteworthy defender was Su Shih, who with Ou-yang Hsiu, had earlier advocated emphasizing discussion and policy questions. Su, who as George Hatch has suggested may have been fearful of the politicization of the examinations,³¹ made an interesting argument for the retention of poetry. Conceding its irrelevancy, he challenged the relevancy of discussion and policy questions, since in the final analysis the examinations were nothing more than a literary exercise.³² Su's argument, though unheeded at the time, was prescient, for much to the dismay of later generations of Confucian critics, the examinations became largely literary exercises in which even policy questions were graded more on their form than content. Moreover, in a society where literary skills were the mark of a gentleman, poetry was extremely popular. Given a choice, a great majority of literati preferred poetry to the classics as a subject for concentrated study. In 1093, when the poetry and classics *chin-shih* degrees were supposed to be of equal importance, out of 2,175 University students, 2,093 were studying poetry and only 83 the classics.³³ Thus practical considerations overrode the objections of the moralists to insure the survival of poetry in the examinations.

The *chu-k'o* degrees lacked any such tenacity. In 1102 the New Degree in Law was abolished and all of its quota places, which had originally been *chu-k'o* quota places, were distributed as *chin-shih* quotas throughout the empire.³⁴ This marked the virtual end of degrees for specialized subjects. Why was this so? Both poetry and the specialized degrees had been attacked by the reformers, but the crucial difference between them lay in the narrowness of the latter. Ssu-ma Kuang in 1086 remarked of the New Degree in Law:

As for laws and regulations, [knowledge of them] all is necessary for those who would be officials. [But] if you can get those who are scholars to truly understand the meaning of the Way, they will be in profound agreement with the laws. Why must we have a single degree in law, the preparation for which will be narrow and superficial? This is not that which will long cultivate talent and enrich customs.³⁵

The generalist ideal of education, always popular, was becoming ever more dominant, and this worked to the benefit of the *chin-shih* degree, which had the reputation of attracting the most talented, whereas the *chu-k'o* degrees were felt merely to select those with voluminous knowledge.

Burning incense, receive the *chin-shih*; with angry glances await the *ming-ching*. When the talented have prepared for the *chin-shih*, at examination time they ready the incense altar for rites of worship and

obeisance. When the talented have prepared for the *ming-ching*, at examination time they steel their resolve for the troublesome examinations and fear other commentaries [than those that they have studied].³⁶

Add to this the reputation of the *chin-shih* examination as the training ground for future ministers,³⁷ and it is little wonder that the *chu-k'o* degrees did not survive.

Before leaving this subject, we should acknowledge the human costs of changes in the examination curriculum. Yüeh K'o (1183–1240) tells of an examination held in Ch'eng-tu fu (Szechuan) in the fall of 1180, during which someone pointed out that the written form of one of the characters in the assigned theme for the poetic essay (*fu*) differed from that given in the official rhyme book. When the instructions given by a functionary at the time as to which form to use were unwittingly contradicted by an official the next day, a riot ensued. Angry candidates beat up an examiner and tore down a gate saying: ‘The examination officials have carelessly interfered with our three years of fortune and misfortune.’³⁸ This scene, like that of the candidates cursing Ou-yang Hsiu in 1057, suggests the passions that could be aroused when unfairness in the questions or grading was perceived.

Less dramatic but more poignant are the stories of individuals who, after years of preparation for one kind of examination, could not adjust to new curriculum requirements. Wang T'ing-kuei (1080–1172) of Chi-chou tells how several of his contemporaries reacted to the reintroduction of poetry in 1127. Liu T'ing-chih (1100–60) and his brother Yü-hsi shifted their studies and concentrated on the writing of *fu*, and both received *chin-shih* degrees.³⁹ Wang Hung-chih (1081–1106), by contrast, decided that his chances were ruined because his style was simple, so he quit the examinations.⁴⁰ Most revealing, however, is the case of Liu Tsao (1096–1168), who had been an outstanding student of the classics. When he attempted the examinations with poetry, he ‘fell discontented from the examination hall and abruptly decided to quit. He knew that his efforts and his fate were out of harmony and he did not again try for selection’.⁴¹

Schools and the reformers

When the Ch'ing-li reformers proposed that schools be established in all prefectures (and in some counties as well), they were following a venerable tradition in Chinese history but one which had been curiously ignored during the Sung. From the golden age of the Three Dynasties on down through the great imperial dynasties, the idea of establishing schools had been an integral part of the patrimonial ideology of the Chinese state.⁴² Whatever the institutional reality may have been behind these purported

school systems, the claim of the ruler to act as moral exemplar and teacher was fundamental to the notion of rule by virtue. As Mencius argued in support of the schools of antiquity, 'The object of them all [the different kinds of schools] is to illustrate the human relations. When those are thus illustrated by the superiors, kindly feeling will prevail among the inferior people below.'⁴³

It is tempting to speculate that relative non-involvement of the early Sung government with education represented a retreat from patrimonialism, similar to the transition some two centuries earlier from the equal field system to the two tax system, whereby the state stopped trying to control landownership. Certainly the central government's educational activities, which consisted of running the Directorate of Education school for a handful of officials' children, providing sets of the classics to schools and academies (*shu-yüan*) which had been produced through the revolutionary method of woodblock printing,⁴⁴ and controlling the examination curriculum, suggest a willingness to rely upon indirect means of educational and cultural leadership that departed from past practices.

Thus it fell to local officials and literati to establish and run schools. In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, when the great attraction of the examinations was increasingly felt, students could be found studying in local government schools, academies, Confucian temples (*K'ung-tzu miao*, *Wen-hsüan wang miao*), and Buddhist schools. By 1022, when the central government increased its involvement in local education by endowing the prefectural school of Yen-chou (in Ching-tung-hsi) with ten *ch'ing* of support land (about 151 acres) and appointing a teacher for it,⁴⁵ the spread of schools was already well under way. Table 10, which is based upon references to Sung schools in a variety of sources including more than one hundred local histories, indicates that while the rate of establishing schools peaked under Jen-tsung (1022–63), the increase began under his predecessor Chen-tsung (998–1021) if not before.

What then was the significance of Fan Chung-yen's reforms? Lü Ssu-mien, who is generally skeptical about the existence of government schools on any large scale during most of Chinese history, feels that Fan's residency requirement created an orientation toward office holding which gave government schools a needed *raison d'être*.⁴⁶ This, I believe, is an exaggeration given the short duration of the reforms. Moreover, whether his educational program had much of an impact on the spread of local schools is debatable, for the high level of school foundings during Jen-tsung's reign was as much the result of activities before the reforms as after.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Fan's educational program was important, for it created precedents and initiated an approach to education which was to come to

Table 10. Sung government schools classified by earliest references per decade

Period	Prefectural schools			County schools			Total schools		
	References	# per decade	References	# per decade	References	# per decade	References	# per decade	# per decade
Pre-Sung	45		52		97				
960–997	6	1.6	10	2.6	16	4.2			
998–1021	10	4.2	22	9.2	32	13.4			
1022–1063	80	19.0	89	21.2	169	40.2			
1064–1085	32	15.0	36	16.4	68	31.4			
1086–1100	5	3.3	32	21.3	37	24.6			
1101–1126	17	6.5	51	19.6	68	26.1			
N. Sung undated	3		37		40				
N. Sung Total	153	9.2*	277	16.6*	430	25.8*			
1127–1162	13	3.6	49	13.6	62	17.2			
1163–1189	7	2.6	22	8.1	29	10.7			
1190–1224	5	1.4	29	8.3	34	9.7			
1225–1264	4	1.0	25	6.2	29	7.2			
1265–1279	2	1.3	5	3.3	7	4.6			
S. Sung Total	31	2.0	130	8.5	161	10.5			
Sung undated	5		57		62				
Sung Total	189	5.9*	464	14.5*	653	20.4*			
All schools			516		750				
	234								

Sources: For a precise listing of sources, see Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations in Sung Society,' Appendix 2.

*These figures include undated schools.

fruition under Ts'ai Ching and Hui-tsung. And here Lü Ssu-mien is quite correct in emphasizing the link between schools and examinations, for it constituted the crux of reformist education. The reformers felt that character evaluation should form a part of the selection process and they considered the moral and practical training of future officials to be central functions for schools. In a memorial from late in 1043, unnamed ministers memorialized:

From antiquity the method of selection of scholars has been rooted in schools. Since the T'ai-p'ing era (976–1083) schools have prospered. [But] we have not yet appointed officials [for them] or regulated instruction so as to add weight to their offices. Today we have literati vie for the length of a day in the examinations. How can this compare with simply nurturing scholars throughout the world?⁴⁸

The organic metaphor of 'rootedness' is significant, for it implies that the educational inactivity of the early Sung government had resulted in cultural disunity, a lack of ethical roots among the literati of the empire. The logical conclusion to such an idea was to delegate the selection function to the schools, where both character and ability could be evaluated over long periods of time. In fact this is precisely what occurred and Fan's proposals can be viewed as a first step towards such an end.

During the years of Shen-tsung's reign (1068–85), when first Wang An-shih and then his followers were in power, the central government was quite active in education (it was the first period of sustained activity in local education for the Sung government). The University was greatly expanded and divided into three halls (*san she*) or grades, thereby introducing the important notion of advancing by grade through school.⁴⁹ Wang felt that the local schools were too small and understaffed. In 1071, the fiscal intendents (*chiian-yün-shih*) in all circuits were ordered to give each school ten *ch'ing* of fields.⁵⁰ At the same time, schools were told to appoint teaching officials (*chiaos-kuan*) or preceptors (*chiaos-shou*) with special emphasis to be placed upon the appointment of teachers in the northern circuits of Ching-tung, Shan-hsi, Ho-tung, Ho-pei and Ching-hsi.⁵¹ In 1074 and 1078 there were additional measures providing for the appointment of teachers and a special examination for teachers was begun in 1076.⁵²

In spite of these decrees and Wang's belief that, ideally, officials should be selected at schools,⁵³ the educational developments resulting from his New Policies were not great, at least outside the capital. There is little evidence in local histories to suggest that schools were given additional land at this time. Also, despite the decrees ordering the appointment of preceptors in all prefectural schools, there were only 53 of them in 1078 (out of approximately 320 prefectures).⁵⁴

If Wang made any contributions to local education, it was through the appointment of preceptors. This was the first occasion on which the Sung government appointed regular, executorial class officials as teachers at local schools, and that in itself was an important step in making the local schools more than just occasionally functioning institutions. Also, despite the relatively small number of prefectures given teachers, they were concentrated heavily in the north, as Terada Gō has observed.⁵⁵ Thirty-three were located in northern China and just four in Liang-che and Fu-chien. Whatever the political motivations or consequences of this, it is likely that the educational effects were maximized, since the majority of preceptors were appointed to prefectures outside of the southeast, which had a strong tradition of support for local schools.

The Three Hall System

Sixteen years after the death of Shen-tsung, following a period which saw the central government relatively inactive in local education,⁵⁶ a series of far-reaching reforms was implemented. A new emperor, Hui-tsung (r. 1100–26), after a brief period of conciliation towards reformers and anti-reformers alike, had chosen as his Chief Councilor Ts'ai Ching, the most prominent of a third generation of 'reformers', who had received his *chin-shih* degree in 1170 under Shen-tsung. At the suggestion of Ts'ai, who declared that 'making schools flourish is the first order of business today',⁵⁷ the examination system was replaced by a unified, hierarchical school system which was given the dual function of educating students and selecting the outstanding among them for the *chin-shih* degree. Although the triennial departmental examination continued to be held and *chin-shih* degrees given,⁵⁸ candidacy was restricted to University students and they, with the exception of the privileged Directorate School students, had been promoted from prefectural schools.

The school hierarchy actually had four levels: primary schools, which were supposed to be established in every county; county schools; prefectoral schools; and the University. Each school was divided into three grades or halls (thus the Three Hall System – *San-she-fa* – by which the system was known), following the model used by the University since the time of Wang, and at the University the outer hall was given a separate campus to the south of the city and prosaically named Pi-yung, from a passage in the Classic of Poetry. Promotion from grade to grade and school to school depended upon periodic examinations and required guarantees from the preceptor and local officials.⁵⁹ Quotas determined both the number of students allowed in a school and the number who could enter officialdom either by advancing to and through the upper hall or by taking a triennial examination which corresponded to the departmental examination of the examination system.⁶⁰ To

supervise this system, education intendants (*t'i-chu hsüeh-shih*) were appointed to each circuit.⁶¹

The Three Hall System was a bold experiment, almost certainly eclipsing in scope the combined schools of the eleventh century. It was, as Table 10 indicates, the last period of wide-scale creation of government schools, resulting in the first true empire-wide system of schools in Sung and possibly Chinese history. The financial resources which the government devoted to education were unprecedented, for local governments were instructed to draw upon land and income from ever-normal granaries (*ch'ang-p'ing-ts'ang*) and heirless land (*hu-chüeh-t'ien*) in order to reach requisite support levels.⁶² Overall, the system received income from over 100,000 *ch'ing* of land (over 1.5 million acres) and had roughly 200,000 students, all supplied with room and board by the state.⁶³ This was in an empire which then numbered around a hundred million people, so the students comprised approximately 0.2% of the total population or 0.4% of the male population.⁶⁴

In 1104, an intriguing and revealing addition was made to the Three Hall System. Provisions were promulgated for the rapid education and promotion of students of outstanding virtue, specifically for those with renown in one of 'eight [kinds of virtuous] conduct' (*pa-hsing*).⁶⁵ Such individuals were to be recommended and sent from villages to counties to prefectures, where they were to attend school for a year. They were then to be sent to the University where they were to be admitted without examination to the upper hall, investigated for unorthodox views, and then be given degrees and official rank. Provision was also made for their opposites, those with histories of 'eight punishments' (also *pa-hsing*, but with a different *hsing*), who were to be expelled from the schools.⁶⁶

The edict establishing the 'eight conduct' method of selection was engraved on stelae which were distributed throughout the land,⁶⁷ and it remained in use through most of the Three Hall period.⁶⁸ In its quest for superior men and sages, it was the most extreme attempt by the reformers to recruit on the basis of virtue rather than ability or talent. Reminiscent of the Nine Rank Arbiter system (*chiu-p'in chung-cheng*) established by Wei Wen-ti (r. 220–7) which attempted to rank people according to their virtue, its subjective criteria and the preferential treatment of its candidates rendered it vulnerable to abuses, although not on the scale of the earlier system, which was swiftly transformed into an hereditary status system.⁶⁹

The references to investigations of orthodoxy and the 'eight punishments' suggest, moreover, that Ts'ai and his followers were as interested in intellectual control as in virtue, and indeed, there is much in their educational program to suggest that this was the case. For while the early reformers like Fan tried to demonstrate the relevancy of their Confucian principles to

the pressing problems of the day, the later reformers insisted that particular sets of principles and particular applications of them be taught.⁷⁰ In 1068, Wang An-shih had argued that the times demanded orthodoxy:

At the present talented men are scarce; moreover scholarly skills are dissimilar. Each man has an interpretation [of the classics] and for ten men there are ten interpretations. When the court wants something done, the various arguments are confusing and no one is willing to obey instructions. This, in general, is why the court is unable to achieve a single morality. To achieve it, we must therefore reform our schools, and if we wish to reform our schools, we must change the examination regulations.⁷¹

In the intervening years, the tides of factionalism which Wang had done much to swell had risen precipitously, and Ts'ai was intent on propagating the reformers' political vision while chastising his enemies. Most infamous was his literary inquisition in which 'unorthodox' books and the writings of some 309 men were proscribed, while in the realm of education, the teaching of history was banned,⁷² private schools were forbidden,⁷³ and special 'isolation rooms' (*tzu-sung-chai*) established where students displaying unorthodox ideas were sent for punishment.⁷⁴ How these measures were implemented is open to question. Most of the writings survived, we know of private schools that were founded while they were in effect, and from Hung Mai we have a rather benign story involving an 'isolation room' from this period.⁷⁵ But their intent was clear and at least one surviving memorial testifies to their harmful effects on written examinations:

Today in all prefectures and counties, there are no entrance examinations which test the student's ability to write. The first thing the examiners look for is whether or not a candidate's essays refer to subjects currently tabooed. If the language of a candidate's essays touches on such tabooed subjects, then no matter how well he has written, they dare not pass him. It is tabooed to say: 'in order to rest the people rest the military; to make wealth abundant, regulate expenses; eliminate the service requirements that are not urgent; incorruptably enter officialdom.' All language like this [is tabooed].⁷⁶

Even apart from the issue of intellectual control, the Three Hall System was beset by problems. There were complaints of indifferent and incompetent teaching and of widespread cheating. Declared one critic in a Mencian vein that was to become common in Southern Sung complaints about examination preparation:

The administrators and professors now in residence at the University all profit by considering ways to nurture their wealth and seeking advancement outside [the University]. The students all profit in the yearly and monthly [tests] and in examination selection. Superiors and inferiors congregate together because of profit. Can they possibly develop and nourish human talent?⁷⁷

The greatest problem, however, was financial. The system taxed the resources of local governments and, in addition, there were numerous charges of corruption. Describing the Chien-chou (Fu-chien) prefectural school, a Southern Sung writer commented, 'The system of selection through halls was exalted and harmonious, but great were the complaints and wasteful the extravagance.'⁷⁸ Even more to the point was this memorial from 1112:

Those who supervise the prefectures and counties do not know that the fundamental aim of the court is specifically the education of great talent. They engage in [obtaining] plentiful food and drink and their abuses extend to converting [grain] from the real price to the market price. They engage in borrowing from students and their abuses extend to breaking laws and damaging culture. Many [cases] reach the court-room, some [involving] violence against officials and some, encroachments on the people, yet none dare to question [them]. They engage in [buying] superfluous decorations and so have useless expenditures of funds and provisions. They engage in applying for bequests and so there is the evil of quarreling over profits with the people.⁷⁹

Thus when the Three Hall System was abolished in 1121, the move met with little opposition and there were no serious attempts to revive it in the Southern Sung.

The legacy of reform

Had Ts'ai Ching succeeded in gaining acceptance for the Three Hall System, the subsequent history not only of Chinese education but also of Chinese society would have been profoundly different. It would have produced a literati population with much closer ties to the government, with a greater susceptibility to government control, and with perhaps less authority and legitimacy in society at large. It would also have required a government that was far more active, not only in education but also in the activities of the local elites, than was the case in the Southern Sung and subsequent dynasties.

But one might also argue that the Hui-tsung program was unfeasible in the long run. Thomas H. C. Lee has cogently argued that it was premised upon an

unresolvable contradiction.⁸⁰ On the one hand, the schools were to train and select a small corps of scholar-officials to govern the empire, an inherently elitist goal. To quote Wang An-shih,

The talent of a person is completed through concentration and destroyed through dispersion, so the former kings' placement of the people's talent was as follows: they placed laborers in government yamens, farmers in the fields, merchants in the market place and scholars in the schools. They had each mind his own occupation and not look on strange things, for it was feared that strange things might harm the occupations.⁸¹

On the other hand, the reformers looked to the utopian descriptions of the schools of antiquity in such works as the *Rites of the Chou* and appear to have been genuinely interested in pursuing a goal of universal education. Such a goal, of course, was not only contradictory to their goal of training officials but also unfeasible administratively and fiscally for the Sung state as it was constituted.

For these and other reasons (especially the loss of the north, which was blamed upon the reformers), the reform program failed, and henceforth neither was selection rooted in schools nor did the government claim to monopolize education. Yet the legacy of the reformers was profound, for both in what they did and in what was done in reaction to them, they managed to have a lasting impact on later institutions and society.

The institutional impact is perhaps the most evident. In the examinations, Wang An-shih's abolition of the *chu-k'o* degrees made the *chin-shih* degree the goal towards which all literati labored and so it remained until the examinations ended in 1905. We can only speculate as to the effects of this, for while it eliminated an element of educational diversity that had hitherto been present (the *chu-k'o* degrees may have been of lesser prestige but they provided a respectable alternative to those who felt most comfortable with specialized topics or memorization), it may be that this educational uniformity was an essential ingredient of the literati culture that was to dominate Chinese society for the next seven hundred years.

Regarding schools, the reform legacy was one of institutional development. In the early eleventh century, when formal prefectural schools were first appearing, often evolving from Confucian temple-schools,⁸² their provisions and regulations were quite fluid. Attendance at them varied greatly, for students would travel considerable distances to study under famous teachers.⁸³ There were, moreover, no institutional ties between government schools; each was supported and managed by its local government and there was no administrative uniformity.

By the end of the Northern Sung this had all changed. Not only were all government schools connected in a hierarchical empire-wide system, but there was a high degree of organizational uniformity as well. Prefectural school preceptorships became respected posts in local administration which, as far as we can tell, were routinely filled; educational support fields (*hsüeh-t'ien*) and student support provisions became the rule rather than the exception; and to cope with the rising demand for schooling, school entrance examinations (*pu-shih*) became common.⁸⁴ In fact, given the formal similarities in organization and physical layout (though not in pedagogy) between the Southern Sung government schools and those of the Ming and Ch'ing, the late Northern Sung can be seen as the key period in the development of the government school as an institution.

There were negative legacies as well. We noted earlier how the re-introduction in the 1120s of poetry, which the reformers had tried to eliminate from the examinations, firmly established it as an integral part of the examination curriculum. Of even greater importance was the failure of the attempt to select students in schools, where character as well as talent could be evaluated, and the return to the principle of anonymity in the examinations. This may well have been an inevitable development, for as literati increased and competition became more intense, anonymous procedures became essential to preserving at least the illusion of fairness. In 1048, an anti-reform official argued for reinstating covered names and copied examinations by stressing the quality of the graduates:

I have observed the outer prefectures sending up *chü-jen*. Before there were covered names and copied examinations, many with empty reputations were selected and examination officials did not refrain from taking requests on behalf [of candidates]. Also, only old men who had previously been selected were chosen. After covered names and copied examinations [were instituted], the examination officials could not see the names and so had to really judge literary merit, which was more suitable, approaching fairness.⁸⁵

One hundred and fifty years later Hsü Chi-chih (1163 *chin-shih*) a minister of the Board of Rites, also argued for anonymous procedures on the grounds of fairness, but fairness in this case was in the eyes of those who failed:

Although grading with covered names is still inadequate for obtaining all of the world's eminent talents, the reason why, among them [i.e., the literati], teachers, old scholars, aged and white-haired men are kept from being officials and yet do not complain, is that they submit to the fairness of the examinations.⁸⁶

Given the prominence of schools in the selection of officials in the classics, the idea of linking schools and examinations did not die. Several Southern Sung critics of the examinations, most notably Chu Hsi in his 'Private Opinion on Schools and Examinations,' argued for a return to some sort of linkage.⁸⁷ And in the Ming and Ch'ing the two systems were integrated. *Sheng-yüan*, the lowest degree holders, were government school students, and a studentship was in fact the prerequisite for taking the provincial examination.⁸⁸ But the reality was far different from what the reformers had envisioned. Except for the early Ming, when attempts were made to employ famous scholars as teachers in the government schools, their primary function was to provide prestige and support to the *sheng-yüan*.⁸⁹ Moreover, the examinations continued to be judged solely on the basis of written work. So despite the link, teaching was not rooted in the government schools; education was divorced from the examinations.

There was, finally, a social legacy of reform education, and it was substantial. Much as T'ai-tsung's expansion of the examination system had increased elite participation in the examinations, the reform program focused their attention upon schools and examinations and then, for a time, upon schools alone. As we noted above this resulted in educational abuses, not the least of which was the politicization of the schools as the ideological struggles between reformers and anti-reformers were fought out in curriculum and pedagogy, especially under the Three Hall System.

But there were positive aspects to the Three Hall System as well. With examinations handled by the schools and support given to their students, the prestige, status and benefits that came with attending them were unprecedented. This, I suspect, is the reason why the great majority of biographical accounts that I have read which mention attending government schools describe the Hui-tsung period, for it was then that attendance was considered a noteworthy accomplishment. One also finds in contemporary comments a sense of awe over the resources that were being devoted to education. Chang K'o-ching, an official in Ho-pei, wrote in 1104

I have heard that the scholars of antiquity took office and only afterwards received a salary. Now these scholars dwelling below [i.e., non-officials] have yet to take office and still they receive support for food and drink, which is regarded as a salary to be given to them . . . This never was the case in the past.⁹⁰

A decade later Hui-tsung declared in an edict raising school support quotas throughout the empire:

For twelve years, the schools have [followed] the way of improving and nourishing people, establishing teachers and Confucian scholars,

building schools, preparing tasty provisions, and teaching the literati of the world. Day by day enlightened literati have increased and become a multitude, approximating antiquity. Yet the quotas for supporting literati still lag behind past figures . . . and the literati who travel to schools but are not taught remain numerous. If it is thus, then the country is neglecting talent.⁹¹

Though Hui-tsung was hardly a disinterested observer, his statement is perceptive and revealing, for the Three Hall System with its two hundred thousand students had created a multitude of literati such as had never been seen before, or at least never since the shadowy reaches of antiquity. In addition, it had served to focus the attention of local elites more than ever before upon government schools and the training for testing and employment that they offered, a fact that became evident during the rapid rebuilding of ruined schools during the early Southern Sung. To a large extent, then, the reform program in general and the Three Hall System specifically were responsible both for the dramatic growth of the literati described in Chapter 2 and for the concomitant failure of fairness in the examinations as bitter competition led those with privileges to exercise them in whatever way that they could.

Government schools in the Southern Sung

Just five years after the abolition of the Three Hall System, the Sung lost all of northern China and some thirty-five percent of its population to the Jurchen invaders. Large areas north of the Yangtze River and even much of Liang-che became the scenes of protracted warfare between the truncated Sung and the new Chin empires. For a time, internal rebellions made Sung government control precarious even in areas completely unaffected by the war. Even after the immediate crisis passed (peace was agreed to in 1142), the government's control over the empire was weakened. It faced the problem of providing for northern refugees who, one modern scholar has estimated, numbered in the millions,⁹² and it had to cope with widespread destruction caused by war and rebellion.

These events had a devastating impact upon schools, at least initially. For financial reasons, the government made deep cuts in teaching personnel.⁹³ But worse, many schools were destroyed in the fighting. Yeh Meng-te gave the following description of the effects of the Chin invasion upon Chien-k'ang fu (or Chiang-ning fu) in northern Chiang-nan-tung:

Chien-k'ang commands the eight prefectures on the left [bank] of the Yangtze and is a great city of the southeast. In other times, its literary accomplishments were greater than those of other places and it long had a school in the southeastern corner of the prefecture [i.e., the

Table 11. *Constructive and destructive activities at 64 prefectoral and 108 county schools*

Period*	Reports of building, renovation, and endowment increases		Reports of floods, fires, and destruction by troops or rebels	
	Prefectural schools	County schools	Prefectural schools	County schools
960–997	7	2		
998–1021	11	11		
1022–1040	25	9	1	
1041–1063	30	38	1	1
1064–1085	21	29	1	
1086–1100	15	20		
1101–1126	27	43	3	8
N. Sung	136	153	6	9
1127–1162	67	92	14	26
(1127–1140)**	(27)	(35)	(12)	(24)
(1141–1162)**	(30)	(34)	(1)	(1)
1163–1189	52	65	2	6
1190–1207	26	36	1	2
1208–1224	26	43	1	1
1225–1240	24	37	3	3
1241–1264	21	41	2	2
1265–1279	9	6	4	8
S. Sung	225	320	27	48
Total	361	472	33	57

Sources and list of schools used: see Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2.

*Periods follow reign periods or, in some cases, combinations of short reign periods.

**These subtotals are given to provide an indication of school activity during the early years of the Southern Sung and to distinguish those years from the years of the school reforms, the 1140s. The subtotals do not add up to the period total because some of the references were insufficiently specific, referring only to the Shao-hsing reign period (1131–62).

city]. Then it suffered soldiers burning the city, reducing it to waste-land. Only the school itself survived. [But even there] falling walls ruined and pressed against each other. The registered students hurriedly scattered and the erudites accordingly did not lecture.⁹⁴

This destruction is also reflected in the figures for the years 1127–62 in Table 11, which shows the record of constructive activity (building, rebuilding, endowment additions) and destructive activity (floods, fires, destruction by troops or rebels) at 64 prefectoral and 108 county schools for which there are records of three or more such events.

The effects of these disturbances on schools, however, seem to have been temporary. Accounts of school rebuilding during the 1130s and 1140s are extremely numerous and, as we saw above, the central government began an educational program in 1142, the same year that peace was declared with the Chin. But most remarkable was the role that students played in the recovery. In Liu-ho county of Chen-chou (Huai-nan-tung), students built themselves a ten-room thatched-roof building after their school had been destroyed.⁹⁵ Students in Lien-chiang and Ku-t'ien counties of Fu-chou (Fu-chien) and in An-hua county of T'an-chou (Ching-hu-nan) led building drives for the local schools.⁹⁶ Most telling is the following account of the conditions in Ming-chou in 1135, where the government school had been destroyed:

There was no school building to use for educational activities, and there was no millet, meat, water, fire, utensils or plates to use for feeding [the students]. None of the hundred [necessities] was prepared. Yet the students still came with satchels on their backs and sat beneath the ruined rooms. The sounds of singing and recitation did not stop. Because of such customs and love of learning as these, the prefect, Mr Chiu, was induced to submit respectfully a memorial to the emperor extolling Confucianism by the next post leaving town.⁹⁷

By the following year, through donations from the government and local individuals, the money and materials necessary for rebuilding the school had been raised.⁹⁸

During the Southern Sung, the central government was notably uninvolved in local education. The major exception was in the 1140s when the court played an active role in the reconstruction of schools and made repeated efforts to get them all staffed with degree-holding preceptors,⁹⁹ for as the emperor Kao-tsung (r. 1127–62) rhetorically asked in 1143, ‘If we do not make schools thrive today, how will we be able to obtain talented men for employment in the future?’¹⁰⁰ That same year examination candidates were required either to spend half a year in school or to participate in two district wine drinking ceremonies (*hsiang yin-chiu li*), but there is little evidence to indicate that this was ever enforced.¹⁰¹ Following this period, the central government’s involvement in government schools seems to have ceased. According to contemporary complaints, the schools deteriorated in quality and were subjected to various abuses such as heterodox teaching, no teaching at all, and loss of revenue.¹⁰²

Table 12. *Incidence per decade of constructive activity at 64 prefectoral and 108 county schools*

Period	Prefectural schools, incidence per decade	County schools, incidence per decade
960–997	1.8	0.5
998–1021	4.6	4.6
1022–1040	13.2	4.7
1041–1063	13.0	16.5
1064–1085	9.5	13.2
1086–1100	5.8	7.7
1101–1126	10.4	16.5
Northern Sung	8.1	9.1
1127–1162	18.6	25.6
(1127–1140)	(19.3)	(25.0)
(1141–1162)	(13.6)	(15.4)
1163–1189	19.2	24.0
1190–1207	14.4	20.0
1208–1224	15.3	25.2
1225–1240	15.0	23.1
1241–1264	8.8	17.1
1265–1279	6.0	4.0
Southern Sung	14.7	20.9
Total	11.3	14.8

But government schools were hardly defunct. In spite of the complaints and the lack of involvement by the central government, government schools remained active, more active in fact than they had been during the Northern Sung. In Table 12, which shows the net constructive activity (constructive minus destructive incidents) at the schools represented in Table 11, we can see that the levels of activity throughout the Southern Sung were consistently higher than the highest levels during the Northern Sung. Even if we grant a tendency by later sources to provide more information on Southern Sung activities, it is clear that government schools remained vigorous and active throughout the Southern Sung and did not fall into disrepair and disuse as the traditional interpretation would have it.

Government schools were the object of much criticism, however. With unprecedented numbers of literati taking the examinations, it is not surprising that county and prefectural schools came under attack, for although there was no longer a formal connection between them and the examinations, the

former remained centers for examination preparation.¹⁰³ In 1194 Chu Hsi described the large prefectural school at Fu-chou (Fe-chien) in the following manner:

The prefectural school of Fu-chou is the largest in southeastern China, with hundreds of students. Yet in recent years its teaching and nourishment [of students] lacked rules. Teachers and students regarded each other indifferently, like men on the highway. Elders were concerned by the daily decline of ancient customs and the disappearance of scholarly spirit, but they were unable to remedy it.¹⁰⁴

What most upset educational critics, however, were the corrosive effects of examination preparation and competition. 'A healthy society cannot come about when people study not for the purpose of gaining wisdom and knowledge, but for the purpose of becoming government officials,' wrote Yeh Shih (1150–1223),¹⁰⁵ and in the opinion of many, that is just what people were doing. In 1192, Chao Ju-yü (1140–96), the Minister of Personnel, wrote,

After the Ch'ing-li period [1041–8], things cultural were refined. Since the restoration [i.e., the beginning of the Southern Sung], the University has been established in the temporary capital and the examinations have been held in all prefectures, but an air of urgent quarreling has dominated and the customs of loyalty and trust have been obscured.¹⁰⁶

The competitiveness engendered by the examinations, moreover, was associated with the government schools. Chu Hsi described students at the University:

Those scholars who have set their minds upon righteousness and principle will not seek them at the school. Those who hasten [towards] the hub and arrive are nothing more than the excess of the prefectural quotas, the favorites of class-selection [literally, 'hall selection'] and that is all.¹⁰⁷

And an early thirteenth-century local historian complained that 'schools are considered to be the business of officials and examinations are considered to be the vocation of scholars, alas!'¹⁰⁸

Such criticisms were not universal. If anything, the attacks upon examination-oriented education were testimonials to its widespread popularity, and government school activities that succeeded in increasing examination success were lavishly praised.¹⁰⁹ Yet there was an undeniable decline in the prestige of government schools, especially if one contrasts those in the late twelfth century with the more renowned schools of the mid eleventh century. Education itself had bifurcated and the ideal of disinterested intellectual inquiry took many students and scholars elsewhere, to the academies.

The spread of academies

Academies were hardly new to China during the Southern Sung.

Shu-yüan and *ching-she*, the terms usually translated as 'academy,' both pre-dated the Sung and encompassed a range of functions, serving as schools, studies, and meditation halls.¹¹⁰ As we can see from Table 13, which lists all Sung academies to which I have found reference, they existed throughout the dynasty. During the Northern Sung, except for a handful of famous, officially recognized academies which functioned much like government schools, most seem to have been either small informal schools or scholars' studies. In the course of the Southern Sung, although informal academies remained common, many others took a form which was to become characteristic of Ming academies, with income-producing endowments, salaried staffs, and campuses with ceremonial temples, lecture halls, dormitories, and kitchens. In this they were much like the government schools. Where they differed was in their educational program: rejecting in large part preparation for the examinations, they advocated instead Neo-Confucian self-cultivation.

The change was of major significance and can be roughly dated to the reign of Hsiao-tsung (1163–89) when three important and related events

Table 13. *Sung academies classified by dates of earliest reference and references per decade*

Period	References	References per 10 years
960–997	12	3.2
998–1021	7	2.9
1022–1063	13	3.1
1064–1085	9	4.1
1086–1100	3	2.0
1101–1126	12	4.6
Northern Sung	56	3.4
1127–1162	33	9.2
1163–1189	45	16.7
1190–1224	78	22.3
1225–1264	75	18.8
1265–1279	30	20.0
Southern Sung	261	17.0
Undated	108	
Total Sung	425	13.3

Sources: See Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2.

occurred. First, the establishment of new academies increased dramatically and continued at a high level for the rest of the dynasty. Geographically, they appeared in every circuit (see Table 23), but the great majority were in the fertile and productive southwest, most notably in a broad mountainous swath extending west from the coastal regions of Liang-che-tung and northern Fu-chien to the Hsiang River Valley of Ching-hu-nan.

Second, under the leadership of Neo-Confucian local officials, several of the famous Northern Sung academies were revived. In 1165 the Yüeh-lu Academy was restored in T'an-chou (Ching-hu-nan) by a pacification official, Liu Kung (1122–78), who enlisted the young but renowned Neo-Confucian philosopher Chang Shih (1133–80) to write a commemorative essay for it.¹¹¹ Twenty years later in nearby Heng-chou, the Stone Drum Academy (Shih-ku Shu-yüan) was rebuilt with an explicitly anti-examination orientation. Its renovator Fan Chih (1126–89) wrote that its purpose was 'to await and accommodate those scholars of the four quarters who are determined to study but do not consider the business of classes and tests worthwhile.'¹¹² Most famous, however, was the renovation of the White Deer Hollow Academy (Pai-lu-tung Shu-yüan) in Nan-k'ang chün in 1179 by the prefect Chu Hsi, who was even then regarded as a major philosopher. With the educational program of morality, intellectual inquiry, and self-cultivation that Chu formulated for it, the academy quickly became the premier symbol of the academy movement.¹¹³

Finally, many of these late twelfth century academies demonstrated an extraordinary intellectual vitality. Such leading thinkers as Chu Hsi, Lu Chiu-yüan (1129–93), Chang Shih, Lü Tsu-ch'ien (1137–81), and Ch'en Fu-liang (1137–1203) all taught in academies and had large followings, often drawn from considerable distances.¹¹⁴ Many founded their own academies and it was common to invite famous scholars to come and lecture.

By the end of the twelfth century, critics of the examinations, and there were many, frequently voiced their distress at the educational and intellectual climate of the day. Chang Shih wrote in 1169:

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. In normal times when they gather and live together [i.e., in government schools], how much does their work become that of looking for ways to be selected [in the examinations] or scheming for profit?¹¹⁵

Disgusted by the competitive and philistine character of bureaucratic and examination life, many scholars withdrew to secluded Neo-Confucian

academies, which were typically located in scenic country spots where they could cultivate their characters and attempt the 'extension of knowledge.' Of course, this very act of withdrawal was somewhat un-Confucian, since it ignored the cardinal principle of service to the ruler and to society.¹¹⁶ But it was undertaken with great moral fervor; not atypical is a set of school rules written by disciples of Chu Hsi which prescribe in detail how the students were expected to sit, go to bed, walk and stand, see and hear, talk, dress, eat and drink.¹¹⁷ Similar in character though more marked by its religiosity which stands in striking contrast to the pedagogy of the reformer Hu Yüan which was described earlier, is this description of the teaching of Lu Chiu-yüan at his Ying-t'ien Mountain Academy (Ying-t'ien-shan Chingshe) in Hsin-chou (Chiang-nan-hsi):

Every morning at the sounding of the academy's drum, he would ascend the mountain and, arriving at the top, meet [the students] with a bow and climb into the lecture seat. His countenance was clear and his spirit severe. The students, using small placards on which they had written their names and ages to make [their age] order known, sat accordingly. At the least, they were several score to a hundred, reverential and not noisy. He would first admonish them to draw together their spirits, nourish a virtuous nature and listen to discourse with an empty mind. The students would all bow their heads and, bowed, listen. He would not only lecture on the classics, but each time would instruct them about the original mind of man. He would select quotations from the classics as evidence — the sound of his voice was clear — and among his listeners there was no one who was not moved.¹¹⁸

More important in its political consequences was the claim made by Chu Hsi and his followers that the way of kingly government, lost since the time of Mencius, had been rediscovered by the eleventh century Neo-Confucians and transmitted to them, their twelfth century successors. Such an audacious claim, involving as it did the issue of political legitimacy, provoked strong reactions and was at least partly responsible for the 'False Learning' (*Wei-hsüeh*) controversy of 1195–1200, in which some fifty-nine individuals, mostly but by no means all Neo-Confucians, were banned from office, while examination candidates had to declare that they were not students of 'false learning.'¹¹⁹

By the middle of the Southern Sung, the examinations and the academies presented apparently conflicting choices to the literati. The former, which promised prestige and power, were criticized as being morally and socially corrosive, while the latter, with their program of moral cultivation and intellectual inquiry, were criticized for fostering superior airs among their

advocates, especially among those who claimed exclusive possession of the kingly way. For the individual, the choice was one which David S. Nivison has perceptively identified as lying between one's filial duty to succeed in the examinations and a personal desire for self-cultivation.¹²⁰ But at the level of institutions it is possible to discern a broader conflict, for the academies represented a literati-controlled alternative to the government-controlled examinations (and schools), even though both claimed the authority of the classics. Two factors, however, served to mitigate this conflict and keep it from threatening the socio-political order.

First, the opposition to the examination life was in fact qualified; criticism of the effects of the examinations on education and society seldom extended to condemnation of the examinations as such, which were recognized as necessary. Rather it was how one studied and approached the examinations that was considered important. In a famous lecture which Lu Chiu-yüan delivered, at the invitation of Chu Hsi, at the White Deer Hollow Academy, he said:

The state examination as an institution for selecting people has existed for a long time. Most well-known scholars and statesmen have been successful candidates at this examination. A student who wants to find a career must submit himself to it . . . Yet students look at the state examination as something to which they aspire. Very few can regard it with contempt. What they read is superficially the books of the sages; but what they aspire to is entirely different from what the sages said . . . Students who perceive that this is not the right attitude for a man, and who make efforts to avoid falling in with mean fellows, must repent and exert themselves strenuously in behalf of righteousness when they enter the examination hall. They will be able to write on their papers what they have learned and what they have determined to do, and they will not deviate from the ways of the sages.¹²¹

Those who were involved in the academies seldom turned their backs on the bureaucratic world entirely. This is most evident in the many famous academy teachers who also served as officials. For example, all of those teachers mentioned above went back and forth between teaching and official service.¹²² It is also likely, though less demonstrable, that students and unsuccessful candidates alternated between the academies and the examination halls. The requirement in 1196 that candidates declare they were not students of false learning implies a belief that many had been, and the logical place for such study would have been at academies. That is, the anti-examination orientation of academy education did not preclude such education from being useful in the examinations. And in some academies

compromises were made. For example, at the quasi-official Academy of the Illuminated Way (Ming-tao Shu-yüan) in Chien-k'ang fu, Chu Hsi's rules for the White Deer Hollow Academy were subscribed to but one third of all study time was set aside for examination preparation.¹²³

But even if the academy education was of little or no practical value, the triennial periodicity of the examinations made it quite possible for scholars to attend academies and take the examinations. For the mature literatus familiar with the examination curriculum, preparation was probably confined to the year preceding the preliminary examinations, which would have left him ample time for other pursuits. Since the examinations provided a major reason for literati to travel and many academies explicitly welcomed 'travelling scholars from the four quarters,' the year of the capital examinations should have been the busiest for academies. In this regard, it is suggestive that two of the most famous intellectual events of the Southern Sung, the meeting of Chu Hsi, Lu Chiu-yüan, Lü Tsu-ch'ien and others at Goose Lake in Hsin-chou, and Lu Chiu-yüan's lecture at the White Deer Hollow Academy both occurred in such years: 1175 and 1181.¹²⁴

A second factor helping to mute the conflict between academy and examination was that the government attempted to co-opt the academies into the official order. In fact, during the thirteenth century the political challenge represented by the Neo-Confucians was effectively neutralized through official accommodation. The ban on false learning, which had never been very effective, was lifted in 1202, two years after the death of Chu-Hsi. In the following years the court paid great lip service to Neo-Confucian doctrines, promoted Neo-Confucian officials (though seldom to important posts), and encouraged academies. Under the emperor Li-tsung (r. 1225–64), whose reign name itself – 'Ancestor of Principle' – was Neo-Confucian, many academies received imperially-inscribed plaques and a number were actually founded upon imperial command.¹²⁵ Even government schools were affected; we find thirteenth-century accounts of sacrificial halls being built and dedicated to Neo-Confucian masters at such schools, and of Neo-Confucian texts being used in them.¹²⁶

But muted though the conflict may have become it did not disappear, for both the dissatisfaction at the kind of education engendered by the examinations and the Neo-Confucian answer to this remained. Neo-Confucian academies were well suited to serve as refuges for frustrated scholars. Rejecting the examination life, they gave prestige and importance to the act of withdrawal and disinterested study. Frederic Wakeman has noted that 'an unbending moral integrity and idealism' which approached 'orthodox intellectual dissent . . . only became a habitual commitment during the Sung period.'¹²⁷ The Neo-Confucian belief in the vital importance of moral and

self-cultivation, together with the spread of academies wherein that cultivation could be pursued, served to strengthen the moral authority and autonomy of the scholar. The many literati who could not succeed in the examination hall were provided with a rationale for their studies which did not depend upon government service.

THE FAILURE OF FAIRNESS: EXAMINATIONS IN THE SOUTHERN SUNG

The examinations at mid-course

For the first fifteen years of the Southern Sung, the dynastic house of Chao was fighting for its life. The emperor Kao-tsung, who had ascended the throne at the age of twenty-one after his father Hui-tsung and brother Ch'in-tsung (r. 1126–7) had been captured by the Jurchen Chin, had to rule with remnants of the court from a variety of locations in central and southeastern China. He had to contend, moreover, not only with Chin invasions in 1129, 1134 and 1138, the first of which reached as far as southern Liang-che and central Chiang-nan-hsi, but also mutinies by troops, popular uprisings, repeated fiscal crises, and the burden of massive refugee migrations from the north.¹ The dynasty survived the crisis thanks to local militias and irregular troops (often rebels who had switched sides), outstanding generals like Yüeh Fei (1103–41), Han Shih-chung (1089–1151) and Chang Chun (1086–1164), and a willingness to settle for control of southern China alone. With the decision in 1138 to name the scenic city of Lin-an fu (Northern Sung Hang-chou) as the de facto capital and the conclusion in 1142 of peace with the Chin, a semblance of normality returned to the truncated empire.

Survival came at a price. To marshal the forces necessary to repel the Chin and restore internal order, the court had to allow a decentralization of military power. For the remainder of the Sung the empire was divided into four command systems,² and these affected civil as well as military administration, creating regional frameworks within which most officials spent their entire careers.³ Moreover, precisely because of the court's weakened position, Kao-tsung and his principal chief councilor Ch'in Kuei (1090–1155) refused to concede to the military the preeminence that a truly restorationist policy would have entailed, and adhered instead to the principle established by Sung T'ai-tsu of curbing outstanding generals and asserting civil control over the military. Their purge of generals, most notably Yüeh Fei who was subsequently assassinated in prison, and the unequal terms of the 1142 peace in which the Sung renounced their claim to all lands north of the Huai River

have drawn the almost unanimous condemnation of Chinese historians ever since, but however one views the outcome one must recognize that the actions were consistent with the commitment to civilism that characterized Sung rule from beginning to end.⁴ When the state donated Yüeh Fei's considerable estate to the University for a campus in 1143, it merely underscored that commitment.⁵

Examinations continued to be held throughout this tumultuous period, though usually at four rather than three-year intervals.⁶ This is not surprising, for such was their symbolic importance for Sung civilism that their abandonment would certainly have been seen by the elite as an admission of dynastic collapse, but it was impressive, for the obstacles to holding them were formidable. Lost were the past examination records from K'ai-feng and the entire north and even many southern prefectures, thus making it extremely difficult to certify candidates or to verify their eligibility for exemptions or facilitated degrees.⁷ Scattered throughout the south were northern literati, often without documents, who had to be provided for. Finally, there were the logistical problems of testing large numbers of literati and arranging for their travel.

The problem of records was addressed by widespread efforts at reconstruction. In prefectures where records were missing, a combination of personal records and guarantees from officials were relied upon, especially in the cases of past *chü-jen*.⁸ At the same time the court asked all prefectures to submit lists of past *chü-jen* along with their examination documents and also the prefectoral quota authorizations, for virtually all of its records had been lost.⁹

Refugee literati were asked for two guarantees each from officials and were then allowed to sit for the examinations in the prefecture where they were staying, but they were to be examined separately at 'refugee examinations' (*liu-yü-shih*) and not with the native literati. It is unclear whether these examinations, which were discontinued in 1156, were designed to spare refugees from competition with the natives or vice versa. They were initially given selection ratios of one *chü-jen* for each twenty candidates,¹⁰ and this was liberalized to one in fifteen in 1136,¹¹ but evidence from local histories suggests that by the 1150s a quota ratio of one in one hundred was being used, thus making the refugee examinations comparably competitive with the prefectoral examinations.¹² Interestingly, the numbers of literati taking the refugee examination were rather small; of the eleven refugee examination quotas to which I have found reference, six were for one *chü-jen*, three for two, and two for three.¹³ Thus numerically at least, the northern refugee impact upon Southern Sung examinations appears to have been minimal.

The logistical problems of holding the examinations also entailed

extraordinary measures. Late in 1127, Kao-tsung decreed from Yang-chou on the northern bank of the Yangtze River that the departmental examination not be held in K'ai-feng the following spring. Instead, its quota was to be divided up and *chü-jen* examined at the fiscal intendent's office of each circuit.¹⁴ These circuit examinations (*lei-shih*) were also held in 1132,¹⁵ so it was not until 1135 that the departmental examination was resumed, and then it was without the participation of Ssu-ch'uan *chü-jen*, who went to their own examination in Ch'eng-tu from then until the end of the Sung.¹⁶

The Southern Sung examinations therefore began in a completely decentralized fashion and so they continued after peace was restored, albeit to a lesser degree. Although Lin-an was the jewel of the south and quickly became the undisputed political and economic center of the empire, its examination record of 493 Southern Sung *chin-shih* was only modest, ranking eleventh among all prefectures.¹⁷ Perhaps for the first time the Chinese bureaucracy was dominated not by a metropolitan elite based in the capital, but drew more broadly from a number of flourishing prefectures.¹⁸

Why did Lin-an not dominate the examinations as K'ai-feng had? The decentralization of power which accompanied the restoration of order was largely responsible. In many parts of the south, elite families had survived the 1120s and 1130s only by asserting their local power, organizing militias, providing sanctuary for northern refugees, and the like. Such security, especially when set against the dangers of serving in high office, undoubtedly lessened the attraction of settling in Lin-an. Moreover, for southern literati Lin-an was much nearer than K'ai-feng had been, so settling one's family in the capital may have been less of a necessity for those appointed to metropolitan offices.

But in part at least, Lin'an's non-domination of the examinations was the result of government policy. Like K'ai-feng, Lin-an attracted large numbers of literati who stayed to take the examinations, but unlike their earlier counterparts, these Southern Sung literati were given a separate, extremely competitive examination. Known both as the *T'ung-wen-kuan-shih* ('examination of the T'ung-wen Hall') and the *Liang-che chüan-yün-ssu fu-shih* ('supplemental examination at the Liang-che fiscal intendent's office') or 'supplemental examination' (*fu-shih*) for short, it was started in 1144 as an examination for scholars in the capital whose homes were over 1,000 *li* (roughly 333 miles) away.¹⁹ By the 1170s it had evolved into an examination for provincial students who were studying in the prefectoral and county schools of Lin-an fu. The narrowness of its quota (see Table 14), however, meant that it offered no competitive advantage over the prefectoral examinations; indeed, it was more difficult than any but a few of them. Nor did the Northern Sung practice of falsifying one's residency offer much hope, for

Table 14. *The supplemental examination (fu-shih) for provincial candidates residing in Lin-an*

Year	Number of candidates	Quota	<i>Chü-jen/candidate ratio</i>
1174	87	1	1/87
1177	400	2–3	1/133–1/200
1189	1,311	10	1/131
1195	1,562	10	1/156
1198	1,667	10	1/167
1201	1,449	10	1/145
1204	1,389	10	1/139
1207	1,384	5	1/277
1210	1,069	4	1/267
1213	1,924	7	1/275
1216	1,671	6	1/262
1219	1,993	7	1/285
1222	2,493	10	1/249

Source: SHY:HC 16/19a–b, 21b, 25b, 28b–29a.

Lin-an's prefectoral examination quota was a mere 17 in 1156, increasing to 19 in 1234 and 22 in 1264.²⁰ Since the government could easily have made the quotas to both of these examinations much more generous, we must assume that they were intentionally kept small.

Whatever the reasons behind it, the consequences of this change in the capital's examination role were great. Just when the examinations were becoming much more popular and therefore more competitive, one of the primary routes that official families had used to move their sons through the system – the capital examination – was severely curtailed. In reaction they made increasing use of protection, they engaged in any number of ingenious methods of cheating, and they turned to special preliminary examinations and subverted them to their own ends. As a result the claim to fairness which had undergirded the Northern Sung examinations became increasingly empty.

The special preliminary examinations

Like an old house whose additions jut in odd directions, the examination system acquired a number of special preliminary examinations over the course of the Sung. Some such as the above-mentioned refugee and supplementary examinations, were established for limited and temporary purposes, even though the latter took on a life of its own. Others, however, were created in the early Sung in response to the same concern for fairness and opportunity that informed much of the examination system's development.

The most frequently mentioned worry was that favoritism by the examiners towards family or acquaintances would make success impossible for those without connections. In 997 the censor Wang Chi (952–1010) warned that ‘If examination selection is not strict the powerful will struggle to be foremost and the orphans and poor will have difficulty advancing.’²¹ His solution was to establish two separate channels of advancement in the examinations, one via the Directorate of Education for the sons, grandsons, nephews and brothers of court-grade officials, the other via the prefectoral examinations for relatives of lower officials and commoners. He continued:

If when they proceed to go up to the Board of Rites, the ranking of their capability also employs two groups, then the powerful will have a separate path and the orphaned and poor will be able to advance themselves.²²

Wang’s proposal, which is reminiscent of the dichotomy between ‘school selection’ and ‘district tribute’ candidates in the T’ang examinations, was never implemented as such, but the principle of segregating those with family connections was accepted and became embodied in the examinations for officials and for relatives of certain officials. Unfortunately separate examinations proved conducive to unequal treatment, and so in the long run the policy of segregating the relatives of officials in the interest of equity resulted in pronounced inequities.

This was not the case, however, with the preliminary examination for officials called the ‘locked hall examination’ (*suo-t’ing-shih*), which originated in the 980s.²³ The government seems to have looked with some disfavor upon officials taking the examinations simply for the prestige or the career advantages that passing them offered. To quote a memorial from 1018: ‘If people have official positions, then they should not compete for advancement with the orphaned and poor.’²⁴

Unlike the avoidance examination for relatives of officials with which it was often associated,²⁵ in the locked-hall examination candidates were punished if they did not meet the minimum qualifying standards. This originally entailed loss of office, but it was later reduced to a personal offense (*ssu-tsui*) and then to just a cash fine.²⁶ In addition, it was felt that officials taking the examinations should not be honored with top places on the examination list. Thus in 1148, Tung Te-yüan, a minor official and *chü-jen* from the locked-hall examination, was moved to the second place on the list even though he was credited with having written the best examination.²⁷ Finally, there is no evidence to suggest that the locked-hall examination gave its candidates a significant competitive advantage over those taking the prefectoral examination and it may in fact have been more competitive.²⁸

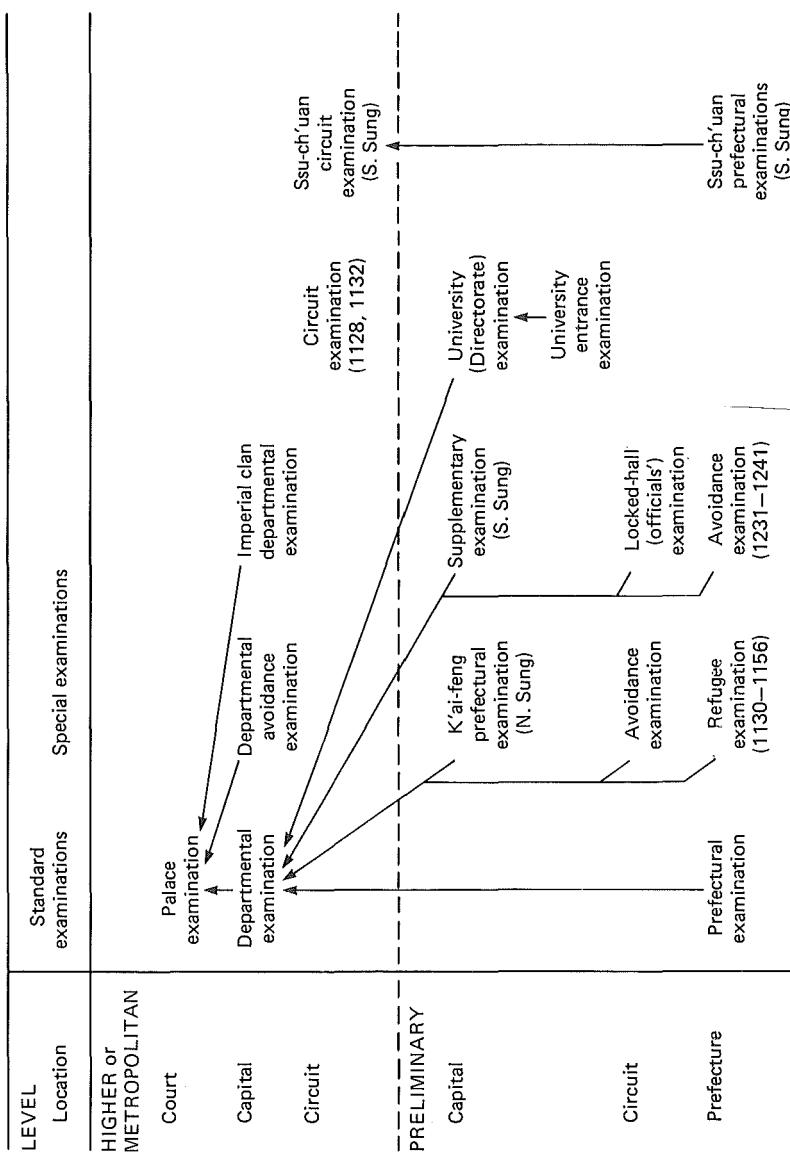


Fig. 4. The Sung examination system.

The avoidance examination appeared just slightly later than the locked-hall examination. In 998 a 'separate examination' (*pieh-shih*) was held for candidates who were related to the examiners at the K'ai-feng and Directorate of Education preliminary examinations.²⁹ From this simple beginning the avoidance examination, which was called by a variety of names,³⁰ expanded to include broader and broader categories of candidates. In 1037, three groups were ordered to go to the avoidance examination: the relatives of examination officials; the relatives of prefects serving in their home prefectures; and sons and grandsons accompanying officials who were serving more than 2,000 *li* away from their homes.³¹ In 1069, tutors (*men-k'o*) serving in the families of examination officials were included as well.³²

During the Southern Sung with its unprecedented and ever increasing examination competition, the avoidance examination continued to grow in size, with reports of candidate numbers ranging from 50 and 337 in Liang-che in 1192 and 1195³³ to 3,500 in Ssu-ch'uan in 1153³⁴ and 5,000 in Liang-che in 1241.³⁵ As early as the mid twelfth century concerns were repeatedly voiced about the large number of avoidance candidates and the question of eligibility attracted controversy.³⁶ Complained one memorialist in 1165:

In the avoidance examination regulations, scholars from Ssu-ch'uan and Kuang-nan may use it, yet [those from] Fu-chien are also being allowed [to take] the avoidance examination; [relatives of] incumbent officials may use it, yet [those of officials] who are awaiting vacancies and who will take office within a year are also being allowed [to take] the avoidance examination; mourning relatives within the same lineage may use it, yet relatives of the fifth degree who are outside the lineage are also being allowed [to take] the avoidance examination.³⁷

The last-mentioned problem of affinal kin, an especially critical one in the marriage-conscious world of the local elites, was the subject of no less than four contradictory edicts between 1168 and 1189.³⁸

When the avoidance examination regulations were codified in 1168,³⁹ the list of those eligible was considerably longer than it had been in 1037. Five groups were now included: (1) relatives (both paternal and maternal) accompanying officials who were either from Ssu-ch'uan or Kuang-nan⁴⁰ so long as their posts were over 2,000 *li* from their homes; (2) sons and grandsons of ranked military officials either from Ssu-ch'uan or Kuang-nan serving elsewhere or vice versa (as above); (3) relatives of prefects and vice-prefects who were serving in their home prefectures; (4) relatives of circuit officials whose circuits contained their home prefectures, though they had to go to a neighbouring circuit for the avoidance examination;⁴¹ and (5) tutors serving in the families of officials holding the office of investigating censor (*chien-ch'a*

yü-shih, grade 7B) or higher, though this was limited to one tutor per official.⁴² The quota-ratio for the avoidance examination was set at 1/40 and, finally, relatives of the last group of officials who were within the third degree of mourning (*ta-kung*) to them⁴³ were permitted to take the University preliminary examination, so long as they were guaranteed by two officials of capital grade or higher.

Fraud also played a role in the avoidance examinations, for complaints abounded of literati taking them illegally.⁴⁴

In the examinations the prefectural quotas are narrow and the candidates numerous, [while] the numbers selected at the circuit offices are rather large. Literati taking the examinations frequently forsake village tribute [i.e., the prefectural examination] and scheme for the [circuit] office list [i.e., the avoidance examination], going so far as to falsely claim [officials as] relatives and to fabricate household registrations lamented a memorial in 1163.⁴⁵ By 1231, so bad had this problem become that the circuit avoidance examinations were abolished and their quotas given to those prefectures with the most restrictive quotas.⁴⁶ However, this measure was effectively negated by an accompanying provision which allowed those who had been eligible for the avoidance examination to be examined separately in each prefecture and to be selected under a generous quota-ratio of 1/50.⁴⁷ Even as amended, the measure was short-lived, for the avoidance examinations were reestablished by 1241.⁴⁸

At the root of the problem lay quotas and differences in competition, for the avoidance examination quota-ratios, while not easy – they were variously 1/20, 1/40 and 1/50 during the Southern Sung – were very attractive when compared with the 1/100 or worse of the prefectural examinations, and this was in striking contrast to the Northern Sung, when the quota-ratios of the two examinations were kept roughly equal.⁴⁹ Accordingly, how to limit entry replaced favoritism by examiners as the dominant concern of memorials and edicts concerning the avoidance examination, and the formal name for it changed from *pieh-shih* ('separate examination') to *tieh-shih* ('official-list examination'). Despite the continuing use of the idea of avoidance to justify the examination, its main function became the provision of an examination *entrée* that was privileged, easier and even honored. Upon the completion of a new hall for the avoidance examination in Chiang-nan-tung in 1213, the respected scholar-official Chen Te-hsiu (1178–1235) wrote that

The area of Chiang-tung is large, its people numerous and their talent outstanding. In the past several decades, many have been those selected at the fiscal intendent's office examination who received high-placing degrees and had honored careers.⁵⁰

The last of the special preliminary examinations, that of the Directorate of Education or the University (*Kuo-tzu-chien chieh-shih, T'ai-hsüeh chieh-shih*⁵¹), underwent a different sort of evolution, but in it too privilege played a major role. As we saw in Chapter 3, the early Sung Directorate School was reserved for children of officials of the seventh grade or above, and only after the creation of the School of the Four Gates and the Imperial University in the 1040s were provisions made for accepting the children of low-grade officials and commoners. Later under the reformers' impetus the University became the empire's premier educational institution and open by examination to all literati, although a Directorate School for the children of officials remained as an adjunct to it.

The University offered its students two paths to officialdom. One, established with the creation of the Three Hall System at the University in 1071, lay in advancement within the University. Students in the upper hall (*shang-she*) could take the upper hall examination and, if they passed it, receive degree status directly. This achievement, known as 'shedding rough serge' (*shih-ho*), was extremely prestigious and difficult. Except for Hui-tsung's reign when over three hundred such degrees were given,⁵² few received it.⁵³

The other path was through the examinations and it was here that the University students received their greatest advantages, at least during the Southern Sung. Through most of the Northern Sung the government managed to keep competition at the Directorate preliminary examination on a rough par with the prefectoral and avoidance examinations,⁵⁴ but in the Southern Sung its quota-ratio was kept at between 1/4 and 1/5 while prefectoral competition rose precipitously.⁵⁵ In addition, some students were exempted from the departmental examination altogether. In the early Southern Sung, students in the inner and upper halls who had been to certain numbers of examinations in the past were granted exemptions from the preliminary and departmental examinations.⁵⁶ A century later provisions were even more generous, for students who had been enrolled for three years or more in the inner or upper halls, which then had over one hundred students, could skip the departmental examination and so were assured of receiving their *chin-shih* degrees.⁵⁷

These benefits proved a powerful attraction to literati frustrated by the regular examinations. Chu Hsi wrote that

The reason why literati today are unhappy with prefectoral selection and vie to rush to the University [entrance] examination is because the prefectoral quotas are narrow and the examinees many, while the University's [*chü-jen*] quota is ample and the examinees few.⁵⁸

But the very attractiveness of the University also made it extremely difficult for most students to gain admission.

The University entrance examination, which was usually held triennially following the departmental examination, underwent considerable change during the Southern Sung as different methods of determining eligibility for the examination were tried.⁵⁹ Most of the time the 'mixed entrance' (*hun-pu*) method was used which allowed any literati who fulfilled certain requirements such as residency in or recommendation by their prefectural schools to take the examination. Excessive numbers resulting from this method led to the introduction in 1177 of a more restrictive method called 'awaiting entrance' (*tai-pu*), in which only *chü-jen* and the top 3% (in 1183 it was raised to 6%) of prefectural candidates who had just missed selection as *chü-jen* could take the examination.⁶⁰ But it faced administrative problems and complaints of unfairness because of its restricted entry, so in 1202 the 'mixed entrance' method was reintroduced.⁶¹

Regardless of how eligibility was determined, the University entrance examination proved extremely popular. The number taking it went from 6,000 in 1143⁶² to 16,000 in 1175,⁶³ 28,000 in 1196,⁶⁴ and a remarkable 37,000 in 1202.⁶⁵ These gatherings, which must have visibly swelled Lin-an for their duration, were so difficult to manage that in 1251 separate entrance examinations were held in each circuit capital, though this experiment was apparently unsatisfactory for it was not repeated.⁶⁶ But increasing competitiveness was the most noteworthy consequence of the examination's popularity. With two to three hundred admitted every three years,⁶⁷ the selection ratio was 1/100 or worse at the turn of the thirteenth century and thus was on a par with the prefectural examinations.

But not all literati had to make their way through the tortuous entrance examination in order to take the University's preliminary examination, for there, as in the examinations at large, privilege played a critical role. In the avoidance examination regulations of 1168, as we noted above, certain relatives of officials with the office of investigating censor or above were permitted to take the University preliminary examination.⁶⁸ This provision was not new, for similar grants allowing the relatives of high officials to take the Directorate's examination had been made in 1130 and 1137 and were to be made in 1192.⁶⁹ The specific requirements varied among these acts: in 1130, the relatives of officials with duties (*chih-shih-kuan*) and officials regulating affairs (*li-wu-kuan*) at the capital were declared eligible;⁷⁰ while in 1192, though the same types of officials were mentioned, fewer of their relatives were eligible, the *li-wu-kuan* had to be at least of capital grade if civil officials and of court grade if military, and the guarantee provisions of 1160 were repeated.⁷¹

There were in addition the 'national youth students' (*kuo-tzu-sheng*) of the Directorate School, which had always served the children of officials

exclusively. In the mid thirteenth century its two hundred places were reserved for the sons, nephews or brothers of officials serving in court.⁷² The Directorate School may even have had its own preliminary examination. One late Southern Sung source describes a 'national youth' *tieh-shih* with a selection ratio of 1/5, which was about the same as the University.⁷³ This is probably the same examination as the *tieh-shih* for 'eldest sons' (*chou-tzu*) dealt with in a remarkable edict from 1261, which set quotas for the number of relatives different officials could have taking it. These ranged from forty for councilors (*tsai*) down to eight for the vice-prefect of Lin-an and one son or grandson for unnamed others who were eligible.⁷⁴ Both the form and size of these quotas are reminiscent of edicts concerning protection. Access to this special examination was clearly a prerogative of high office and had little or nothing to do with either avoidance or one's past accomplishments as a student.

In summary, by the late Southern Sung there were three distinct points of privileged entry to less competitive preliminary examinations: the protection-like 'national youth' *tieh-shih* for large numbers of relatives of the very highest officials and admission to the University preliminary examination for the relatives of high ranking officials serving primarily in the capital, both of which had a very liberal quota-ratio of 1/4–5; and one for the relatives of provincial officials who were, for the most part, of middle rank,⁷⁵ in which a quota-ratio of 1/40 was used, still liberal by prefectoral standards. Except in the cases of officials from or serving in Ssu-ch'uan, Kuang-nan and, after 1171, Fu-chien, the relatives of low ranking officials, who comprised the great majority of the bureaucracy, had no entree to the special examinations. In social terms, then, the line which separated the prefectoral examinations from those that offered competitive advantages lay not at the division between official and commoner but within the bureaucracy itself. The fruits of office were unequal, especially when one considers, as we now shall, the higher examinations where privilege also played a role.

The higher examinations

When a *chü-jen* arrived at the capital from his prefecture, he faced some three months of bureaucratic requirements, ceremonial occasions and, above all, two examinations. The first of these, the departmental examination, was the direct descendant of the T'ang Board of Rites examination and was often called by that name in the Sung. The second, the imperially-administered palace examination, had been created by the Sung founder T'ai-ts'u. Shorter and somewhat easier than the departmental examination, it was after 1057 largely a formality, albeit one of great symbolic import, for in that year all departmental graduates were guaranteed a pass at the palace examination,

thereby narrowing its role to one of placement of preselected graduates.⁷⁶ The departmental examination thus became the only competitive barrier confronting *chü-jen*.

Competition within the departmental examination varied over time and depended on two factors: the number of *chü-jen* taking it and the number of degrees being given. *Chü-jen* numbers, as we have seen, depended themselves upon the numerous qualifying examinations and the ever changing provisions for exemptions. The number of degrees to be given, by contrast, was a matter determined by the emperor or his chief ministers and they determined it using one of two methods.

During the early years of the dynasty, degree numbers were determined anew for each examination and this resulted in large fluctuations between examinations, as we have observed. Gradually this changed. In a report on the examination of 1005, reference was made to 'the unusual procedure of recommending approximately one in ten [for degrees],' but that ratio should probably be taken as a description of past results rather than as a regulation.⁷⁷ In 1034, however, a quota-ratio of 2/10 was mandated for the departmental examination.⁷⁸ Those who passed of course still had to pass the palace examination. In 1055, quotas of 400 *chin-shih* and 400 *chu-k'o* degrees were substituted for the quota ratio.⁷⁹ Thereafter, one or the other of these methods was used to determine the number of degrees to be given.⁸⁰ Degree numbers still varied; quotas were changed, sometimes even for specific examinations.⁸¹ But on the whole, the degree numbers remained stable as did the competition in the higher examinations. The ratio of *chü-jen* to degrees was 1/9.5 in 1086–93 and 1/10 in 1109.⁸² In the Southern Sung, the quota-ratio was set at 1/14 in 1127, lowered to 1/17 in 1163, then raised to 1/16 in 1175 where it remained.⁸³ This modest increase in competition contrasted dramatically with that in the prefectural examinations which, as we saw in Chapter 2, went from similar ratios in the Northern Sung to 1/200 or worse in the Southern Sung. Clearly, the locus of the most intense competition had moved from the capital to the prefecture.

To say that competition was worse in the prefectures than in the capital is not to say that odds of one in sixteen were good. There was ample incentive for *chü-jen* to avoid the departmental examination, if at all possible, and in fact that was possible for certain categories of candidates. We noted above that inner and upper hall students at the University could at times go directly to the palace examination and also how Ssu-ch'uan had its own departmental examination during the Southern Sung, although it should be pointed out that the Ssu-ch'uan quota-ratio, 1/14 before 1183 and 1/16 thereafter,⁸⁴ was very close to that of the regular departmental examination.

Imperial clansmen (*tsung-tzu*) were also given a special departmental

examination, at least during the Southern Sung. In the course of the dynasty, the perennial question of how best to treat the multiplying Chaos, who numbered in the thousands by the end of the Northern Sung,⁸⁵ elicited different policies. According to Li Yu, writing at the end of the Northern Sung, in the early Northern Sung when most clansmen were fairly close relatives of the emperor, few were allowed into the civil service and they were limited in how far they could rise.⁸⁶ Under Shen-tsung and Hui-tsung, however, they were treated more generously. Those with a mourning relationship to the emperor (i.e., with an imperial ancestor within five generations) could either receive office through protection or take the *chin-shih* examinations.⁸⁷ Those more distantly related, who by law were supposed to live outside of the capital, had no protection privileges but could take an examination called the *liang-shih* ('measuring examination'). Candidates were tested by the Board of Rites in either the classics or law and those who passed received facilitated *chin-shih* degrees. Under Hui-tsung this was easier than the *chin-shih* examination and even those who failed it could still obtain official rank after further tutoring at the Board of Rites.⁸⁸

During the early Southern Sung, imperial clansmen advanced both via the *liang-shih* and the *chin-shih* examinations, but when they took the latter they were treated as a special and separate group. In 1145, candidates from the imperial clan living in Lin-an were told to go to the University preliminary examination, where they were to be selected with a quota-ratio of 3/7 if they were officials or 4/7 if they were not; those outside the capital were to take the avoidance examination at the fiscal intendent's office and be selected together with the relatives of officials.⁸⁹ This special treatment extended to the departmental examination as well. According to the Sung historian, Li Hsin-ch'uan, quota-ratios of 1/7 were used for imperial clansmen in both the preliminary and departmental examinations, though the departmental ratio was changed to 1/10 during the Ch'un-hsi reign period (1174–89).⁹⁰ Thus the imperial clansmen were competing primarily, and often exclusively, among themselves.

Although we have no information about the *liang-shih* for most of the Southern Sung, there is a set of documents describing its workings in the years 1162–72.⁹¹ It was held at about the same time as the palace examination and resembled the regular examinations closely in its curriculum. It produced forty to fifty graduates each time it was held, and they were given low military ranks. Despite their military titular offices, these graduates were called *chin-shih*, though their status was probably that of facilitated *chin-shih* like their Northern Sung predecessors.⁹² We noted in Chapter 2 that there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of imperial *chin-shih* beginning from around 1190 and by 1256, 76 of the 572 *chin-shih* were imperial clansmen.⁹³

Although I have found no evidence concerning this change, it might well have been caused by making the *liang-shih* graduates regular rather than facilitated *chin-shih*.

There was finally an avoidance examination for relatives of departmental examination officials (*pieh-shih* or *pieh-yüan-shih*). It had its origins in the examination of 1007 when a proctoring official, Chang Shih-sun (964–1049), discovered that some of the examinees were related to examiners and, with the emperor's support, insisted that they be examined separately.⁹⁴ For most of the Sung this examination seems to have functioned just to insure avoidance, but in the thirteenth century, when it had a quota-ratio of 1/7 (or less than half that of the departmental examination),⁹⁵ attempts were made to include other groups of *chü-jen* in it. After 1190, *chü-jen* who were officials were also examined separately,⁹⁶ and around 1230, other groups were included as well. A *Sung shih* entry from 1243 recounts what happened:

The separate hall examination was generally intended for those scholars who were actually related to examination officials. During Shao-ting [1228–33], those from the 'eldest sons examination'⁹⁷ who had no relationships that had to be avoided were also allowed to take it. Some said that this was because of the greed of the children of powerful officials. In early Tuan-p'ing [1234–7], [such candidates] were sent back to the Great Hall [i.e., the departmental examination] and poor scholars benefited from this. In the first year of Ch'un-yu [1241], they were again sent to the separate hall. This has caused men who should not be subject to avoidance to look forward to it and go. This has caused the scholars of the world to be split without reason and made into two trunks, [thereby] obliterating the original purpose of the separate examination. For this reason, the reform of Tuan-p'ing which made them return to the Great Hall is to be followed.⁹⁸

The comment about the division of the world's scholars is revealing, for nothing compromised the dynasty's concern for fairness and impartiality so much as the special examinations. Because of quota differences the special examinations gave a privileged minority a competitive edge in the examinations, and in effect did create two classes or trunks of scholars.

The extent of privilege

Special examinations, as we have seen, flourished in the Southern Sung and offered those with high ranking relatives comparatively easy paths to the *chin-shih*. But how important were they? What proportion of degree holders did they account for? This question cannot be answered with any precision, for as a rule neither biographies nor examination lists specify the type of examination that people took. Nevertheless the existing records can yield a

good deal of information on this issue, especially if one reverses the question and asks after the importance of the regular examinations.

The most revealing sources for the prefectural examinations consist of three Sung *chü-jen* lists, two for prefectures and one for a county: the prefectures Su-chou in Liang-che-hsi, a rich, populous, cultured prefecture with one of the greatest cities in the empire, and Chi-chou in Chiang-nan-hsi, a prosperous prefecture located on the Kan River and one of the most prolific producers of *chin-shih* during the Sung; the county Shun-ch'ang hsien of Nan-chien chou, situated in the western mountains of Fu-chien. The lists differ in their timespans: 1126–74 for Shun-ch'ang,⁹⁹ 1148–1274 for Su-chou,¹⁰⁰ and 1058–1274 for Chi-chou plus 979–1052 for one of its counties.¹⁰¹ But they are alike in listing only the *chü-jen* selected in the prefectural examinations.¹⁰² By comparing these lists with the *chin-shih* lists for the same places, we can determine the numbers and percentages of *chin-shih* who had passed the prefectural examination rather than one of the special examinations. Table 15 shows the results of such a comparison, using only the Southern Sung portion of the Chi-chou list.

Table 15. *Percentages of chin-shih listed in chü-jen lists from prefectural examinations*

Period covered	Total <i>chü-jen</i>	Total <i>chin-shih</i>	<i>Chin-shih</i>		% of all <i>chin-shih</i>
			who were <i>chü-jen</i>	% of all <i>chin-shih</i>	
<i>Shun-ch'ang</i>					
hsien (a)	1126–69*	85	14	10	71.4
Chi-chou (b)	1127–1279	2,798**	661	406	61.4
Su-chou (c)	1147–1259	475†	252	57	22.6

Sources: (a) MS 103/16b et seq. (b) T'ao Ch'eng, *Chiang-hsi t'ung-chih* ch. 49–51. The nineteenth century *Chi-an fu chih* by Liu I has lengthier lists of both *chin-shih* and *chü-jen*, but using them yields similar results. Reading across from the *chü-jen* column, its figures are: 3,013; 759; 466; and 58.8%. (c) Fan Ch'eng-ta, *Wu-chün chih* 28 for *chin-shih*, *Chiang-su chin-shih chih* 10/6a–13a for *chü-jen*. Lu Hsiung, *Su-chou fu chih*, 50 ch. (1379 ed.) ch. 12 has more *chin-shih* listed for the same years. Using it, the figures are: 475; 297; 58; 19.5.

*The *chü-jen* list for Shun-ch'ang actually continues on through 1174, but the *chin-shih* list stops at 1169. Thus this cutoff date.

**There are 2,872 names on the *chü-jen* list, but 67 of them were from the University entrance examination, 4 were from the refugee preliminary examination, and 3 were from the avoidance examination. None of these was included.

†Eight *chü-jen* from two undated but pre-1147 Shao-hsing (1131–62) examinations have been included. Because of textual lacunae, only 402 of the 475 *chü-jen* can be identified with certainty. The number of *chin-shih* who were prefectural *chü-jen*, therefore, is undoubtedly greater than the 57 listed, but even if all of the *chü-jen* in question had become *chin-shih*, the percentage would still have only been 51.5%.

Table 16. Percentages of Southern Sung *chin-shih* listed in the prefectoral *chü-jen* lists of Chi-chou and Su-chou

Period	Chi-chou		Su-chou	
	<i>Chin-shih</i> numbers	Percentages of <i>chin-shih</i> who were prefectoral <i>chü-jen</i>	<i>Chin-shih</i> numbers	Percentages of <i>chin-shih</i> who were prefectoral <i>chü-jen</i>
1127–62	72	79.2	33*	9.1
1163–89	44	79.5	79	21.5
1190–1207	55	61.8	61	16.4
1208–25	88	67.0	56	19.6
1226–40	96	74.0	36	22.2
1241–64	172	54.9	32†	28.1
1265–79	130	42.0		

Sources: see Table 15.

*For 1148–62 only, for the *chü-jen* list only begins with the examination of 1148.

†For 1241–59 only, for the *chü-jen* list ends with the examination of 1259.

The variation in the percentages of *chin-shih* appearing on the prefectoral lists is large, and there is reason to believe that it was actually even larger. Two of the four Shun-ch'ang *chin-shih* who are not listed as *chü-jen* received their degrees in 1127 and might well have been prefectoral *chü-jen* before 1126. Excluding them would yield a percentage of 83.3. The Shun-ch'ang numbers, of course, are too small to be of much significance, but such is not the case with Chi-chou and Su-chou. As we can see in Table 16 which gives their *chin-shih*/prefectoral *chü-jen* percentages over time, for much of the twelfth century Chi-chou's was comparable to that of Shun-ch'ang, though it fell dramatically in the late Northern Sung. By contrast, Su-chou's percentage was far lower than Chi-chou's but rose from the late twelfth century on.

The regional character of variations in the importance of the prefectoral examinations will be discussed in the next chapter. Here we might simply point out certain sociopolitical differences which lay behind the very different experiences of Su-chou and Chi-chou. Su-chou was not simply an extremely wealthy urban center but was important politically as well, producing no fewer than twelve chief-councilors and assistant-councilors during the Sung.¹⁰³ Yet when compared with other southeastern prefectures, its *chin-shih* numbers were not especially large and, more significantly, both its Southern Sung quota of 12–13 and its candidate population – reported at

Table 17. *Prefectural examination chü-jen among chin-shih classified by patrilineage; Chi-chou and Su-chou, 1148 and 1256*

Patrilineal background	Listed as prefectural examination <i>chü-jen</i>	Not so listed
Living court or capital grade officials*	1	5
Chi-chou	(1)	(2)
Su-chou	(0)	(3)
Other officials	8	5
Chi-chou	(6)	(3)
Su-chou	(2)	(2)
Commoner (no officials listed)	13	9
Chi-chou	(13)	(8)**
Su-chou	(0)	(1)†

Sources: SYKCSL *passim*; T'ao Ch'eng, *Chiang-hsi t'ung-chih* ch. 49–51; *Chiang-su chin-shih chih* 10/6a–13a.

*There were no provisions in the regulations for the relatives of dead officials to take the avoidance examination. In this it differed from protection.

**Two were University students and two imperial clansmen.

†A University student.

2,000 in the thirteenth century – were unusually small.¹⁰⁴ What this would seem to indicate is a small, powerful, highly-placed elite whose members were able, on the whole, to take the special preliminary examinations. Robert Hartwell has argued from the Su-chou example that the power of newly established local elite families was enhanced by the limited prefectural quotas, since they ‘controlled access to those slots’.¹⁰⁵ I would submit that the power of the Su-chou elite was most visible in its continued access to the special preliminary examinations, and that in this respect it was unusual. Chi-chou, by contrast, had more than twice as many *chin-shih*, a much larger prefectural quota,¹⁰⁶ and a far larger literati population.¹⁰⁷ Yet it produced only eight chief-councilors and assistant-councilors, and half of them were from the Northern Sung.¹⁰⁸

In both prefectures relatives of high ranking officials tended to avoid the prefectural examination. Thus in Table 17, which analyses the forty-one *chin-shih* from Su-chou and Chi-chou whose names appear both in the prefectural lists and those of 1148 and 1256, most of the *chin-shih* who were related to high officials did not pass the prefectural examination, while most of the others did. Furthermore, of the nine ‘commoners’ who do not appear on the prefectural lists, five were University students or imperial clansmen.

Table 18. Comparison of Sung chin-shih and departmental graduate totals

Period	Departmental graduates	<i>Chin-shih</i>	Triannual difference	Departmental graduates per <i>chin-shih</i>
973–97*	1,641**	1,492	+ 17	0.91
998–1021	2,672	1,615	+ 132	0.60
1122–63	5,274	4,255	+ 73	0.81
1064–85	2,971	2,845	+ 17	0.96
1086–1100	2,682	2,679	0	1.00
1101–26	5,495	5,495***	0	1.00
1127–62	2,069	3,319†	–138	1.60
1163–89	3,126	4,066	–104	1.30
1190–1207	2,179	2,793	–102	1.28
1208–25††	1,698	2,941	–207	1.73

Sources: See Appendix 2.

*Until the palace examination was begun in 973, the departmental graduates all received degrees.

**Includes no figures for the departmental examinations held in 980, 983, 992. If one omits the *chin-shih* figures for those years, the *chin-shih* would total 779, the triannual difference would be 95, and the ratio 0.46.

***Does not include 336 *chin-shih* who were promoted directly from the University during non-examination years.

†Since no departmental examinations were held in 1128 and 1132, the *chin-shih* totals from those years have not been included. For the years 1135–62, 328 specially designated *Ssu-ch'uan chin-shih* have been included.

††1223 is the last examination for which SHY:HC 1 gives departmental examination figures.

But we should also note that seven of the eight Su-chou *chin-shih* had forefathers who were officials, compared with only twelve out of thirty-three in Chi-chou. Thus the conclusion that Chi-chou's literati population was larger but less privileged than that of Su-chou is not unreasonable.

However we explain the differences between these two prefectures, it should be clear that the special examinations were important throughout the Southern Sung. In the empire's more cultured prefectures they could account for anywhere from twenty to eighty percent of their *chin-shih*. The range is huge and makes it impossible to estimate the aggregate percentage for the empire. But we will see in the next chapter that for many prefectures in the southeast the figure was probably comparable to Su-chou's eighty percent.¹⁰⁹

Fortunately the evidence on the higher examinations is more informative, for the *Sung hui-yao* provides the number of graduates for every departmental examination from 960 to 1224. When one compares them with the

actual *chin-shih* figures (Table 18), an interesting pattern emerges. For the first century, or until the palace examination ceased being used to select individuals in 1057, there were many more departmental graduates than *chin-shih*. From then until the end of the Northern Sung, virtually all departmental graduates and they alone received *chin-shih*. In the Southern Sung, however, *chin-shih* substantially outnumbered the departmental graduates,¹¹⁰ accounting for roughly one third of all Southern Sung *chin-shih* up to 1225.

Which examinations did that one third pass? For the departmental avoidance examination we have no quantitative information at all. Ssu-ch'uan's circuit examination may have accounted for as much as half of them (18% out of 38%) in 1127–62, but this dropped to less than a third (9% out of 32%) in 1190–1225.¹¹¹ Many others came through the University. In addition to the above-mentioned provisions exempting upper and inner hall students from the departmental examinations, an edict from 1169 states that 133 University students 'received titular office' (*shou-kuan*) in the examinations that year, or 22% of the 592 degrees conferred that year.¹¹² But this certainly included many who took the departmental examination and perhaps even some facilitated degree recipients as well. We also know that imperial clansmen numbered 16 (4.8%) in the examination of 1148 and 76 (13.3%) in 1256.¹¹³ Thus Ssu-ch'uan, the University, the imperial clan and probably also the departmental avoidance graduates were well represented among the *chin-shih* who had not passed the departmental examination.

In summary, during the Southern Sung it was common for *chin-shih* to have passed at least one special examination, and they may indeed have outnumbered those who passed only the regular examinations. This might not seem very different from the 1060s when, as we saw in Chapter 3, K'ai-feng and the Directorate examinations accounted for 40–50% of all *chin-shih*. But the K'ai-feng examination was, technically at least, a regular prefectural examination. What set off the Southern Sung was the proliferation and popularity of the special examinations, for in providing numerous paths for the privileged who could thereby escape the almost impossible odds of the prefectural examinations they served to undermine and degrade the examination system so carefully developed during the early Sung.

The examinations in decline

The quest for advantage did not stop at the special examinations. For many literati the road to success lay through cheating, fraud and bribery, and these appeared in numerous, often ingenious guises. These included having someone else take the examinations for one, smuggling cribs into the examinations, copying other people's answers, bribing clerks and examining officials,¹¹⁴ and, as we saw in Chapter 3, falsifying residency or family information.¹¹⁵

The use of cribs is of special interest because of its connection with books and printing. In 1112 there were complaints about students smuggling 'small basted-together volumes with minute fly's head [sized] characters' into the examinations. These books included Wang An-shih's *New Commentaries on the Three Classics*, the Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu (Taoist books were then a part of the curriculum) and bookstores were ordered to stop printing and selling them.¹¹⁶ But the prohibition had no lasting impact, for in 1223 renewed complaints described printed pocket-books with all of the examination topics, designed specifically for smuggling into the examinations, and reportedly fetching high prices among literati.¹¹⁷

As with the special examinations, the main beneficiaries of examination corruption were those with money and connections. Hung Mai recounts the story of one Shen Shu, a Hu-chou native who at the invitation of his brother-in-law Fan Yen-hui, an official in Lin-an, went in the fall of 1144 to take the University preliminary examination. Upon his arrival he discovered that he was ineligible because he was of a different lineage than Yen-hui. The Fans then arranged for him to falsely register as a refugee residing in Lin-an and thus eligible for the Lin-an refugee examination, and found an official who, for a mere twenty-five thousand cash, acted as his guarantor. Two nights before the examination, Shen was confronted in a dream by venerable spirits who warned him: 'This is not where you live. Return [home] quickly or we will kill you.' He did and with the active aid of the spirits passed both the Hu-chou and departmental examinations.¹¹⁸

However we interpret such divine intercession,¹¹⁹ a scandal which erupted in 1148 over the previous year's Liang-che avoidance examination suggests that the bribery to which the Fans willingly resorted was not unusual.

Many powerful families paid bribes and conspired to have those taking the examinations exchange answer sheets and write answers for others [or] write draft answers which would be copied on the real answer sheets. Some assumed the names of others and went to the examinations; some brought in model answers from outside and copied them out after receiving their answer sheets.¹²⁰

Eight years later a case surfaced in which eight virtually illiterate children who were, however, from families of officials, received *chin-shih* degrees. 'Although the examinations still exist, the path of fairness [*kung-tao*] has been terminated,' protested the memorialist, who succeeded in having the degrees of the eight revoked and their places added to the upcoming departmental examination quota.¹²¹

Professor James T.C. Liu has observed that Sung examination abuses first became a significant problem in the late Northern Sung and only became

severe in the Southern Sung.¹²² The fact that the majority of complaints about abuses dates from the Southern Sung and the connection that some critics drew between huge literati numbers, competition, and corruption both support this conclusion.¹²³ But we must not imagine that the examinations were in shambles, for despite all of the problems and corruption, the examinations were held punctually and usually without untoward incident throughout the Southern Sung. Great care, moreover, was taken with examination regulations. One set of prefectoral examination rules, which were printed in Lin-an and distributed to all prefectures in 1177, had been drawn up a few years earlier by Shih Hao (1106–94) when he had to supervise the mammoth Fu-chou (in Fu-chien) examination.

When I was prefect of Fu-chou [in Fu-chien], I worked out several score items [of rules]. The 'evening problem' was eliminated¹²⁴ and the examination hall was well ordered. The candidates numbered twenty thousand men, [but] there was no shouting or clamour.¹²⁵

That such careful attention was paid to the prefectoral examinations even as imperial clansmen and the relatives of high officials were avoiding them whenever possible illustrates the great distance the examination system had come since the early Sung. The early emperors, we will recall, had directed their policy of 'fairness' (*kung*) at curbing the powerful and attracting the talented, especially from among southern literati. Southern Sung writers also appealed to 'fairness,' but the very different social conditions of that era gave the term a different meaning, one which emphasized the perception of fairness and not necessarily its reality. In 1156 it was decided that the ban against using cribs be enforced even among imperial clansmen, so as to 'demonstrate the utmost fairness in the world.'¹²⁶ Yet more telling was Hsü Chi-chih's earlier cited defense of the use of covered names in the examinations, namely that it enabled the 'eminent talents' of the world to 'submit to the fairness of the examinations.'¹²⁷ Thus fairness was used to pacify the masses of literati who were threatening to overwhelm the examination system, even as the unfairness of special examinations continued unabated.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SUCCESS

The rise of the south

In the vast patchwork quilt of local economies and social structures that constituted Sung China, the examination system was one of the hierarchical systems upon which the empire depended. Extending into virtually every prefecture, the examinations played a vital role in promoting political stability and imperial integration. By providing a common educational curriculum and periodically assembling literati in prefectures, circuit offices (for the avoidance examinations) and the capital, they fostered a literati culture that encompassed the empire. Because the rewards of status, wealth, and the power that comes from representation in the bureaucracy benefited not only the men who passed but their families, lineages and regions too, kin and community support for promising students was common, as was local pride in the accomplishments of native scholars, examples of which abound in local histories.

The examinations could also be divisive, for since the degrees were limited in number, one group or region's gain was usually another's loss, and local pride could easily turn to resentment. This problem appeared with particular urgency during the Northern Sung when China's political and cultural center was rapidly shifting to the south.¹ This shift was closely related to a southward economic and demographic movement which began as early as the Han and culminated in the great migrations of the late T'ang and Five Dynasties, when many moved to escape the dynastic struggles in the north, and the early Southern Sung, when people from every walk of life fled the Jurchen.² But while this long-term change was undoubtedly the major force behind the political rise of the south, the early Sung emperors' policy of broad and impartial recruitment through the examinations provided its vehicle. Through success in the examinations, southern literati rose from obscurity and by the late eleventh century had come to dominate the civil service.³ Thus the dynasty's flight from K'ai-feng in 1127 and its reincarnation as a southern dynasty followed and did not cause the southward shift in power.

Not surprisingly, the growing role of the south stirred up feelings of

sectional, north-south antagonism.⁴ Not untypical was the following discourse by the Northern Sung reformer and K'ai-feng native Sung Ch'i of the differences between the northwest and southeast, the traditional and emerging centers of power and culture:

In the southeast, heaven and earth are mysterious and hidden, yielding, soft and base; in the northwest, heaven and earth are strong and upright, brave, honorable and majestic. Thus the flourishing of emperors and kings has always occurred in the northwest, which is the way of heaven, and the southeast is the way of earth. What is to be done about the southeast? It is said, 'Its soil is thin and its water shallow. Its living things are nourished, its resources are rich. Its men rob and do not consider that important. They waste food and dishonesty is produced. Scholars are timid and few are constant; if you press them they will yield.' And what of the northwest? It is said, 'Its soil is thick and its water cold. Its living things are few, its resources are unproductive. Its men are resolute and simple. What they eat is tasteless but diligence is produced. Scholars are extremely profound but few are clever; if you pressure them they will not yield.'⁵

Apart from such stereotyping, the growing prominence of southern literati raised a fundamental question concerning examination policy: should the locus of the examinations' fairness be the region or the individual? If one took as a goal a fundamental regional balance within the bureaucracy, then regional quotas were necessary, for without them those from backward regions would be unable to compete with those from the most advanced regions, who had far greater economic and educational resources on which to draw. If, however, one operated solely from the principle of selecting the most talented men, then, given regional disparities in development, regional quotas would be both counterproductive and unfair to those from the more advanced regions.

The clearest statements of these opposing arguments occurred in a famous debate in 1064 between Ssu-ma Kuang, a scion of a venerable northwestern family, and Ou-yang Hsiu, born of a minor bureaucratic family from Chiang-hsi. The date is significant for at that time there was considerable discussion and activity concerning the examinations. Empire-wide prefectoral quotas had been set in 1058, adjusted for certain areas in 1060, and were to be reset in 1066.⁶ Also in 1066, the examination period was to be lengthened from two to three years, so as to give scholars from distant prefectures more time between examinations.⁷ The debate furthermore came at the end of a half century during which, as we shall see, the number of degree-holders from southern China increased dramatically, thereby challenging the age-old

Table 19. Chü-jen to chin-shih ratios for selected circuits in the examinations of 1059, 1061, and 1063

	1059			1061			1063		
	CS	CJ	CS/CJ	CS	CJ	CS/CJ	CS	CJ	CS/CJ
Directorate	22	118	1/5	28	108	1/4	30	111	1/4
K'ai-feng fu	44	278	1/6	69	266	1/4	66	307	1/5
Ho-pei	5	152	1/30	—	—	—	1	154	1/154
Ho-tung	0	44	0	0	41	0	1	45	1/45
Ching-tung	5	157	1/31	5	150	1/30	—	—	—
Shan-hsi	—	—	—	1	123	1/123	2	124	1/62
Tzu-chou	2	63	1/32	—	—	—	—	—	—
Li-chou	2	26	0	—	—	—	0	28	0
K'uei-chou	1	28	1/28	0	32	0	—	—	—
Ching-hu-nan	2	69	1/35	2	69	1/35	2	68	1/34
Ching-hu-pei	—	—	—	0	24	0	1	23	1/23
Kuang-nan-tung	3	97	1/32	2	84	1/42	0	77	0
Kuang-nan-hsi	0	38	0	0	63	0	0	63	0

Source: Ssu-ma Kuang, *Ssu-ma kung wen-chi* 30/2a-3b.

Note: The *chi-jen* figures include all *chi-jen* (those from the preliminary examinations and those with exemptions) who took the departmental examination. They do not include *chi-jen* selected by their prefectures who did not make the trip to the capital.

domination of bureaucracy by the north. Finally, we should note that both men spoke (or actually wrote, since the 'debate' consisted of a memorial by Ssu-ma Kuang, which was in fact written in support of another memorial that is no longer extant⁸ and an answering memorial by Ou-yang Hsiu) from the authority of experience. Ou-yang had been Director of the Examinations in 1057 and Ssu-ma the Acting Associate Director in 1063.⁹

In his memorial, Ssu-ma Kuang contended that the examination system discriminated unfairly against candidates from distant and less developed regions, particularly the northwest and southwest. Lacking the educational opportunities of the capital and southeastern regions and enduring great hardships to travel to the capital, they were at a disadvantage in the departmental examination and did poorly. In support of this thesis, he gave statistics from the departmental examinations of 1059, 1061, and 1063 demonstrating the poor performance of candidates from the north and west compared with those from the capital (see Table 19). To rectify this unfair situation, he proposed establishing quotas by circuit in the departmental examination, set by a quota-ratio (he suggested one in ten) as in the qualifying examinations. Thus he would have modified the merit criterion to insure a more equitable geographical distribution of *chin-shih* degrees.¹⁰

Ou-yang Hsiu made several points in response.¹¹ First, he argued that a comparison of *chin-shih* results was misleading when considering the northwest and southeast. The former had always been strong in classical studies, so its candidates tended to excel in the *chu-k'o* examinations, while the latter was strong in literary studies and produced many *chin-shih*. Second, he disparaged the educational level of some of the distant regions such as the Kuang-nan circuits in the far south: 'These circuits rely only upon numbers in sending up [*chü-jen*]. The *chü-jen*, too, know that they lack literary skills. They merely go once to the metropolitan examination and then return to become irregular officials.'¹² Third, Ou-yang pointed out that the southeastern *chü-jen* had already been through much greater competition in the prefectural examinations than those from other areas, and so were already being discriminated against. In his view, further restrictions of southeastern candidates through geographical quotas would be extremely unfair.

Finally, Ou-yang heatedly rebutted a point raised not by Ssu-ma but by other supporters of regional quotas, that unless the northwest was treated more generously in the examinations, its scholars might rebel. He pointed out that the northwest had no monopoly on rebels, the southeast having produced such famous examples as Hsiang Yü, the rival to the Han founder Liu Pang, Hsiao Hsien in the Sui, and Huang Ch'ao and Wang Hsien-chih in the late T'ang. But his central point was that containing potential rebels was an inappropriate use of the examinations: 'The examinations were established

basically to await those of sagely ability. For winning over lawless men there should be other methods which do not involve the examination hall.¹³

This last assertion is noteworthy more for its frank statement of the issue than for its validity as a normative statement, for one of the essential functions of the examinations was clearly to maintain the support of potentially rebellious elites.¹⁴ And however principled Ou-yang's arguments may have been, they resulted in enormous benefits for his native region, the southeast. Ssu-ma's protests and proposals went unheeded, for despite certain exceptions that we will shortly consider, the departmental examinations remained without geographical quotas, and as a result the southeast was able to dominate the examinations and bureaucracy in a manner unparalleled in Chinese history. For in subsequent dynasties, regional and, under the Mongols and Manchus, even racial quotas were used in the allocation of *chin-shih* degrees.¹⁵

This conclusion, while important, is vague, for the term 'southeast' covered a variety of regional economies and local cultures during the Sung. To even begin to understand the geographical dimensions of the examinations — the reasons for the success of a locality or region and the patterns of success — a much more detailed analysis is necessary. Unfortunately, few of the studies that have been made on the subject discuss regional differences or offer hypotheses to explain them. In part, this inattention has stemmed from insufficient data. The data bases used by studies thus far have ranged from a few hundred to almost fifteen hundred individuals. These are considerable numbers, but when spread over an entire dynasty or even half of it, they are insufficient to allow for very detailed analysis. Furthermore, since most of these studies have been based upon biographical collections, the possibility of geographical biases in the selection of biographies cannot be avoided or resolved.¹⁶ Examination lists are fortunate in this regard, for they reflect a selection process which had relatively objective and ascertainable criteria. Kracke's short but excellent study of regionalism in the examinations of 1148 and 1256 therefore avoids many of the problems inherent in the other studies.¹⁷ Yet he in turn was confronted by another problem, that of generalizing from the results of just two examinations, particularly for those regions that did poorly in those examinations, since places could and did have exceptionally good and bad years.

The data to be used in this chapter circumvent most of these problems. They consist of numerical listings of *chin-shih* degrees by prefecture and examination for all prefectures under Sung control (Chin examination results will not be considered) for all of the Sung. These data have been gathered from prefectoral and provincial local histories dating from the Sung through the Ch'ing using, as a rule, the earliest extant list for each prefecture. The

results of this compilation are uneven. In north China, successive waves of destructive warfare subsequent to the Northern Sung made examination lists so fragmentary as to be almost useless. There is also a question concerning the reliability of Ming and Ch'ing lists. This is discussed at length in Appendix 4 and the following conclusions are reached: the degree numbers for north China and especially for K'ai-feng are far too low; those for the southeast, especially for the two Chiang-nan circuits, are somewhat high; and those for certain peripheral regions of south China are somewhat low. Even with these reservations, however, the data for south China appear to be generally reliable.

Two factors make this body of data particularly attractive to the historian. One is its comprehensiveness and scope. Since it covers some thirty-five thousand individuals, its very size should permit a higher level of generalization about the regional distribution of degree holders and changes in that distribution than has hitherto been possible. Second is its use of the prefectoral unit. Ideally the county unit should have been used, but the labor and problems associated with compiling separate lists for over eleven hundred counties made that unfeasible for this study. Nevertheless, the use of the prefecture as the basic unit, as it was in the examinations, should not only facilitate comparisons with other studies using larger units but also enable us to test hypotheses regarding the role of regions in examination success.

Geographical biases

Even though the Sung examinations never employed a system of regional quotas, they were far from blind to geographical considerations. The ideal of all candidates competing under uniform conditions was qualified in two important respects.

The first concerns the setting of prefectoral quotas. The reader may have noticed that Ou-yang Hsiu's statement about the several prefectoral examination competitions in the southeast is at variance with the description in Chapter 2 of how prefectoral quotas were set according to uniform quota-ratios after 1009. The existence of large discrepancies in prefectoral competition may be explained in part by the fact that, in the sometimes lengthy periods between the empire-wide adjustments in prefectoral quotas, differences in educational development produced differences in examination competition. At the time Ou-yang was writing, it had been almost twenty years since quotas had last been set on the basis of candidate numbers and a uniform quota-ratio,¹⁸ the 1058 setting of quotas mentioned above was in fact a halving of the existing quotas and not a recomputation using new statistics of candidate numbers. But this is at best a partial explanation, for there is evidence suggesting that there was a consistent policy of restricting

the quotas of advanced prefectures and allowing more backward ones larger quotas than the legislated quota-ratio would have permitted.

The redetermination of quotas that occurred in 1045 provides perhaps the best example of such restrictions. The new prefectoral quotas were to be two tenths of the number of candidates taking the examinations in 1037 or 1041, whichever was greater, but a prefecture's new quota could not be more than 50% larger than its old quota.¹⁹ This prevented the more developed prefectures from increasing their quotas inordinately but it also meant that differences in competition remained. Later, in 1156 when quotas were set based on a quota-ratio of 1/100, 'three prefectures', probably Wen-chou, T'ai-chou and Wu-chou (all in Liang-che-tung), were told to use a ratio of 1/200.²⁰ Again, the apparent aim was to prevent large quota increases, for as we shall see, Liang-che-tung was, educationally, the most rapidly developing circuit in the Southern Sung. Without such quota restrictions, its success in the examinations would certainly have been more spectacular than it was.

The more lenient treatment given to the less advanced regions is evident mainly in edicts that set new quotas for specific places. Although there were such edicts for southeastern prefectures, they tended to have as a rationale the narrowness or restrictiveness of existing quotas.²¹ By contrast, the edicts for the northern and southwestern prefectures evince more concern with the smallness of their quotas. Competition, or the lack of it, was not a factor. In 1020, for example, the circuits of Shan-hsi (i.e., Yung-hsing and Ch'in-feng), Ssu-ch'uan and Kuang-nan were given permission to send as *chü-jen* all qualified candidates, regardless of previous quota limitations.²² This was rescinded in 1024 after complaints of numerous cases of forged residency,²³ but in 1026 quota increases were granted to these same regions and in 1029 additional increases were given to prefectures in Ssu-ch'uan and Shan-hsi.²⁴ Such edicts are not as numerous for later periods, though one can still find instances such as that of the circuit of Ching-hsi-nan (or that part of it still under Sung control) in 1126, which was allowed to use a quota-ratio of 1/20 instead of the prevailing 1/100.²⁵ However, the numerous complaints in the Southern Sung about people going to 'distant places' and falsifying residency there where the examinations were less competitive indicate that the quota differences described by Ou-yang Hsiu continued.²⁶

Secondly, at times during the Southern Sung certain regions had their own departmental examinations. In those cases, interregional competition was of course impossible, for the candidates taking them were competing only against each other for some predetermined number of degrees. We saw in Chapter 5 how in 1128 and 1132 the critical military situation necessitated holding departmental examinations at each circuit capital. Similarly, the protracted war against the Mongols during the last decades of the Sung

Table 20. *Ssu-ch'uan chin-shih and their representation in south China and in the empire*

Period	Ssu-ch'uan <i>chin-shih</i> *	Percentage of all <i>chin-shih</i>	Percentage of south China <i>chin-shih</i> **
960–97	46	2.9%	18.2%
998–1021	45	2.9%	8.9%
1022–63	333	7.8%	15.6%
1064–85	220	7.7%	12.8%
1086–1100	197	7.4%	14.6%
1101–26	495	8.5%	15.5%
Northern Sung	1,336	7.1%	14.6%
1127–62	748	17.6%	17.6%
1163–89	524	14.9%	14.9%
1190–1224	508	8.9%	8.9%
1225–56†	598	10.3%	10.3%
Southern Sung*	2,378	13.2%	13.2%

Sources: See Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2.

*Includes Ch'eng-tu fu lu, Tzu-chou lu, Li-chou lu, and K'uei-chou lu.

**Includes all of the Southern Sung territory except for those parts of Ch'in-feng lu and Ching-hsi-nan lu that remained under Sung control.

† After being invaded in 1258 by the Mongols, Ssu-ch'uan's representation in the examinations virtually ended. The Southern Sung *chin-shih* are therefore calculated for the years 1127–1258.

resulted in Huai-nan, Ching-hsi, Ching-hu-pei and Kuang-nan-hsi holding their own departmental examinations.²⁷ Most important was the Ssu-ch'uan departmental examination (*Ssu-ch'uan lei-sheng-shih*) which began in 1134 and continued for most, perhaps all, of the Southern Sung.²⁸

What were the effects of the special departmental examinations? If we look at the examination performances of the regions in question before and after their special examinations were instituted, changes in their proportion of all *chin-shih* should tell us whether or not they benefitted from being examined separately.

Because the separate departmental examination of Ssu-ch'uan *chü-jen* began in 1128 and thus coincided with the loss of the north, Ssu-ch'uan's percentage of southern China *chin-shih* is a better measure of the examination's effects than is its percentage of all *chin-shih*, which includes the north for the Northern Sung. In Table 20, we can see that Ssu-ch'uan's

percentage of south China *chin-shih* actually declined slightly lower from the Northern to Southern Sung.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Ssu-ch'uan did not benefit from this special departmental examination. For despite its lack of increased success *vis à vis* the rest of south China in the Southern Sung, it probably fared better than it would otherwise have done. As in the regular departmental examination, the numbers passing the Ssu-ch'uan examination were determined by a quota-ratio. For most of the Southern Sung, the two quota-ratios were identical, but for twenty years in the twelfth century, Ssu-ch'uan's was actually more generous, 1/14 compared with 1/17 (during 1163–1175) and 1/16 (during 1175–83).²⁹

This favored treatment was a result of Ssu-ch'uan's unique role in the Southern Sung. Its four circuits were distant, isolated, and vital to the defense of the empire, whose western flank it constituted. Throughout that period it functioned as a semi-autonomous territory under the rule of a Pacification Commissioner (*An-ch'a-shih*), whose authority extended to the civil service and the examinations.³⁰ In 1157 an attempt was made to abolish the Ssu-ch'uan departmental examination. It was thwarted by the argument that forcing the *chü-jen* to make the long trip to the capital caused great hardship for the many poor scholars of Ssu-ch'uan.³¹ While undoubtedly true, this could hardly have been persuasive, for the trip to Lin-an was far easier than had been the trip to K'ai-feng and it was easier, or at least no more difficult, than the trip from Kuang-nan. However, Ssu-ch'uan's defender happened to be Yang Ch'un (1094–1166), a native of Mei-chou (Ch'eng-tu fu lu) and an 1124 *chin-shih* who had placed first in the departmental examination, who was then Acting Minister of War, and he carried the day. Clearly, those from Ssu-ch'uan felt that the examination served their interests.³²

In the relatively backward circuits of Huai-nan, Ching-hsi, Ching-hu-pei and Kuang-nan-hsi, the separate departmental examinations had a marked effect on examination results. While the combined *chin-shih* of these circuits accounted for 1.1% of all *chin-shih* in the period 1190–1224, from 1251 to 1271, after they began their separate departmental examinations, they accounted for 2.9%.³³ This change is also reflected in the lists of 1148 and 1256, in which they account for 1.2% and 8.5%, respectively, of all *chin-shih*.³⁴ This was, in fact, what the officials of Kuang-nan-hsi had hoped for. Unlike the other circuits, Kuang-nan-hsi had not been involved in fighting the Mongols, and while its officials used the other circuits as precedents, their reason for requesting a special departmental examination was to improve their examination success, for 'in general, our mountains and forests are of a rustic nature [and our scholars] cannot compete with the scholars of the central region'.³⁵

In conclusion, these circuit departmental examinations provided tangible benefits to the circuits involved, dramatically in the cases of Huai-nan *et alii*, more modestly for Ssu-ch'uan. Also, with the exception of Ssu-ch'uan (or at least the very successful circuits of Ch'eng-tu fu and Tzu-chou), these examinations together with the government's prefectoral quota policy discussed above helped to improve the examination lot of the least successful regions.

The problem of regional units

The analysis in the sections below will employ both circuits (*lu*) and physiographic regions, based respectively upon hierarchies of administrative and economic activity, for both were consequential in the Sung examinations and neither, I would submit, is sufficient to explain the examination results.

The bureaucratic circuit (*lu*) has obvious attractions. It conforms by definition to groupings of prefectures, our primary statistical unit, and it is important statistically since certain Sung data are broken down only by circuit.³⁶ The avoidance examinations and the extraordinary departmental examinations of the Southern Sung were held at circuit capitals and a variety of measures intended to encourage backward regions defined those regions by circuit. However Sung circuits had very weak geopolitical identities. In contrast to the provinces of other dynasties, Sung circuits supervised prefectoral administration but did not control it, for that was done directly by the capital.³⁷ Moreover, circuits were bypassed in the regular examinations, which were held in prefectures and at the capital.

Physiographic regions, by contrast, delineate integrated market systems bounded by topography. According to G. William Skinner, whose regionalization model we will be using with modifications,³⁸ small regions or sub-regions were the first to develop, through the growth of markets and commerce, into integrated economic systems. These eventually gave way to regional systems and finally to macroregional systems, of which he has identified nine.³⁹ These macroregions had two salient features. First, 'each region was characterized by the concentration of resources of all kinds — arable land, population, capital investments — in a central area and a thinning out of resources toward the periphery.'⁴⁰ These regional cores were, for the most part, 'river-valley lowlands, which almost by definition enjoyed higher levels of agricultural productivity and crucial transport advantages.'⁴¹ Second, each macroregion was the locus of a distinctive departmental cycle:

I am prepared to argue . . . that much of the flux of economic and social history in imperial China, urban phenomena included, falls into meaningful temporal patterns when the data are first specified by physiographic region. In a word, it seems to me that the economic

development, demographic history, and sociopolitical dynamics of each region have displayed a distinctive rhythm. These regional cycles were associated in medieval and late imperial times with the buildup of an urban system centered on a particular apex city and with its subsequent (at least partial) breakdown.⁴²

The attractiveness of this regional theory for examination analysis lies in the relationships it suggests between macroregional development and examination success, and with their lack of circuit or provincial quotas, the Sung examinations are well suited to test them. Skinner himself has used Ch'ing data to show that regional cores were far more successful than peripheries, and that urban centers, particularly the higher-level cities in the economic hierarchy, were also disproportionately successful.⁴³ Although we will examine the Sung data for similar distributions, we will pay more attention to the proposition that the physiographic regions themselves constitute meaningful units for examination analysis so that patterns of success gain coherence by their use.

But while this approach is well suited to those regions where a high level of economic integration existed, questions arise as to its applicability to the more backward reaches of the empire, for Skinner has argued that by the late Sung macroregional integration had occurred in North China, Northwest China, the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast, but not elsewhere.⁴⁴ Where the level of economic integration was low, might not the very use of macroregions or even, in such areas as western Kuang-nan and Ching-hu-pei, of regions suggest a regional unity that did not exist during the Sung? In such places, moreover, the social and economic roles of the administrative hierarchy were probably more pronounced, especially with regard to the examinations where, as we have seen, circuits from backward regions frequently received special consideration.

Thus our analysis will employ both circuits and physiographic regions. We shall use the former in empire-wide comparisons, where the need for standard, comparable units is greatest, and also in our discussion of the least successful regions. But when we examine examination patterns in the most successful parts of the empire, namely Ssu-ch'uan and the southeast, we shall use the physiographic regions.

The distribution of *chin-shih*

In Table 21 and Figures 5 and 6, the empire-wide distribution of Sung *chin-shih* is shown in two different ways. The table gives the distribution by circuit using a periodization of reign periods and combinations of reign periods. The figures present the data visually, showing the Northern and Southern Sung aggregates for prefectures and circuits.

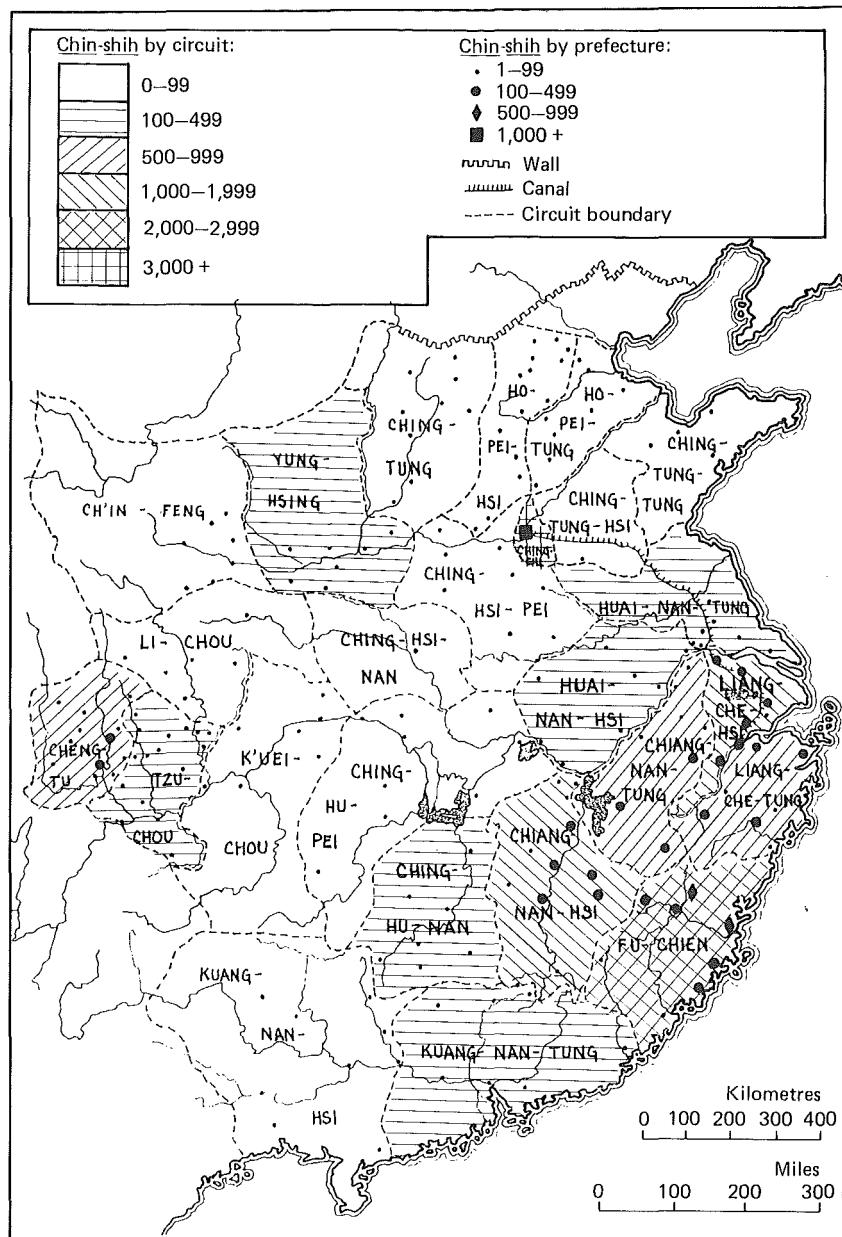


Fig. 5. Northern Sung distribution of *chin-shih* degrees.

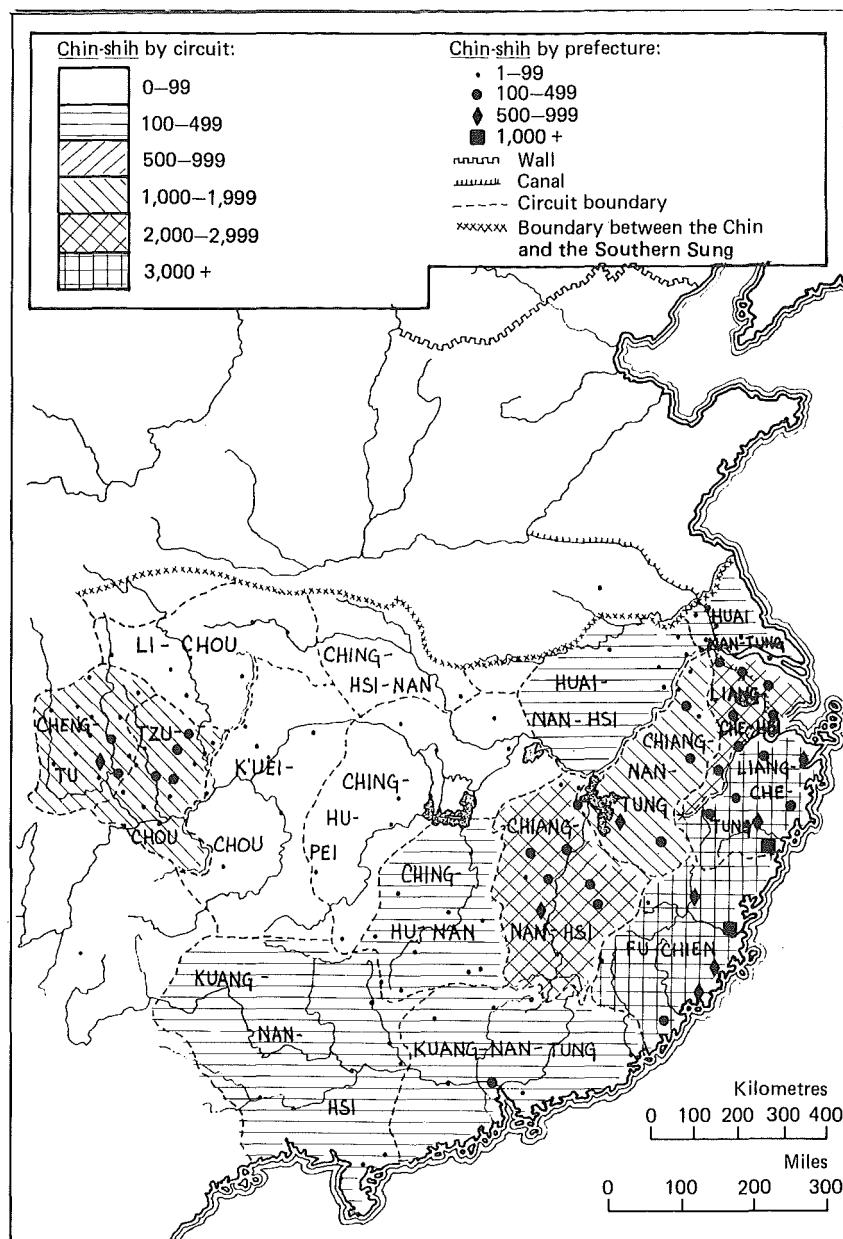
Fig. 6. Southern Sung distribution of *chin-shih* degrees.

Table 21. *Sung chin-shih by circuit based upon lists in local histories*

Circuit	960— 997	998— 1020	1021— 1063	1064— 1085	1086— 1100	1101— 1126
Southeast China						
Liang-che-tung	10	33	198	173	144	353
Liang-che-hsi	12	61	297	351	210	513
Chiang-nan-tung	21	34	161	124	130	388
Chiang-nan-hsi	53	92	325	218	180	357
Fu-chien	67	183	623	497	370	860
Central China						
Huai-nan-tung	6	7	52	44	21	58
Huai-nan-hsi	7	3	35	15	17	47
Ching-hu-nan	19	27	29	35	47	43
Ching-hu-pei	4	7	30	15	3	22
Ling-nan						
Kuang-nan-tung	4	8	35	20	18	39
Kuang-nan-hsi	5	6	24	9	7	20
Ssu-ch'uan						
Ch'eng-tu fu	25	24	197	128	131	283
Tsu-chou	16	12	111	87	49	172
Li-chou	5	6	22	5	10	25
K'uei-chou	0	3	3	2	7	15
North China						
Ching-chi	15	12	23	13	3	7
Ching-tung-tung	2	3	0	0	0	0
Ching-tung-hsi	7	8	12	3	3	2
Ching-hsi-nan	1	0	6	0	0	0
Ching-hsi-pei	17	11	17	18	5	5
Ho-pei-tung	21	8	7	5	3	1
Ho-pei-hsi	4	5	8	2	9	4
Northwest China						
Ho-tung	14	10	16	8	9	10
Yung-hsing	27	20	33	40	4	2
Ch'in-feng	0	1	2	0	0	0
Local History Totals	362	584	2,266	1,812	1,380	3,226
Degrees Conferred	1,587	1,615	4,255	2,845	2,679	5,831

Sources: For local histories, see Appendix 4 or Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2. For degrees conferred, see Appendix 2.

Table 21. (cont.)

Northern Sung	1127–1162	1163–1189	1190–1224	1225–1279	Southern Sung	Undated	Total Sung
911	587	660	1,029	1,624	3,900	47	4,858
1,444	517	497	533	655	2,202	0	3,646
858	399	240	399	700	1,738	49	2,645
1,225	422	303	525	1,386	2,636	0	3,861
2,600	743	869	1,367	1,546	4,525	19	7,144
188	45	20	20	21	106	14	308
124	14	10	17	62	103	43	270
200	55	48	96	217	416	48	664
81	8	6	7	59	80	32	193
124	50	20	37	152	259	0	383
71	57	15	19	84	175	0	246
788	479	227	127	300	1,133	91	2,012
447	316	315	334	273	1,238	19	1,704
73	15	13	29	38	95	14	182
30	19	9	18	27	73	0	103
73	0	0	0	0	0	0	73
5	0	0	0	0	0	27	32
35	0	0	0	0	0	16	51
7	0	0	0	2	2	7	16
73	1	0	0	0	1	2	76
45	1	1	0	0	2	43	90
32	1	0	0	0	1	47	80
67	0	0	0	0	0	62	129
126	0	0	7	1	8	22	156
3	0	0	1	0	1	7	11
9,630	3,729	3,253	4,565	7,147	18,694	609	28,933
18,812	4,238	3,525	5,680	9,102*	20,793*		39,605*

*Includes estimates of 500 each for the years 1253, 1265, and 1271.

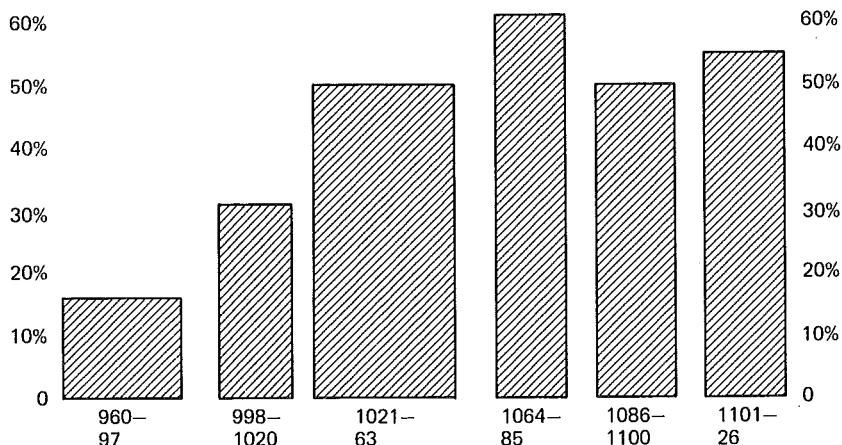


Fig. 7. Representation of south China *chin-shih** in the Northern Sung examinations.

(Bar widths vary according to the lengths of the periods, which are reign periods or combinations of reign periods.)

*Includes the circuits of Liang-che-tung and -hsia, Chiang-nan-tung and -hsia, Fu-chien, Huai-nan-tung and -hsia, Ching-hu-nan and -pei, Kuang-nan-tung and -hsia, Ch'eng-tu fu, Tzu-chou, Li-chou, and K'uei-chou.

We should reiterate that there are biases in these data, the most serious being the underrepresentation of northern China. For the Northern Sung, records exist for only half of the *chin-shih* degrees that we know to have been given. If, as it is argued in Appendix 4, the figures for southern China are fairly reliable, then most of the missing degrees would be from the north, making it far more successful than it appears either in the table or on the maps. In one case I have tried to rectify this; the evidence of K'ai-feng's dominance in the Northern Sung examinations is so overwhelming that, in Figure 5, I have estimated its *chin-shih* numbers to have been in excess of three thousand.⁴⁵

Turning now to the table and maps, several observations can be made about general trends in examination success. First, the north–south distribution of *chin-shih*, presented graphically in Figure 7, corroborates our earlier generalization about the growing political dominance of southerners during the Northern Sung. Not only does this accord with the assertion by Lu Yu (1125–1209) that Jen-tsung's reign was the first in which southerners were admitted to the bureaucracy freely and without discrimination,⁴⁶ but it also agrees with Robert Hartwell's finding that only during the reign of Shen-tsung (1067–85) did the south's proportion of policy-making officials equal the south's proportion of the population, for we would expect a lag of roughly a

generation before changes in recruitment patterns were reflected at the highest levels of government.⁴⁷

Second, the series of wars which the Southern Sung waged against the Jurchen and later the Mongols, had a measurably deleterious effect upon the examination performances of the territories involved in the fighting. Whereas the Southern Sung circuits as a whole had over twice as many *chin-shih* as they had had during the Northern Sung, the four border circuits of Huai-nan-tung, Huai-nan-hsi, Ching-hu-pei and Ching-hsi-nan did more poorly in the Southern Sung, while the only other border circuit, Li-chou lu, had the smallest percentage increase of any of the other circuits. This is hardly surprising, for not only did these wars cause disruption and southward migration, but we might also presume that they turned the attention of the local elites from education to military affairs.

Finally, and most important, so great was the range in the examination performances of the circuits of southern China that we can divide them into two groups: successful and unsuccessful. The successful circuits, each of which had over fifteen hundred *chin-shih*, were centered primarily in the southeast (Fu-chien and the Liang-che and Chiang-nan circuits) and secondarily in Ssu-ch'uan (Ch'eng-tu and Tzu-chou). So great was their domination that they accounted for 84% of all *chin-shih* in the Southern Sung, which had sixteen circuits in all.⁴⁸ The unsuccessful circuits were those in south and central China (Ching-hsi-nan and the Kuang-nan and Ching-hu circuits), those in the Ssu-ch'uan periphery (Li-chou and K'uei-chou) and the Huai-nan circuits to the north of the lower Yangtze. With the exception of Ching-hu-nan, none of these had more than four hundred *chin-shih*.

Before proceeding to separate considerations of these successful and unsuccessful regions, and then to a discussion of the factors behind success, it might be helpful to examine the geographical distribution of Sung schools. Tables 22 and 23 give the distributions of government and private schools respectively, schools whose chronological development was discussed in Chapter 4. Again, we must acknowledge geographical biases. Like the examination data, the school data for northern China are fragmentary, as are those for Ssu-ch'uan. Also, Sung local histories did not, as a rule, make note of academies, so many probably vanished without a trace, though what geographical biases resulted from this is impossible to say.⁴⁹

In a general way these tables reflect the same dichotomy that we noticed in the examinations. The successful circuits (at least in the southeast) had prefectural schools in all prefectures, county schools in the great majority of counties, and large numbers of academies and other private schools. Although the unsuccessful circuits had prefectural schools in most prefectures, many,

Table 22. Geographical distribution of government schools

Circuit	Prefectures		Counties		Examination rank†	
	Pref. schools	% with schools*	County schools	% with schools*	N. Sung	S. Sung
Southeast China						
Liang-che-tung	8	100 +%	38	90%	5	2
Liang-che-hsi	8	100 +%	37	97%	3	4
Chiang-nan-tung	9	100%	31	82%	6	5
Chiang-nan-hsi	11	100%	57	100 +%	4	3
Fu-chien	8	100%	48	100 +%	2	1
Central China						
Huai-nan-tung	11	92%	10	26%	10	11
Huai-nan-hsi	8	80%	11	33%	13	12
Ching-hu-nan	10	100%	36	92%	9	8
Ching-hu-pei	13	93%	29	52%	16	14
Ling-nan						
Kuang-nan-tung	15	100%	25	58%	13	9
Kuang-nan-hsi	23	82%	26	40%	20	10
Ssu-ch'uan						
Ch'eng-tu fu	11	69%	26	45%	7	7
Tzu-chou	13	87%	18	33%	8	6
Li-chou	8	80%	9	24%	18	13
K'uei-chou	5	36%	7	22%	23	15
North China						
Ching-chi	0	0%	3	19%	1	
Ching-tung-tung	8	89%	11	29%	22	
Ching-tung-hsi	7	70%	12	28%	21	
Ching-hsi-nan	8	89%	7	23%	25	16
Ching-hsi-pei	6	60%	10	16%	17	
Ho-pei-tung	7	37%	7	12%	15	
Ho-pei-hsi	9	47%	24	37%	19	
Northwest China						
Ho-tung	11	41%	18	22%	12	
Yung-hsing	8	44%	12	14%	11	
Ch'in-feng	9	56%	4	14%	24	
Totals	234	72%	516	44%		

Sources: See Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2.

*Percentages based on the prefectures and counties that existed ca. 1080. Later changes in both account for the percentages greater than one hundred.

†For rank ordering, undated *chin-shih* for all Northern and Northwestern circuits except for Ching-hsi-nan were added to their Northern Sung totals. Also, for reasons explained in the text the capital district of Ching-chi is ranked in the Northern Sung examinations.

Table 23. Geographical distribution of private schools

Circuit	Academies*			Other private schools	All private schools
	Shu-yuan	Ching-she	Acad. per prefecture		
Southeast China					
Liang-che-tung	43	3	6.6	5	51
Liang-che-hsi	20	0	2.9	6	26
Chiang-nan-tung	46	3	5.1	4	53
Chiang-nan-hsi	90	3	9.0	2	95
Fu-chien	52	15	8.4	18	85
Central China					
Huai-nan-hsi	7	0	0.7	1	8
Ching-hu-nan	36	0	3.6	0	36
Ching-hu-pei	17	0	1.2	0	17
Ling-nan					
Kuang-nan-tung	34	0	2.3	1	35
Kuang-nan-hsi	14	0	0.5	0	14
Ssu-ch'uan					
Ch'eng-tu fu	10	0	0.6	0	10
Tzu-chou	8	0	0.6	0	8
Li-chou	2	0	0.2	0	2
K'uei-chou	3	0	0.2	0	3
North China					
Ching-tung-tung	2	0	0.2	0	2
Ching-tung-hsi	3	0	0.3	2	5
Ching-hsi-pei	6	0	0.6	0	6
Ho-pei-hsi	3	0	0.2	0	3
Northwest China					
Ho-tung	1	0	0.04	0	1
Yung-hsing	4	0	0.2	0	4
Totals	401	24	1.2†	39	464

Sources: See Chaffee, 'Education and Examinations,' Appendix 2.

*Schools that began as *ching-she* but subsequently became *shu-yuan* have been classified as the former.

†Includes all Sung prefectures, not just those in the circuits for which we have records of private schools.

often most, of their counties had no county schools and they had few academies or other private schools. The magnitude of these differences, however, was far smaller than it was in the examinations in which, for example, Fu-chien had nineteen times as many *chin-shih* as its neighbor, Kuang-nan-tung. This is partly because government school numbers were limited by the number of prefectures and counties in a circuit, but it also suggests that the spread of schools during the Sung was a truly empire-wide phenomenon. Also, there were exceptions to this general correlation between examination success and school development, the most notable being Ching-hu-nan, whose school figures were indistinguishable from those of the southeastern circuits. Clearly, a high level of formal educational development did not, of itself, ensure great examination success.

The unsuccessful regions

The existence of two groups of south China regions sharply demarcated by their degree of success in the examinations raises an important question about many of the basic findings of this study. Were such developments as the great and sustained expansion of both government and private education and the manifold growth of the literati truly empire-wide in scope, or have we in effect written an educational history of just a few advanced regions? I would argue that these developments in fact extended to all regions, or at least all circuits, of southern China and probably northern China as well, though our evidence for the latter is extremely fragmentary. But this does not mean that they extended to all counties or even prefectures; patterns of examination results in the least successful circuits almost suggest islands of Confucian learning in an uncultured, often non-Han sea.

In some ways, the most compelling evidence for the widespread influence of the examinations is the fact that all circuits produced *chin-shih* and, in fact, except for Ching-hsi-nan whose *chin-shih* figures are incomplete, all of the southern circuits produced over a hundred. The *chin-shih* degree was, after all, a very considerable achievement, not only for the individuals involved but also for their localities or lineages, which had made long-term educational investments to make it possible, and for those from cultural backwaters who lacked both family connections, plentiful books (since most of the printers were located in the southeast), and first-rate teachers, the achievement was especially impressive.

Schools, too, could be found in every part of the empire. While the distribution of schools, as we noted above, reflects the successful/unsuccessful dichotomy found in the examinations, the differences are far less marked. Except for K'uei-chou and, ironically, Ch'eng-tu, all southern circuits had schools in 80% or more of their prefectures. Although the numbers of

academies and county schools in the unsuccessful circuits were considerably less impressive than this, their percentages of counties with county schools ranged from 22% to a remarkable 92% and, with the exception of Huai-nan-tung, all of them had at least a few academies.

These figures are very abstract and may reflect the availability of sources more than anything else. For a concrete view of educational development in an unsuccessful circuit, we are fortunate to have an anonymous late Southern Sung local history for Shou-ch'ang chün (Ching-hu-pei), a commandary created in 1222 from Wu-ch'ang county in E-chou and located on the Yangtze downriver from modern Wuhan.⁵⁰ As a county, it had had a school as early as the Ch'ing-li reforms of 1045, which was moved twice in later years (1106 and 1174–89). When the county became a commandary, the school was enlarged and it subsequently underwent further enlargements or renovations in 1227, 1237, 1250 and 1253. In the 1250s, it had fifty rooms (*chien*) worth of buildings, a large endowment, six dormitories, a staff of twelve, a library with well over two hundred and fifty volumes (*ts'e*) of books, and it managed an examination estate.⁵¹ Shou-ch'ang also boasted the Nan-hu Academy, which was built in 1242 with fifty rooms and had a separate endowment and a library almost as large as the commandary school's.⁵² This educational activity in the thirteenth century had a dramatic effect on the literati population; the examinations which had drawn a hundred candidates in 1222 were attracting some four hundred in 1252.⁵³ Yet for all this activity, there were only five *chin-shih* during that thirty-year period.⁵⁴

How representative was Shou-ch'ang chün? We cannot say with any certainty since we lack comparable information for other places, but it seems likely that it was typical of at least the most successful prefectures in the unsuccessful circuits. As a commandary, its prefectoral examination quota was two, so its selection ratio went from one in fifty to one in two hundred. Comparing these figures with those that we have for other prefectures such as Lung-chou and Hsing-chou in Li-chou lu, Wen-chou (which produced no *chin-shih* at all) in K'uei-chou lu and Hua-chou in Kuang-nan-hsi as shown in Figure 2, we see that all of the figures from the unsuccessful circuits either fell within this range of competition or were more competitive. If we further compare their competitive levels and the sizes of their scholarly populations (Figure 3) with those of the successful circuits, we can see that although they lagged behind the successful circuits during the Southern Sung, their Southern Sung levels were substantially higher than those of the successful circuits during the Northern Sung, though this does not mean that their educational standards were at all comparable.

This activity was not demonstrably universal. If we look at where the more

successful prefectures in the unsuccessful circuits were (in Figures 5 and 6 or, more precisely, using Appendix 3 and Figure 1), we find some most interesting distributions. In the central Yangtze success was distinctly subregionalized and restricted to core areas. Excepting the Kan River Valley which we will consider later, prefectures in the Hsiang River Valley were the most successful (though far less so than those in the Kan Basin). Then came the Yangtze corridor, including the lowlands around Tung-t'ing Lake. Finally, the Yüan and Han River Valleys were almost unrepresented.

Elsewhere we find that all prefectures with even a moderate degree of examination success were located either in core areas or along major trade routes or both. In Kuang-nan, of the seven prefectures with thirty or more *chin-shih* during the entire Sung, Ch'ao-chou, Hui-chou, Kuang-chou and Liu-chou all had important river locations, either at their mouths or at important junctures, while Shao-chou was on the extremely important trade route into the Yüan River Valley. In Huai-nan, too, 69% of the *chin-shih* for whom we have records were from prefectures located along the Yangtze or the Grand Canal.⁵⁵

Forty-odd prefectures in southern China produced no *chin-shih* at all. Predictably, most were located in regional peripheries away from major rivers or trade routes. They were also concentrated in certain circuits: Kuang-nan-tung (8), Kuang-nan-hsi (16), Li-chou lu (3), K'uei-chou lu (3) and Ching-hsi-nan (7), although this last may reflect just poor examination records. Moreover, of these prefectures, five from Kuang-nan-hsi, two from Li-chou lu, three from K'uei-chou lu and two from Ching-hsi-nan had no schools of which we have record, suggesting a lack of educational development.⁵⁶

It is no coincidence that all of these circuits, save Ching-hsi-nan, were in frontier regions. The Chinese presence in the south and southwest during the Sung, as in virtually every other imperial dynasty, was in part a colonizing one, with Han and non-Han peoples living side by side and not always in peace. For example, a Man rebellion in 1051 forced the government to hold special qualifying examinations for candidates from Kuang-nan-tung and -hsı in Chiang-nan-hsi and Ching-hu-nan respectively.⁵⁷ The literati in these frontier regions constituted at most a thin stratum in local society. Even the southernmost Chiang-nan-hsi prefecture of Kan-chou which produced a respectable 163 Sung *chin-shih* was described by one Southern Sung official as a poor and isolated place close to Kuang-nan and with customs similar to those of the Man.⁵⁸ Kuang-nan itself was evocatively described by Chang Tz'u-hsien (1193 *chin-shih*) in 1222:

[There is] a single climate [of] constant heat [and] the four seasons are like summer. Grass and trees last through the depth of winter and

poisonous snakes roam about during [the time] of hibernation. People's risk of malaria [is such that], of those who become ill, few survive. Since their entire environment is similarly strange, the reeds and rushes are boundless and the people who live there few. Families with Confucian vocations are thus spread out. [As for] the numbers of scholars with literary capabilities, in entire prefectures examination candidates at the most number three to four hundred, and at the least, not even a hundred.⁵⁹

The smallness of their numbers, however, does not mean that literati or the examinations were unimportant. We noted earlier how special provisions allowed Kuang-nan *chü-jen* to become irregular officials (*she-kuan*).⁶⁰ This had the dual effect of making office much more attainable and of giving the Kuang-nan elites a significant role in local government.

Schools and the examinations may also have played an important role in the sinicization of the non-Han inhabitants of these regions. The anthropologist Barbara Ward has argued persuasively that this was the case during the Ch'ing:

By limiting power to officeholders, by insisting upon educational qualifications for office and standardizing them in such a way that all aspirants to administrative position had to spend many years studying the same texts, the system insured the rapid spread of a powerful and most prestigious stratum of fully sinicized persons over even the most barbarous of the Chinese territories . . . The fact that the examinations were competitive and open to all comers would have given ambitious men in the newly administered areas the strongest possible motivation to see their sons and grandsons educated in the Chinese way, whatever their ethnic origin.⁶¹

Our evidence is too meager to determine whether or not this process was occurring during the Sung, but the little that we have is suggestive. In 1105 newly established frontier prefectures in Shan-hsi were permitted to open 'barbarian schools' (*Fan-hsüeh*), which would use foreign languages to instruct students in the classics, statutes, Chinese language and even Buddhist writings with the aim of 'gradually changing customs'.⁶² There is also an intriguing memorial from officials in Ch'eng-tu fu in 1171 indicating non-Han participation in the examinations on a regular basis. The memorial asked for a quota increase because of the many candidates who were refugees from the northwest and also because '*chü-jen* from great barbarian [*ta Fan*] [families] of the southwest are generally increasing'.⁶³

Whether or not the examinations aided the process of sinicization and

however thin the stratum of literati may have been in places, our findings that schools were widespread and that candidate numbers were increasing in even the least successful parts of the empire indicate that the educational developments with which we have been concerned were truly empire-wide phenomena. This is of consequence to more than just this study, for it suggests that the integration of local elites into a national elite culture was proceeding apace. It has been argued that the lack of any sustained political disunity in China after the Sung was due to the growing economic integration of the country.⁶⁴ While this was undoubtedly the case, our findings here suggest that the cultural unity created, in large part, by schools and examinations was an important contributing factor to the political unity of late imperial China.

Patterns of success

The success of Ssu-ch'uan and southeastern China in the examinations is hardly surprising, for economically they were among the most advanced regions in Sung China, rivalled only by the regional system of the North China plain which was centered on K'ai-feng. Not only were they leading producers of such primary commodities as rice, tea, salt and timber,⁶⁵ but they also led the empire in producing such scholarly essentials as paper, ink, inkstones, brushes and printed books.⁶⁶ In the southeast, a high level of trade (both internal and overseas) had created a remarkable urban network which was most articulated in the Yangtze Delta but extended up the Yangtze into Chiang-nan and down the coast as far as Kuang-chou (Canton).⁶⁷ Ssu-ch'uan was somewhat less developed, but the fertility of the Red Basin made it one of the richest, most populous and most cultured parts of the country. Note-worthy among its accomplishments were two pioneering enterprises in printing during the tenth century: the first printing of the Buddhist *Tripitaka* and one of the first two printings of the Confucian classics.⁶⁸

To say that there was a general correspondence between levels of economic development and examination success tells us nothing, however, about the complex process of translating wealth into useful learning or about how inevitable that process was. Such a general explanation also does not take into account the considerable variations in wealth, commercial activity, educational development and examination success within Ssu-ch'uan and the southeast. Thus we need a more discriminating form of analysis.

The physiographic regions which we shall be using (see Figures 8 and 9) correspond, on the whole, to those proposed by Skinner, but there are several differences. First, because *chü-jen* from the four circuits that comprised Sung Ssu-ch'uan had a separate departmental examination during the Southern Sung, I have kept them together as a group, even though Skinner's Upper Yangtze macroregion is slightly smaller. But since the prefectures in question

were virtually unrepresented in the examinations, the practical difference is minimal. Second, the Kan Basin will be treated as a separate region comparable in size and importance to the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast, rather than as a subregion of the Central Yangtze. Third, I have followed Yoshinobu Shiba in not including territory north of the Yangtze in the Lower Yangtze macroregion.⁶⁹ Even if the southern parts of Huai-nan-tung and Huai-nan-hsi were integrated economically into the Lower Yangtze, the loss of records and the educational disruption caused by the Chin wars would make comparisons of them with the rest of the Lower Yangtze misleading. Fourth, Ming-chou (Ningpo) has been assigned to the Southeast Coast rather than the Lower Yangtze. As a center of inter-regional and international trade, its regional orientation was ambiguous. Its principal counties were on the coastal plain which circled Hang-chou Bay and formed the Yangtze Delta to the north, and it was connected by canal to Lin-an to the west.⁷⁰ But its capital was also an important port,⁷¹ its rivers were small and its hinterland limited, all of which were characteristics of the Southeast Coast. Given the great importance of maritime commerce during the Sung, the coastal character of Ming-chou seems to have been dominant at that time.

In Figures 8 and 9, two of the physiographic regions (or macroregions) are subregionalized and two are not. I would suggest that regions can be characterized as naturally unitary or segmented. Unitary regions have either a single dominant river system or a single valley or basin forms a relatively undifferentiated core bordered by an upland periphery. The Kan Basin and, to a lesser extent, Ssu-ch'uan are examples of such regions. The latter is problematical, for the Red Basin is somewhat subregionalized by its rivers and, as we shall see, this made a difference in the examinations. But Ssu-ch'uan's dominant physiographic characteristic is that of a unitary core, the Red Basin, sharply set off from a mountainous periphery, and I have therefore classified it as unitary. Segmented regions, by contrast, are composed of discrete subregions, usually small river systems, each of which usually had its own core and periphery. The Southeast Coast is an archetypical segmented region.

Our fourth region, the Lower Yangtze, is more difficult to classify, for since much of it consists of delta-land, 'physiographic constraints on the development of socioeconomic subregions were weak,' to quote Skinner.⁷² I would argue, however, that even weak constraints produced three discernible subregions: a natural subregion corresponding to the watershed of the Ch'ien-t'ang River; the Yangtze Delta, a rather unnatural subregion in that its unifying waterway was the man-made Grand Canal; and Chiang-tso, the northern section of Chiang-nan-tung which had a northwestern drainage into the Yangtze and was centered economically on the city of Chien-k'ang fu

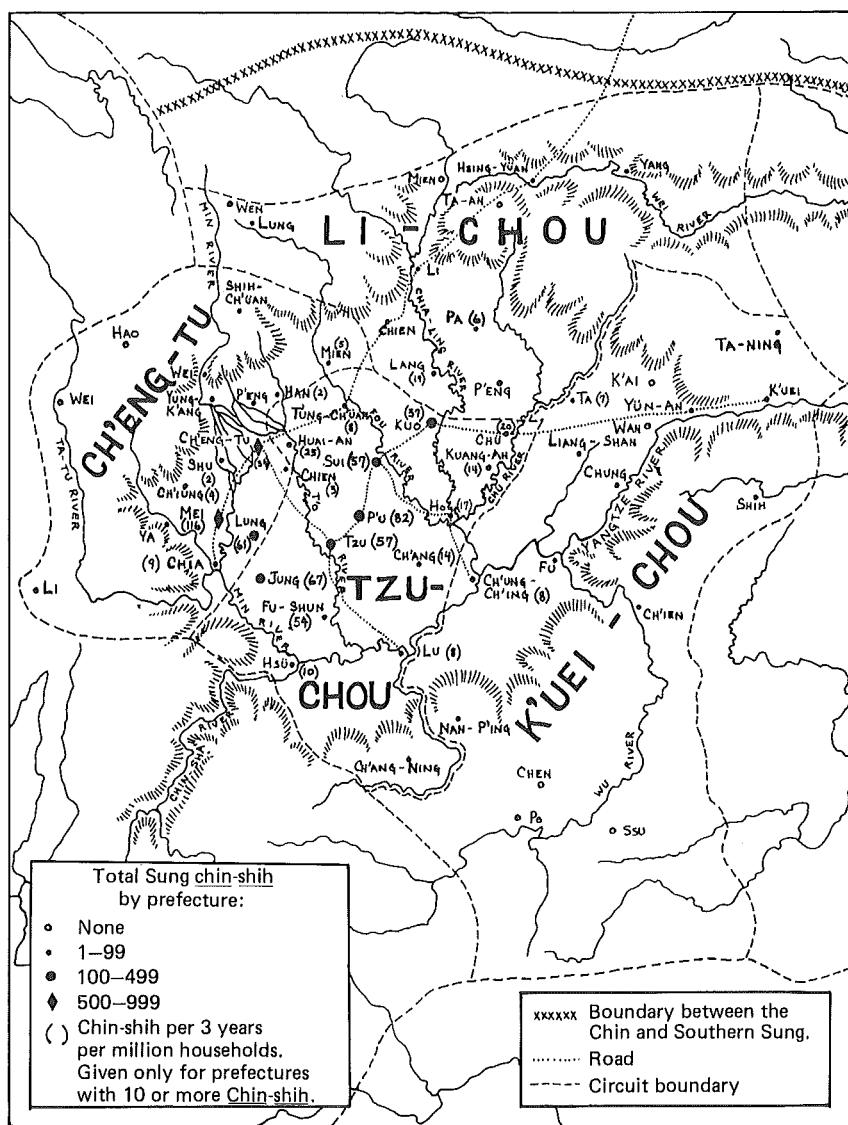


Fig. 8. Sung Ssu-ch'uan (the Upper Yangtze Region).

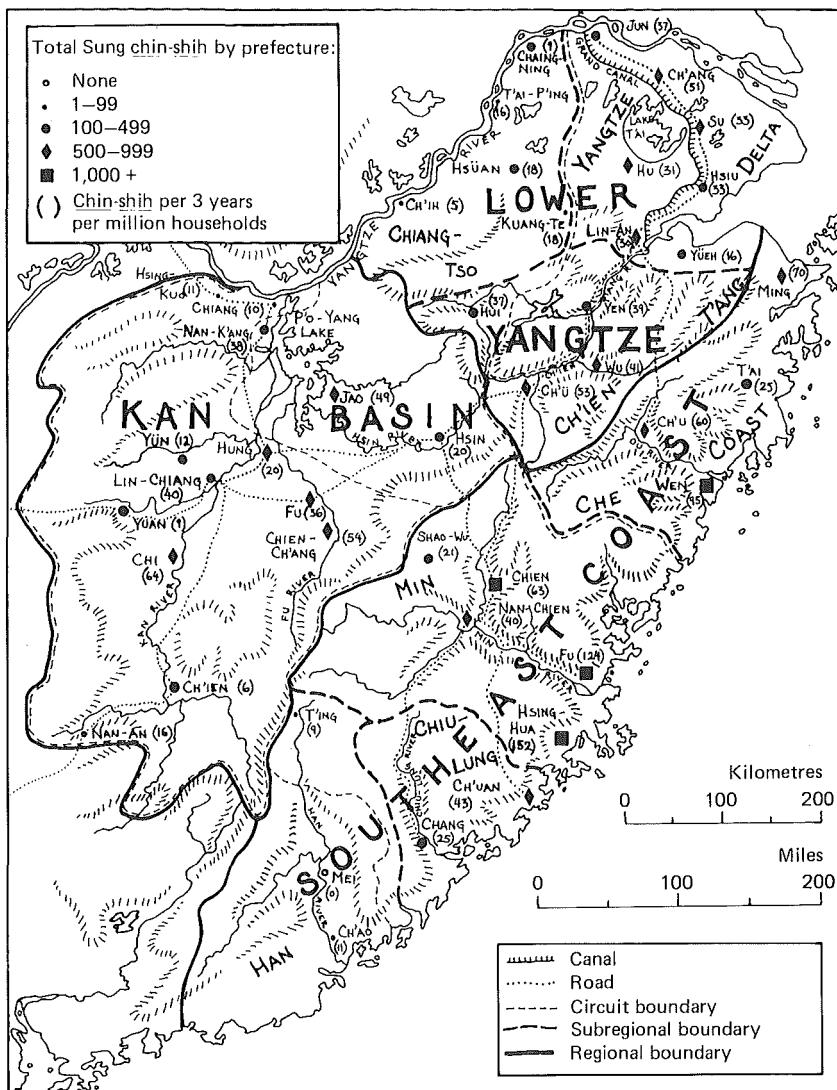


Fig. 9. Regions and subregions of southeastern China.

(Nanking). Thus even though the Lower Yangtze does not fit the criteria for segmented regions precisely, I would still classify it as such.

Turning now to the examination data for the prefectures in these regions, we can distinguish different patterns of success. In the Kan Basin, the success of the core and periphery are hard to discern because many prefectures spanned the two. But it is noteworthy that seven of the eight prefectures with over twenty *chin-shih* per three years per million households were either right around Lake P'o-yang or in the prosperous rice-growing country along the lower to middle reaches of the Kan and Fu Rivers.⁷³ The temporal pattern of the Kan Basin's success is also noteworthy (Figure 10), for its increases came in three phases: a steady increase to around ten percent during the first century of the Sung; a jump at the beginning of the Southern Sung which probably reflects the loss of northern China more than anything else; and a dramatic increase at the dynasty's end to twenty percent. This last increase, which was balanced by relative declines in the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast, began a period educational and political vitality which continued for another two centuries, for in the first century of the Ming Kiangsi produced more *chin-shih* than any other province in China.⁷⁴

Domination by the core is even more evident in Ssu-ch'uan where not one of the prefectures in its periphery (i.e., outside the Red Basin) received more than nine *chin-shih* degrees during the entire Sung, compared with the vast majority of core prefectures that did. One can also observe that the most successful prefectures were concentrated in the western part of the Red Basin, which for centuries had been the economic and cultural center of Ssu-ch'uan.

In the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast, the patterns were different. Most of the prefectures were extremely successful, but the significant

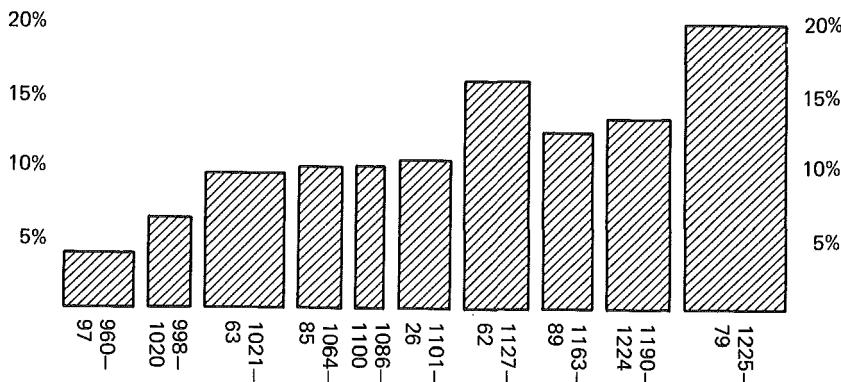


Fig. 10. Examination record of the Kan Basin: percentages of all *chin-shih*.

Table 24. *Distribution of prefectures in the Lower Yangtze and Southeast Coast by their three-year averages of chin-shih per million households*

Region/subregion	0-19	20-39	40+
Lower Yangtze			
Chiang-tso	5		
Yangtze Delta	1	5	1
Ch'ien-t'ang		2	2
Regional total	6	7	3
Southeast Coast			
Che Coast		1	3
Min		1	4
Chiu-ling		1	1
Han	3		
Regional total	3	3	8

Sources: Appendix 3; Chao Hui-jen, 'Sung-shih ti-li chih hu-k'ou piao,' pp. 19-30 for prefectural populations ca. 1102.

variations in the degree of success tended to divide along subregional lines and not according to cores and peripheries. This last point must be qualified, for in the Min subregion, Fu-chou and Hsing-hua chün were much more successful than the still very successful inland prefectures. Also, so small are the other coastal subregions that only a county-level analysis could reveal the presence or absence of core/periphery distinctions. In the Lower Yangtze, however, the peripheries (southern Chiang-tso and all of Ch'ien-t'ang) did as well if not better than the core area.

As to subregional differences, we can see from Table 24 that the two subregions with examination levels dramatically different from the others were Han and Chiang-tso. In view of the fact that the former was sparsely populated and the latter was rather poor agriculturally,⁷⁵ and neither was centrally located within its region, it may be that they were only minimally integrated into their regions. If we disregard them, we find a high degree of consistency in levels of success within each region; 64% of the Lower Yangtze prefectures had between 20 and 39 *chin-shih* per three years per million households, while 73% of the Southeast Coast prefectures had over 40.

In terms of this measure of *chin-shih* per examination controlled for population, we find significant variations at both the subregional and regional

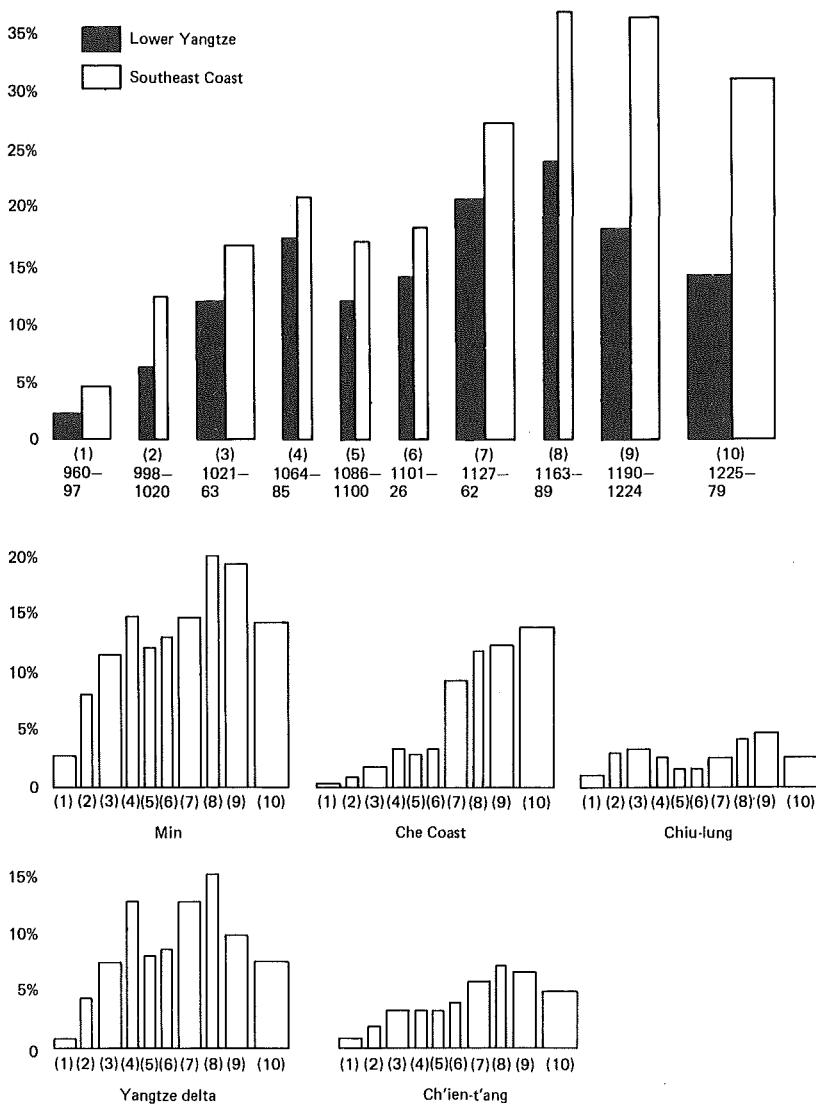


Fig. 11. Examination successes of the Lower Yangtze, the Southeast Coast, and their principal subregions.

levels. Of course this is just one of several possible measures and it is also static, a three-century average. Figure 11 compares their examination records over time and reveals striking similarities as well as differences. The greatest similarity lies in the parallel shifts in the examination fortunes of the two regions: rapid growth in degree numbers for the first century of the Sung, a drop in the late eleventh century followed by increases culminating in a peak in the late twelfth century, and finally a long decline in the thirteenth century. This pattern is also evident in each region's dominant subregion (Min and the Yangtze Delta) and, to a lesser extent, in Chiu-ling and Ch'ien-t'ang. But the differences are also striking. Not only did the Southeast Coast's fourteen prefectures consistently outproduce the Lower Yangtze's sixteen, but the gap between them widened greatly during the last century of the Sung. Likewise, Min's late Sung drop was later and more moderate than that of the Yangtze Delta. Most remarkable, however, is the record of the Che Coast. Only minimally represented in the Northern Sung examinations, the subregion's proportion of *chin-shih* tripled in the early Southern Sung and continued growing thereafter.

Of the many questions raised by these findings, we shall concentrate on two. First, how did the initial examination successes of both the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast occur, coming as they did from a history of almost no representation in the imperial bureaucracy? Second, how can one account for the extraordinary success of the Che Coast in the Southern Sung?

Although the examinations in the early Northern Sung attracted successful candidates from all parts of the south, a few prefectures produced far more than their share of *chin-shih*. For the first century of the Sung (960–1063), Chien-chou in Fu-chien led all other southern prefectures with 282 *chin-shih*, followed by its Fu-chien neighbors Ch'üan-chou (194), Hsing-hua chün (152), and Fu-chou (142). The other six of the top ten were Ch'ang-chou (108), Su-chou (75), and Ch'ü-chou (73) in the Lower Yangtze, Chi-chou (115) in the Kan Basin, and Ch'eng-tu fu (121) and Mei-chou (88) in Ssu-ch'uan.⁷⁶

Fu-chien's record is especially remarkable, for during the T'ang it had been a backward frontier region and played little if any role in imperial affairs.⁷⁷ But during the late T'ang and then as the kingdom of Min (879–978), it wad benefitted from sustained immigration, become an important agricultural region, and, thanks to Ch'üan-chou, emerged as a major center of overseas trade.⁷⁸ Hugh Clark has argued that the autonomy which accompanied the T'ang-Sung 'interregnum' allowed Ch'üan-chou to develop unhindered as a port and provided its local elite with the opportunity to serve in government and skim off commercial profits, an activity which had previously been the prerogative of non-native officials. Thus the Ch'üan-chou

elite was well prepared to flourish in the Sung.⁷⁹ This is persuasive, and I would amend the argument only to say that the extremely early success of Ch'üan-chou in the examinations (they began producing *chin-shih* within a year of joining the Sung) betokened not merely a tradition of government service but also an unusual commitment to classical education during the Min period, a widespread willingness to assume literati lifestyles and values.⁸⁰ One Yüan writer ascribed to the Ch'üan-chou elite just such a pioneering role:

The esteem with which the *chin-shih* degree is held by men of Min began with the men of Ch'üan. From this [beginning] literary creations overflowed and rippled outwards until by the end of the Sung, the Confucian air [i.e., customs] of Min were unexcelled in the south-east.⁸¹

Although we lack the space to consider them individually, it seems likely most of the prefectures which early excelled in the examinations shared these characteristics of economic prosperity, a history of official service in the southern kingdoms as well as, in cases, the T'ang, and an early commitment to education. Most were in regional cores and those from Ssu-ch'uan and the Yangtze Delta had venerable traditions of learning. Most also gained enormously by their precocity, for these were precisely the places most heavily represented in the professional elite described by Robert Hartwell, that group of lineages which dominated the eleventh century bureaucracy.⁸² Thus until later years of the Northern Sung, these prefectures were well and powerfully represented in K'ai-feng.

It was in this context of longstanding examination success by the neighboring subregions of Min and the Yangtze Delta that the remarkable rise of the Che Coast occurred. Undoubtedly the Che Coast elites, like local elites elsewhere, benefited from the increased opportunities for advancement that resulted from the disintegration of the professional elite. They surely also benefited from the booming economy of the Southeast Coast, for its prosperity was more coastal in locus during the Southern Sung, aided by the continuing commercial ascendancy of Ch'üan-chou⁸³ and the supremacy of the Southern Sung navy which improved the security of shipping conditions.⁸⁴ In 1227 Hu Chü, then prefect of Ming-chou, was to write that:

This prefecture is in an out-of-the-way place on the seacoast and completely depends on seaships that stop and anchor here. Civil authorities depend on the profits from taxes returned and residents have an abundance from trade.⁸⁵

Thirty-three years later, in 1260, another prefect financed much of a rebuilding project for the Ming-chou prefectoral school with proceeds from a

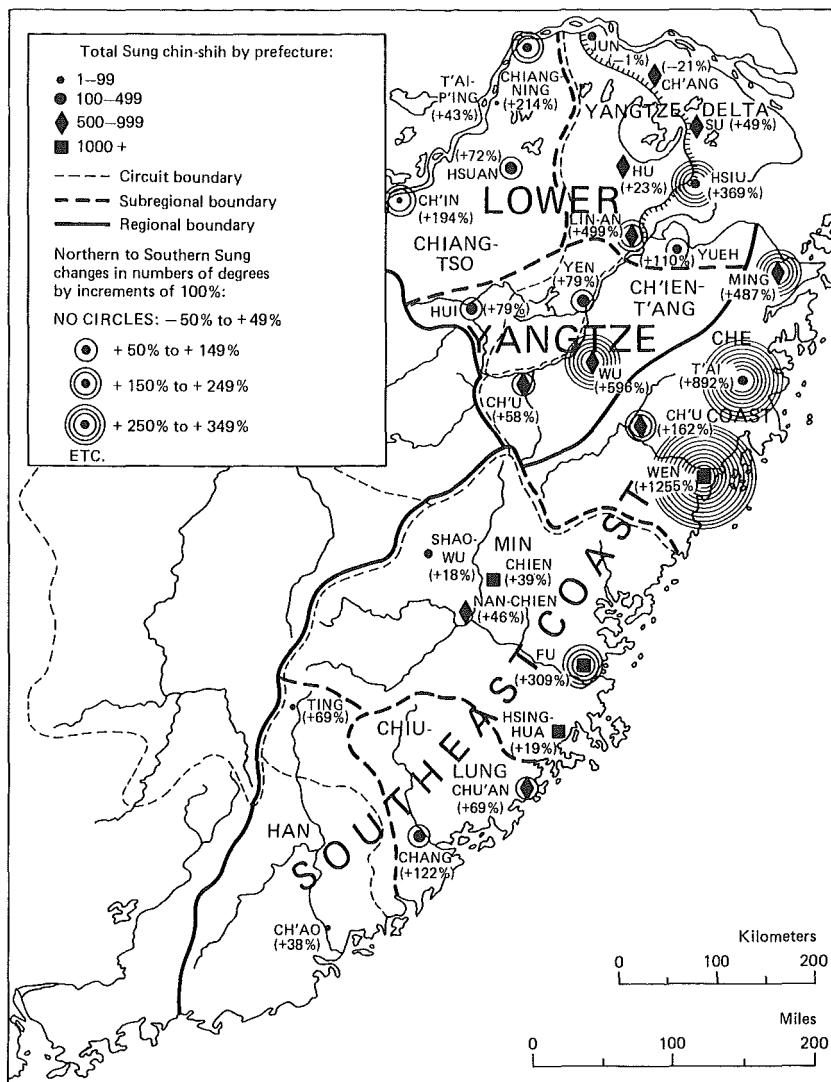


Fig. 12. Northern to Southern Sung changes in the examination success of Southeastern prefectures.

tax on junks.⁸⁶ The most persuasive evidence of coastal prosperity in the Southern Sung, however, comes from the examinations themselves, for as we can see in Figure 12, most of the prefectures in the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast whose *chin-shih* numbers increased by 150% or more were situated on the coast and usually had an important port. In fact, the seven coastal prefectures of the Southeast Coast alone had a cumulative increase of 239% and accounted for 28% of Southern Sung *chin-shih*. This compares with 23% of Ming *chin-shih* and 16% of Ch'ing *chin-shih* who came from the entire provinces of Chekiang and Fukien.⁸⁷

But coastal prosperity alone cannot explain the Che Coast's Southern Sung success, which overshadowed that of other coastal prefectures and included Ch'u-chou, a non-coastal prefecture. Much of the credit must be given to the region's extraordinary educational culture that became noteworthy in the mid-Northern Sung and flourished through the Southern Sung. In the thirteenth century Wang Ying-lin began his discussion of the cultural history of Ming-chou with the Ch'ing-li period (1041–8), 'since which time all of our elders have been pure and cultivated.'⁸⁸ It was then that the prefecture's first famous teachers, the 'Five Masters of Ch'ing-li' became active⁸⁹ and it was also around this time that we first find references to local officials promoting education at the county level.⁹⁰ By 1090 a Ming-chou writer was describing an atmosphere in which literati flourished and 'good people consider not educating their sons to be shameful'.⁹¹

Although we lack comparable information for the other Che Coast prefectures, it seems likely that they underwent the same kind of educational development, for in the Southern Sung they shared not only great success in the examinations but also a remarkable intellectual vitality. In the 1160s four students from Ming-chou — Yang Chien (1140–1226), Yüan Hsieh (1144–1224), Shu Lin (1136–99) and Shen Huan (1139–91) — studied with Lu Chiu-yüan's brother, Chiu-ling (1131–80), at the University in Lin-an. They became leading proponents of Chiu-yüan's 'school of mind' and through their teaching at academies which they founded they made Ming-chou one of the main centers of that school.⁹² Even more concentrated geographically were the utilitarian or pragmatist thinkers led by Yeh Shih (1150–1223) from Wen-chou and Ch'en Liang (1143–94) from Wu-chou.⁹³ Indeed, so many of this group came from the Wen-chou county of Yung-chia that they came to be known as the Yung-chia school. Finally, Chang Chia-chü has tabulated the geographical origins of those with biographies in the Neo-Confucian (*Tao-hsüeh*) and Confucian (*Ju-lin*) sections of the *Sung shih*. In the Northern Sung, seven out of forty-four came from the modern provinces of Chekiang and Fukien; in the Southern Sung, it was twenty-five out of forty-five.⁹⁴ Inconclusive as these figures are, since much of Chekiang is in the Lower

Yangtze region, they still reflect an intellectual vitality that was certainly a fundamental cause of its great success in the Southern Sung examinations.

There is other evidence as well. The Che Coast was home to some 30 academies, or 7.5 per prefecture, and while this was excelled by Min's 56 academies (11.2 per prefecture), it easily surpassed the 19 prefectures of the Yangtze Delta (2.7 per prefecture). Even more dramatic are the comparative reports of prefectoral examination candidate numbers. While Min again led with figures of ten thousand in Chien-chou and twenty thousand in Fu-chou,⁹⁵ the eight thousand reported in both T'ai-chou and Wen-chou⁹⁶ were far greater than the one to three thousand reported in Jun-chou, Su-chou and Hui-chou of the Yangtze Delta.⁹⁷ In a more impressionistic vein, contemporary discussions of local culture also suggest that learning or an 'academic strategy' for success had a broader appeal in Min and the Che Coast than it did in the Yangtze Delta. Ch'en Hsiang (1017-1080), an eleventh century prefect of Hang-chou (Lin-an), blamed the poor examination record of that prefecture on the influence of coastal trade and the desire for profit:

How could it not be that the people living on the seacoast propagate the teachings of sages rarely, practice frivolous customs, follow profit and select the inferior? Therefore, although they have excellent youths, some of them are lost to the professions of artisans, merchants, Buddhists and Taoists. They have not known that if the way of Confucian teaching is honored, then the art of humanheartedness and righteousness will triumph.⁹⁸

By contrast, Tseng Feng in 1184 described his native Fu-chien as a place where competition drove men to succeed both as literati and in more humble occupations:

Everywhere these days there are people leaving agriculture to become literati, Taoists, Buddhists or professional entertainers; but those from Fu-chien are the most numerous. The land of Fu-chien is cramped, and inadequate to feed and clothe them, so they scatter to all the four quarters.⁹⁹ For this reason wherever studying goes on, there Fukienese literati will be found. Wherever there are Buddhist or Taoist halls there will be Fukienese Taoists and Buddhists. Wherever there are markets there will be Fukienese professional entertainers.¹⁰⁰

As the Che Coast prefectures became increasingly successful in the Southern Sung examinations, a change occurred which had important ramifications both for their future success and for their elite societies: the proportion of their *chin-shih* who had taken the prefectoral examination shrank. Figure 13 plots the ratios over time of *chin-shih* per examination to

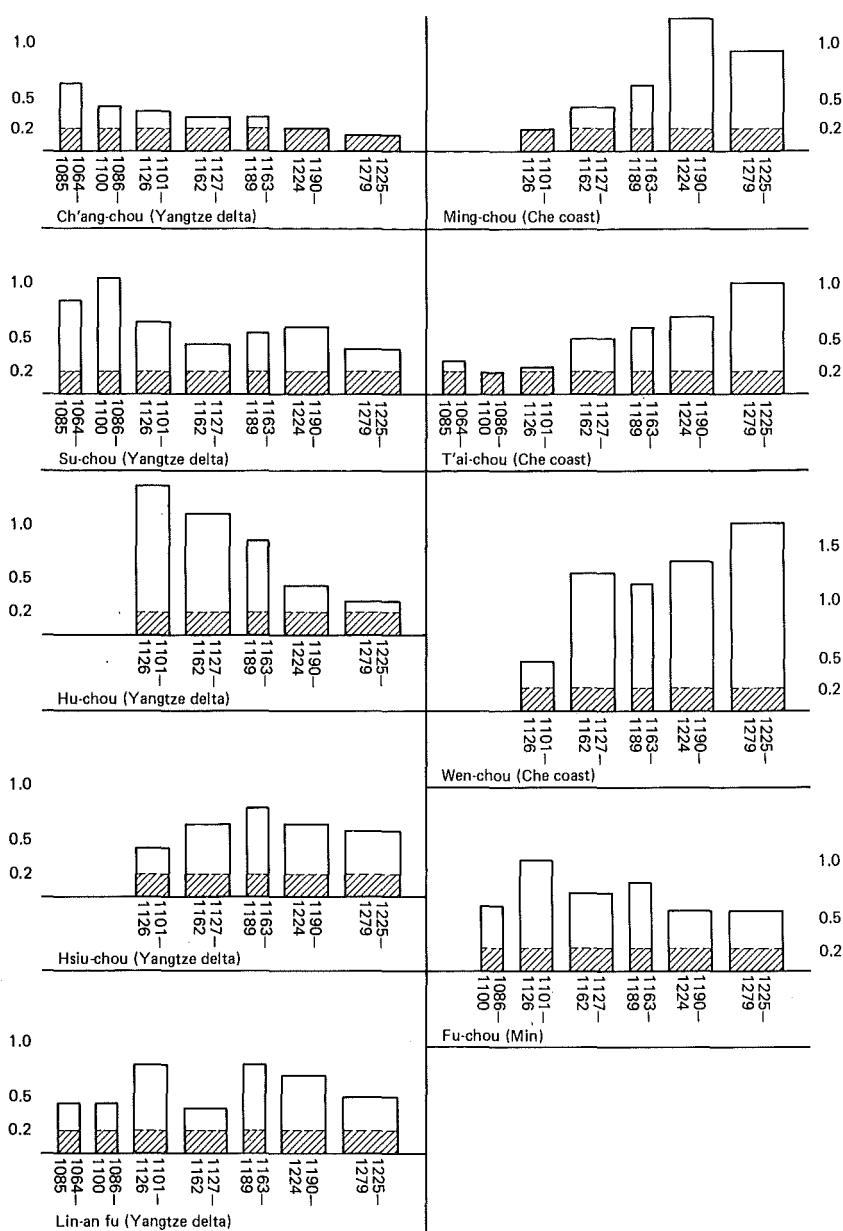


Fig. 13. Ratios of the average number of *chin-shih* per examination to the prefectural *chü-jen* quota in various prefectures of the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast. (Shaded area = *chin-shih* who passed the prefectural examination.)

prefectural quota for a number of southeastern prefectures. In the extant Sung *chü-jen* lists the percentages of prefectural examination *chü-jen* who became *chin-shih* are all within the range of 13–20%.¹⁰¹ Thus it seems reasonable to assume that *chin-shih* in excess of 20% of the quota (or 0.2 in the graphs) had passed a special preliminary examination. In all three Che Coast prefectures the ratio went from at or near the 0.2 level in the late Northern Sung to in excess of 1.0, meaning that the majority of *chin-shih* had passed the special examinations. Many of these were literati discouraged by the extreme competition in the prefectural examinations who took and passed the University entrance examination in Lin-an. Chu Hsi, in fact, wrote of that examination:

Today most of those who extol the mixed entrance examination are men from Wen, Fu [in Fu-chien], Ch'u, and Wu, and not from other prefectures. It is not that only the men from these prefectures fiercely contend while all men from other prefectures modestly retire, but rather that the circumstances [i.e., prefectural competition] drive them to it.¹⁰²

Apart from these University *chin-shih*, however, the others must have been imperial clansmen or those who through family or personal connections were able to take the avoidance examination or gain privileged entrance to the University.

This is a classic case of success spawning success, for the more officials the Che Coast produced, the more high officials there would be with recruitment privileges for their kin. Thus use of the special examinations must be added to the causes of the Che Coast's success. At the same time their use must have contributed to a widening social gap between the thousands who battled very long odds in the prefectural examinations and those who took the special examinations as a matter of course.

Turning to the other subregions represented in Figure 13, the Yangtze Delta prefectures all indicate significant access to special examinations in the Northern Sung, which then held roughly steady (Hsiu-chou, Lin-an fu) or declined (Ch'ang-chou, Su-chou, Hu-chou) in the Southern Sung. This is generally consistent with our characterization of Su-chou in Chapter 5 as having a relatively small literati population but a powerful elite with continued if declining access to the special examinations. It also suggests that the social lines between literati and wealthy but non-literati families were more closely drawn in the Yangtze Delta than on the Southeast Coast, perhaps because of the continuing influence of the descendants of the Northern Sung professional elite.

In the Min example of Fu-chou, another center of the professional elite, a

different pattern appears. Thanks in part to two Southern Sung quota increases that tripled its prefectoral quota to ninety, by far the largest in the empire, recourse to the special examinations declined from a late Northern Sung peak of 1.0 to 0.6. But that was still high compared to the Yangtze Delta, suggesting that even in the thirteenth century as many as two thirds of its triennial average of fifty-plus *chin-shih* had passed a special preliminary examination. This, however, is what one would expect from a prefecture whose bureaucratic position was among the most eminent in the Northern Sung and yet which also boasted the largest and most varied literati population in the Southern Sung, for in this it differed both from the Che Coast and Yangtze Delta prefectures.

From the above analysis, it should be clear that examination success was patterned both regionally and subregionally, and also that no one variable is sufficient to explain those patterns. Economic development, the particularities of local elite history, educational traditions, and the special examinations were all critical factors, and each had its own geographical dimensions. Thus while the profits of maritime commerce probably aided all coastal prefectures in the examinations, the differing social structures and educational traditions of the Southeast Coast together with the early development of Fu-chien and the Yangtze Delta all helped to shape the unique examination histories of each of the southeastern subregions.

But most interesting is the revelation of the degree to which certain regions were able to dominate the examinations, given the minimal constraints the Sung placed upon them. The academic strategy of wealth, education, and special examinations worked, and it is little wonder that subsequent dynasties governing from the north attempted to curb the southeasterners who had perfected it.

THROUGH THE THORNY GATES: THE CULTURE OF EXAMINATIONS

The terminology of testing

One of the most intriguing features of the Sung examination system is the colorful vocabulary which was frequently used in place of the drier institutional terms. At times it emphasized ancient precedents and the imperial role in selection. The examinations themselves were often called the 'great comparison' (*ta-pi*), a reputedly Chou dynasty term for the triennial census when districts would select local worthies to be sent to the court.¹ Similarly, 'tribute halls' (*kung-yüan*) referred to the halls where candidates sat for the examinations and 'district tribute' (*hsiang-kung*) or 'tribute scholars' (*kung-shih*) to the 'selected men' (*chü-jen*) chosen in them. At other times popular terminology emphasized the glory of success: the *chuang-yüan* ('first in appearance'), the highest graduate of the palace examination, was sometimes called the 'great eminence' (*ta-k'uei*) or the 'dragon's head' (*lung-shou*), and the tablet (*p'ang*) on which the graduates' names were listed was also known as the 'cassia register' (*kuei-chi*). Yet other terms emphasized the difficulty of passing the examinations, as when the examination hall was called the 'thorny gate' (*chi-wei*).

These examples of linguistic inventiveness, which could easily be multiplied, are evidence of the cultural importance of the examinations in Sung elite society. As a central factor in the lives of many, perhaps most upper class men, the examinations became a preoccupation and came to influence the ways in which people acted and thought. Of course that influence both predated and postdated the Sung, but it was during the Sung that two critical developments occurred. First were the unmistakable beginnings of a public examination culture, embedded of course in the prevailing elite culture but with its own ceremonies, symbols, buildings, and support organizations. These were not confined to the capital as they had been previously, but were spread throughout the empire, most visibly in the successful regions of the south. Secondly, more than ever before the examination endeavor, with all of its uncertainties and attendant insecurities, engaged the attention

of writers and story-tellers, thus enabling us to chart at least some of the relationships between the examinations and elite culture. It is with these two largely neglected topics that this chapter is concerned.

The spread of ceremony

The examinations at the capital had always been replete with ceremony. Indeed, when Sui Wen-*ti* created the examination system in 587 A.D., he placed it under the Board of Rites (*Li-pu*) rather than that of Personnel, thus indicating that its ritual functions were to be considered central. From the candidates' presentation of documents upon their arrival at the capital through the departmental examination, the listing of its results, the palace examination, the hanging of the final placement list, congratulatory feasts, and an imperial audience, one occasion followed another. By their conclusion the successful commoner had made the transition from commoner to official and had received, however fleetingly, the attention of the Son of Heaven. In the words of a twelfth century description,

He entered the Bureau of Great Officials and stood at the foot of the court with several hundred of his fellow students. They were all wearing white robes and occupied the western side [of the court]. The emperor sat above. One by one the clerk called every name, and each was conducted to the east side . . . [Kung] P'i-hsien followed the calling [of his name] and went to the east.²

While elaborate ceremonies at the capital were well developed as early as the T'ang,³ there are almost no accounts of local examination ceremonies from the Northern Sung or before. The one exception was the 'district wine drinking ceremony' (*hsiang yin-chiu li*), a reputedly Chou dynasty ritual in which men of a district (*hsiang*) gathered to drink, eat, and listen to music, all with the utmost gravity.⁴ According to later commentators, there were several variants of this ceremony,⁵ but the T'ang adopted one which was associated with the selection of local worthies at the time of the 'great comparison' (see above) for use when prefectures submitted their annual tribute of goods and scholars: 'On the day that the tribute should be sent, perform a district drinking ceremony and sacrifice sheep so that the [sending of] official goods may be complete.'⁶

For a brief period during the Sung, the district drinking ceremony served as an integral part of the examination system. In 1143, with a humiliating peace with the Jurchen just concluded and the government eager to secure the support of the southern elites, all examination candidates were required either to have attended a government school for half a year or to have participated in two district wine drinking ceremonies.⁷ Thirteen years later, in

1156, the rule was repealed, perhaps because of the difficulty of making the ceremony universal.⁸

In Ming-chou and possibly elsewhere, however, the ceremony had a much longer history. According to a late Southern Sung account, during the Northern Sung it had been an annual affair held during the new year period at which the prefect led the educated elite (*shih-ta-fu*), arranged by order of age, in presenting food offerings to the Former Sages and Teachers (*hsien-sheng hsien-shih*).⁹ Halted when the prefectoral school was destroyed in the fighting of the late 1120s, the ceremony was revived in 1137, received 106 *mou* of fields to provide for expenses in 1140, and in 1143 served as the model and inspiration for the edict of 1143 mentioned above.¹⁰ Thereafter a pattern developed of the ceremony falling into disuse only to be revived by prefects with help from members of the elite. Of the known revivals in 1165–73, 1214, 1227, and 1246, the last two were noteworthy for having involved in excess of fifteen hundred and three thousand participants respectively.¹¹

Ming-chou cannot be considered typical, for with its outstanding success in the examinations (as we saw in Chapter 6) and its vibrant elite culture, it was more leader than follower in cultural developments.¹² Still its example is instructive both in illustrating the Sung trend towards public ritual and in suggesting the important role played by the government schools in that trend. Indeed, the schools with their ancient and thoroughly Confucian goal of 'spreading culture' (*chiaohua*) to a great extent provided the context in which the examination culture developed. But as the most visible symbols of literati life, they had a problematical relationship to the examinations, which demanded a different role of them: preparing students to pass the examinations. Particularly after the Three Halls experiment under the emperor Hui-tsung, when schools and examinations were merged, the government schools tended to be viewed as a preparatory step for the examinations. (The logical end of this tendency was reached during the Ming when they became pure appendages of the examinations, places for the support of lower degree holders.) But the debate over the proper role of the schools continued, with Neo-Confucians especially arguing that acculturation and the teaching of the *tao* were their proper roles. It is in this light that the Ming-chou drinking ceremony should be viewed, for despite the exemplary role that it played in the examination regulations of 1143, its stated purpose was 'to make flourish the practices of the literati and the spirit of the people'.¹³

Other Southern Sung ceremonies, however, focused specifically upon the examinations. The most intriguing, though unusual, again was found in Ming-chou as well as in Ssu-ch'uan in the late Southern Sung and involved the announcement of prefectoral examination graduates.¹⁴ On the appointed

day, the candidates and others would gather outside the examination hall and an official would come down to uncover the names. When the first-place name was uncovered, that individual would be led into the hall where his name, residence, and the names of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were inscribed on a green, wooden, gold-flowered placard (*chin-hua p'ang-tzu*) about twenty-one by eight inches in size, which was then given to him.¹⁵ Leaving the hall, he would present the placard to his followers, who could then go out with bells and announce the news. This signified the official announcement of the examination results.

In the Chiang-hsi prefecture of Chi-chou there was a 'hopeful gathering' (*ch'i-chi*) at which *chü-jen* congregated after the announcement of the prefec-tural examination results in celebration and expectation of the departmental examination. The eminent Chou Pi-ta, a native of Chi-chou, wrote of it in 1198 with delight, for an unprecedented 50 *chü-jen* had attended it that year:

Foremost [in the process] of selecting scholars in villages and elevating their names to the storehouse of Heaven is the ceremony of the gathering of hope. Lu-ling [Chi-chou's metropolitan county] is called a scholarly district, so this ceremony has greatly flourished, but this year it was especially flourishing.¹⁶

Unfortunately Chou does not describe the ceremony, except to say that poems written by the guests had been collected. It seems likely that it was, in fact, a local variant of the most famous and widespread of local examination ceremonies, the congratulatory banquet for successful *chü-jen* called the Feast of the Barking Deer (*Lu-ming yen*).¹⁷ This was attended by local and retired officials, past *chü-jen*, and new *chü-jen* from both the prefec-tural and the special qualifying examinations, which made it a large affair in the more successful prefectures. It featured the presentation of gifts to the new *chü-jen*, most importantly stipends for the trip to the capital but in at least one place also including quantities of writing brushes, rolls of paper, and bottles of wine.¹⁸

Hung Mai, in his twelfth century collection of marvellous tales, the *I-chien chih*, tells of a literatus from the very academic prefecture of Fu-chou in Fu-chien, who dreamed one night of arriving in a great hall for a group audience, and in the hall there was a tablet which read: 'When rank and office are first approached, court etiquette is still unfamiliar.' Ch'en Mao-lin, the literatus, awoke convinced that this dream of an imperial audience, as he interpreted it, foretold not only his passing the examinations, but that he would place first as well, and he indeed placed first in the 1147 prefec-tural examination. Come the Barking Deer Feast, at which the *chü-jen* were to have an audience with the prefect in the Hall of Great Completion, Ch'en

challenged the established precedent by which they were supposed to line up according to age, saying, 'I was the first selected and I should lead all of the scholars.' No one argued and he led, but at the ceremony's end when the incense was burned and all were supposed to bow twice, the inexperienced Ch'en mistakenly bowed thrice. Those who knew of his dream laughed and said that its meaning was now clear. Ch'en was disconcerted, also doubting his interpretation of it, and in the end did not receive a *chin-shih* degree.¹⁹

Brief as this vignette is, it nevertheless suggests the importance of public ritual in the lives of examination candidates. Examination dreams, as we shall see, were thought to work in many different ways. In this case the dream pointed to Ch'en's tendency to behave improperly, not only in his bowing but more importantly in his discordant insistence that he be first.

The support of *chü-jen*

The rewarding of stipends, which could be substantial, raises the question of how examination life was financed. It was expensive and while some literati managed by attending government schools which provided room and board, or by relying on the beneficence of a rich patron, the primary source of support was usually the individual's family. Hung Mai tells of one mother who responded to her son's request to try for the examinations by saying, 'You seem simple and unlettered, and students have expenses for travelling. You may not [attempt them].'²⁰ In another story, we learn of a young man's feelings of guilt because he was preparing for the examinations in leisure while his family was suffering from extreme poverty.²¹

While the costs of study were long-term and substantial, the examinations themselves exacted the greatest financial burdens. The candidate first had to make his way to the prefectoral capital and if he succeeded there, he faced the much longer and more difficult trip to the imperial capital in K'ai-feng or Lin-an. The prefectoral examinations were usually held during the eighth month, the departmental examination in the second month of the following year, the palace examination in the third month, and the final results in the fourth month. Thus successful passage through a cycle of examinations virtually took a year, if one includes the journey home, and a great deal of travel.²² That travel was expensive and could be harrowing; we shall see later how it drove some *chü-jen* to resort to unusual stratagems. But because of those expenses, both lineages and localities began during the Sung to make formal provisions for their members.

The lineage provisions for the examinations were actually a part of a broader revolution in kinship organization which had its origins in the Northern Sung. In 1050, the statesman and reformer Fan Chung-yen (989–1052) donated some 3,000 *mou* of land to his patrilineage in Su-chou. This land, which was

officially registered and corporately owned by the lineage, was organized into a 'charitable estate' (*i-chuang*) with the purpose of providing financial aid to lineage members, especially for the great expenses of weddings and funerals.²³ Provisions for travel stipends to lineage *chü-jen* were added in 1073, increased in 1196, and in the late thirteenth century a lineage school (*i-hsüeh*) was established as well.²⁴ The Fan example was influential.

References to charitable estates from the late Northern and Southern Sung are numerous for southeastern China and can be found elsewhere as well. Still, it seems likely that they remained the exception rather than the rule, even among the elite lineages of the southeast,²⁵ and moreover, even those that cited the Fan example rarely if ever seem to have adopted a comparatively complex lineage structure.

While examination support was not an initial motivation behind the charitable estates, problems posed by the Sung recruitment system contributed to their spread. Elite families correctly perceived that the task of maintaining their positions over generations had been exacerbated by the dynasty's uncommonly heavy reliance on examinations and by the spread of education, which made the examinations more competitive. While some advocated a return to a system of primogeniture as a way of maintaining the position of the family or lineage,²⁶ the cornerstone of lineages' success strategies increasingly became the charitable estate.

Ch'en Te-kao, an early thirteenth century literatus from Tung-yang county in Wu-chou (Liang-che-tung), was exemplary in this regard. When the death of his father required that he quit his study for the examinations and take up his family responsibilities, Te-kao stated that because he could not fulfill his father's wish that he pass the examinations, he would act to nourish his lineage by establishing a charitable estate modelled upon that of the Fans. The estate, which had 1,000 *mou* of land and a lineage school, was praised by his former teacher, the famous poet Lu Yu (1125–1210), who wrote:

The kinship system should be like this: if you consider the hearts of your ancestors, you will love their sons and grandsons and want them to be given sufficient clothing and food. When they marry, you will want them to become scholars and not want them to drift as artisans and merchants, to descend to become runners, or to leave and become Buddhist or Taoist monks.²⁷

While Lu was intent upon showing how one's responsibility to distant relatives was based upon filiality, obviously a lineage which encouraged its men to 'become scholars' and prepare for the examinations would have an easier time producing officials and maintaining its high status than would an individual family. And as lineages came to cast their nets widely, so too

did whole localities, or at least the elites within them. At the end of the twelfth century county and prefectural examination estates began to appear.²⁸ These were usually called 'estates for tribute scholars' (*kung-shih-chuang*) but more fanciful names such as 'estate for the flourishing of worthies' (*hsing-hsien-chuang*) and 'myriad cassias estate' (*wan-kuei-chuang*) were used as well. They typically consisted of endowed landholdings, the income from which was managed by the government school officials and exclusively designated for stipends for *chü-jen* and, sometimes, for those who passed the departmental examination.

The earliest known reference to examination estates comes from Ching-hu-pei in 1184: 'All of the prefectures [in Ching-hu-pei] bought fields and delegated prefectural educational inspectors [*wen-hsüeh*] to manage the income that was given to *chü-jen*'.²⁹ The first reference that I have found to an actual estate is slightly later, 1197,³⁰ but from then until the end of the dynasty they are common in most of central and southeastern China.³¹

From what we can tell, the examination estates were typically joint ventures of elite families and local officials; the central government played no role whatsoever. Prefects or magistrates were almost invariably credited with founding them, though we should recognize the tendency of local historians to credit presiding officials with any positive activities that occurred during their tenures. In some cases the official role is obvious, as when the local government donated the land for the estate.³² In other cases both officials and the local elite were involved. For example in 1270, the Chi-chou prefectural school preceptor called a meeting to discuss enlarging the endowment of the examination estate, and the result was large donations of land from two local families.³³

Regardless of the initiative for the estates, the response of local elites to them was very positive, and well it should have been, for the aid that they provided to local *chü-jen* was substantial. In Chen-chiang fu (or Jun-chou of Liang-che-hsi) in 1197, new *chü-jen* received 100 strings of cash and another 150 if they passed the departmental examination.³⁴ In Chiang-ning fu (or Chien-k'ang fu) the amounts were 50 strings for prefectural *chü-jen* and 200 for the departmental examination graduates.³⁵ According to figures given by Chu Hsi in 1190 for student boarding allowances at the Yüeh-lu Academy in Ching-hu-nan, 50 strings would have supported a student for 250 days,³⁶ so such an amount would probably have paid for much though by no means all of a trip to and from the capital.

Essays dealing with the examination estates also betray a strong element of local pride. The competition and divisiveness of prefectural selection were forgotten as the locality prepared to send off its *chü-jen*. Panegyrics to its advanced culture abounded. One writer, for example, gave several reasons for

Ming-chou having produced more *chin-shih* than any other Liang-che prefecture: 'It has been able to restore the spirit of antiquity; it has made its villages beautiful in appearance; it has been able to prevent the noisy disorders of successful candidates.'³⁷

We shall return shortly to this sense of community solidarity as it related to the evolving examination culture of the Sung. But first we must consider the visible signs of that culture.

The signs of selection

While examination ceremonies and the fruits of examination estates made their appearances only triennially during the activities associated with the qualifying examinations, other features of the examination culture had a more enduring visibility. One was clothing, which played an important role in the status-conscious society of the Sung, for sumptuary laws, though often violated, were numerous.³⁸ Most elaborate, of course, were the prescriptions for the court dress of high officials with their caps, robes, belts, boots, and audience-tablets, the materials and colors of which were all minutely prescribed according to rank. For the local elites, however, less exalted distinctions were crucial. The 'long robes' (*shen-fu*) or 'Confucian robes' (*Ju-fu*) of the literati set them off from their unlearned contemporaries. And while the dress distinctions between the *chü-jen* and literati were relatively minor,³⁹ with the *chin-shih* degree came the graduate's robes (*lan-shan*) which marked one as an official.⁴⁰ As a deceased literatus turned underworld administrator puts it in one of Hung Mai's stories:

In my lifetime I studied painstakingly, hoping for blue gowns, but to no avail, for I was overshadowed by the efforts of Ch'en Te-kuang [who had passed the examinations]. But now I have been made the City God's vice-administrator and wear fine clothes . . . I have exceeded my place in my life on earth.⁴¹

In Sung biographical accounts one also finds the term 'time of cotton cloth' (*pu-i chih shih*) used to describe the period before the individual passed the examinations.⁴²

The most visible and impressive symbol of the examinations was the examination hall, the 'thorny gates' through which the aspiring candidate had to pass. This Sung addition to the urban landscape of traditional China made its appearance in the twelfth century. For most of the Northern Sung, examinations were usually held at a temple, at the prefectural school (another symbol of Confucian learning), or even at the *yamen*. In 1112, all prefectures were ordered to build examination halls,⁴³ but judging from accounts in local histories, most were built during the Southern Sung,⁴⁴ when the general rule

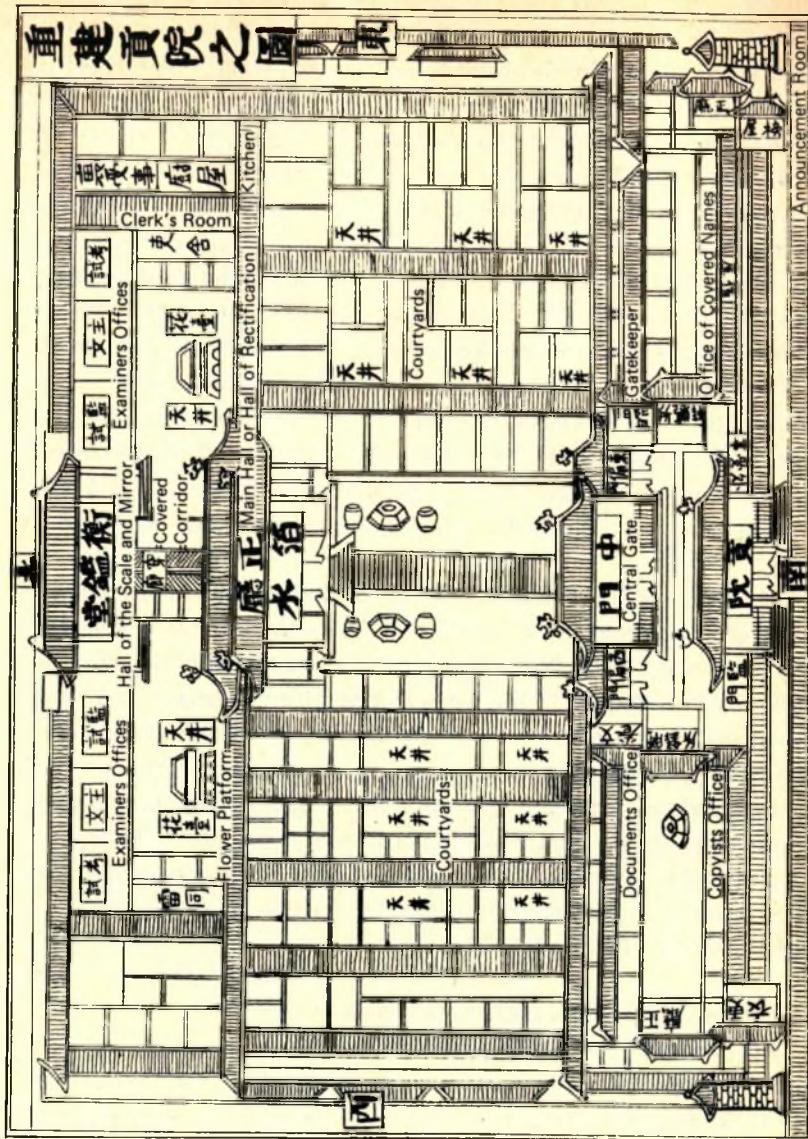


Fig. 14. The prefectural examination hall at chien-k'ang fu.

was that any prefecture with more than one hundred candidates was to build one.⁴⁵

The halls could be quite elaborate. Chien-k'ang fu's rebuilt hall of 1261, the only Sung examination hall for which we have a drawing, was first built in the 1130s and underwent renovations in 1168, 1192, and 1223.⁴⁶ It was located in the cultured easternmost portion of the walled city, near to both the prefectoral school, the Ming-tao Academy, and a sacrificial hall to former worthies (*hsien-hsien tz'u*).⁴⁷ The drawing (see Figure 14) depicts a large walled compound with offices for the registrars, proctors and clerk-copyists at the front, innumerable examination cubicles in the center, and the examiners' offices together with a kitchen and a building for clerks to the rear. Most striking is the commanding south to north axis which took one from the outside gate past a courtyard and through a great Central Gate (*Chung-men*), then up a long walk (shortened by the artist) flanked by the cubicles, through a Main Hall or Hall of Rectification (*Cheng-t'ing*), and up a covered corridor to arrive finally at the Justitia-like Hall of the Scale and Mirror.

The halls were built primarily because of the swelling ranks of candidates, for when candidate numbers increased from the hundreds to the thousands, as they did in many places, the temporary transformation of temples and schools became inadequate.⁴⁸ But we should be mindful of their visual impact as well. To outsiders who saw only the walls and exterior gates, they must have been slightly mysterious but permanent reminders of the promise of the examinations, a mystery that was probably deepened by the fact that they were only used for three days of testing every three years.⁴⁹ To those who entered, the complexity of the compound and the imposing central axis (itself a reflection of the imperial axis mundi) undoubtedly served to reinforce their feelings of high seriousness.

The beginnings of an examination culture

The evidence presented above is admittedly sparse. Not only does it come overwhelmingly from the prosperous southeast, but even if one generalizes from the examples given, the 'examination culture' of the Sung is still a far cry from that of the late imperial period when the examinations were supported by a vast array of schools, academies and provincial hostels, and degree holding offered a way of life to over a million men at a time.⁵⁰ What seems clear, however, is that in the southeast at the very least, a public examination culture with its own symbols, ceremonies and institutions was in the making.

Why did this happen? There were obvious practical reasons. The local elites, larger in size and more powerful in the Southern Sung than they had

been before, needed to tie themselves to the imperium, for as a civil ruling class they were utterly dependent upon the imperial order. Given the great social, political and economic benefits the successful candidate-turned-official could confer upon his family, his affinal kin, his neighborhood, and the local elite in general, the attempt to maximize success through such institutions as the examination estates made eminent sense. It also made sense to increase the prestige of the examinations through symbols and ceremonies, to impress upon commoners, especially the masses of literati, the strength and glory of the prefecture's ties to the empire.⁵¹ Thus local pride is a common element in writings on the examinations. Like the boast about Ming-chou culture cited earlier, Chou Pi-ta's essay on the 'hopeful gathering' ceremony in Chi-chou, after describing some of the great officials who earlier emerged from the prefecture, exhorted the *chü-jen* to continue the local tradition of national service: 'You gentlemen must exert yourselves to follow in the high footsteps of these earlier worthies and increase the abundant undertakings of our country.'⁵²

Desirable for their prestige, examination ceremonies and symbols were also useful in controlling literati. Not only was it important for unsuccessful candidates to accept the results, despite their competitiveness and unfairness, but it was also necessary to keep disturbances from breaking out as they sometimes did. One twelfth-century writer wrote concerning the enlargement of the Chien-k'ang examination hall:

Ever since the edicts encouraging participation in the triennial examinations, candidates have usually numbered in the hundreds and thousands. Fighting and a hundred other things abruptly occur and the officials must ceaselessly keep order in the rooms.⁵³

Implicit is the assumption that more ample and impressive premises would result in greater order and decorum.⁵⁴

The aim of control was also furthered by a downward spread of rewards, for the whole thrust of the evolving examination culture was to increase the status and prestige of *chü-jen* and even candidates. This did not hinder derisive reactions against arrogant and presumptuous *chü-jen*, but on the whole it probably made more palatable the long years and meager results that were the lot of so many.

Cultural considerations were, if anything, even more important, for the examinations formed a part of a broader culture of learning which included government schools, private academies, and sacrificial temples (*tz'u*) to honor past sages, which were frequently erected on school campuses. One of the distinguishing features of the Sung literati was the exalted view they had of their cultural role. Living under a dynasty which had raised the cultural,

literary, and civil values of *wen* over the martial values of *wu*, seeing themselves raised, via the examinations, to positions of unprecedented power, Sung scholars saw themselves as Confucius's superior men, transmitters of civilization, and in the process of transmission they realized the remarkable Confucian revival of the eleventh century. There were of course disagreements over the form Confucianism should take. Was the received literary and cultural tradition embodied in *wen* and evident in the poetry sections of the *chin-shih* examination the best means of approaching the *tao*, as men like Su Shih argued?⁵⁵ Or could the *tao* only be apprehended by discovering the truths in the classical canons and acting upon them? This latter view was particularly popular among Southern Sung Neo-Confucians who saw it as an answer to the political and cultural crisis posed by the loss of the north. They emphasized the notion of ritual or customary behavior (*li*) as that which civilizes. One thirteenth-century scholar described the importance of sacrificial halls in this manner:

Li, alas! If for one day we lack it, then we will be lost among the barbarians. This is greatly to be feared. Thus, in beginning to build sacrificial halls comes the knowledge of *li*, and following the removal of sacrificial halls comes the destruction of *li*.⁵⁶

The examinations partook of both *wen* and *li*, but also subverted them. Poetry and the classics formed the basis of the curriculum, and yet consideration of one's literary reputation or virtuous conduct was impossible given the anonymous grading procedures which placed a premium upon the mastery of written forms. According to one thirteenth-century critique,

The emperor must use examinations in the selection of literati, [but] literati should not look only to the examinations. From the literati's absorption in advancing through selection comes the destruction of the study of the *tao*. From advancing through selection not being located in the prefectoral schools comes the decline of local schools.⁵⁷

But the solution implied here, that selection should be rooted in schools as the Northern Sung reformers had advocated, was unrealistic, for the perceived failure of just such a policy under Hui-tsung and its association with the loss of the north made it politically unfeasible. One answer, as we saw in Chapter 4, was to establish academies for the pursuit of genuine learning. Yet another was to give the examinations as much order, ceremony, and seriousness as possible, to invest them, in short, with *li*, and this, I submit, was a major force behind the emergence of an examination culture.

Important as the examinations were to the literati, their influence had clear limits. Occurring as they did only once every three years, they were the

means to an end — the status, wealth and power that could come with degree holding and officialdom — and not an end in themselves. They were often described as 'gates' (*wei*),⁵⁸ for they constituted barriers through which the ambitious had to pass, unless they could somehow qualify for protection. Most literati, moreover, never made it through those gates and never participated in the ceremonies described above, and even most of those who passed did so only after years of waiting. How did the public examination culture affect that majority who remained on the outside? To answer this we must consider a different kind of evidence, one which considers popular views of the examination life.

Examination stories

Much as a local examination culture seems to have made its appearance during the Sung, the examination life as a common topic in anecdotal literature appears to have been primarily a Sung development. The pioneer in this regard was Wang Ting-pao (870—ca. 955), whose 'Collected Stories Concerning the T'ang' (*T'ang chih-yen*) present an unparalleled view of T'ang examination life.⁵⁹ Wang's primary concern, however, was with the examinations in Ch'ang-an, and while he was interested in local selection,⁶⁰ his occasional story on the subject cannot begin to match in quantity, detail, or social depth the examination stories of the Sung.

Whether because of greater elite participation in the examinations, or simply because with economic growth and the spread of printing, more literati were writing than ever before, Sung stories about the examination life abound. Some, like the *T'ung-meng hsün* ('Admonitions for the young and ignorant') by Lü Pen-chung (1084—1145),⁶¹ draw primarily from the lives of the author and his family. More often, as for example in the cases of Wang P'i-chih (d. after 1096),⁶² Ho Wei (1077—1145),⁶³ Yüeh K'o (1183—after 1240),⁶⁴ and Chang Shih-nan (d. after 1230),⁶⁵ the stories have been gathered from other books and acquaintances, and often the source is noted. The preeminent work in this genre, however, is the voluminous *I-chien chih* ('The collection of I-chien') which Hung Mai (1123—1202) compiled over a forty-year period in the late twelfth century.⁶⁶ Although none of these works is devoted to the examinations, the examinations and schooling figure prominently in them all.

Anecdotal stories are not the historian's traditional sources and they must be used with care. Their hearsay nature means that their assertions must be treated with skepticism. Since most of the stories were selected because they were unusual, they obviously cannot be taken as typical. And the appearance of such 'supernatural' elements as gods and ghosts in many of them might raise the question of whether they can be used at all. It should be noted,

however, that these stories are presented as fact and not fiction and that most Sung Chinese had no difficulty with accepting ghosts as part of everyday life.⁶⁷ More generally, the great utility of these stories lies in the values and attitudes that they portray, in their material and behavioral detail, and in the range of activities they describe. In this way we will use them here.

We should also recognize that these stories do not come from the common people. Rather they are invariably by and primarily about the elite, and if they at times portray attitudes and concerns which we might label 'popular,' it is not enough to explain this as the influence of the lower classes. In part the problem lies with our overly narrow view of elite culture, a view propagated by orthodox Confucian scholars though not by our sources. Indeed, except for Lü Pen-chung who once studied under Ch'eng I,⁶⁸ none of our story collectors were identified with the Neo-Confucians. Wang P'i-chih, Chang Shih-nan and Yüeh K'o were known primarily as competent local officials.⁶⁹ Ho Wei's father had been a protege of Su Shih's and Su's influence is evident in Wei's diverse investigations into music, poetry and inkstones, not to mention strange stories.⁷⁰ Even Hung Mai, who enjoyed high office and was renowned as one of the great polymaths of his day, wrote little on philosophy and had few dealings with his contemporary Chu Hsi.⁷¹ It may be that these writers represented an alternative tradition to that of the Neo-Confucians, one that emphasized the diversity of culture over the unifying demands of principle and the Way.⁷² But whatever their significance, their accounts of the literati as active participants in the local cultures in which they lived provide a vital dimension to our emerging portrait of the literati life.

Two themes stand out in these stories. One concerns the proper and improper behavior of examination candidates. With large numbers of often elderly literati living in a highly visible state of limbo, traditional age-based roles were frequently violated. Second is the very prominent part played by gods, ghosts, portents and prophecies. It is to these two aspects of examination life that we now turn.

The problems of youth

One of the common characteristics of Sung examination stories is a sense of something amiss. If we were to take them as representative, we would almost have to conclude that licentious young men, conniving and libelous scoundrels, cheaters, and pitifully thick-headed old men were as common in the ranks of candidates as the sincere and upright scholars. Of course we can do no such thing, but the very presence of these types in the stories suggests a considerable behavioral diversity among the literati and

reflects, moreover, a concern for the life stages that a literatus was supposed to undergo.

In a recent article on 'The Confucian Perception of Adulthood,' Professor Wei-ming Tu has persuasively argued that the Confucian tradition conceived of adulthood not as a state that one suddenly attained through some initiation rite, but rather as an ideal towards which grown men worked throughout their lives.⁷³ The 'capping ceremony' (*kuan-li*), which according to the *Classic of Rites* was performed at the age of twenty, marked the division between child and adult, but only the beginning of the moral journey towards 'becoming a person' (*ch'eng-jen*). That journey could be expressed in terms of moral progress, as in Confucius' famous formulation:⁷⁴

At fifteen I set my heart upon learning.
At thirty I established myself [in accordance with ritual].
At forty I no longer had perplexities.
At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven.
At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard.
At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing the boundaries of right.

But one could also speak in terms of a sequence of roles. Thus in the *Book of Rites* the capping ceremony was followed by marriage and fatherhood at around thirty, the beginning of one's official career at forty, the peak of one's public service after fifty, and retirement after seventy.⁷⁵

This Han dynasty career prescription must have seemed remarkably germane to Sung readers, for it closely conformed to the typical Sung pattern of literati success. Marriage and the examinations were the preeminent concerns of literati in their twenties, but while most married then,⁷⁶ the average age for receiving one's *chin-shih* degree was thirty-six,⁷⁷ and the standard age for retirement from the civil service was seventy.⁷⁸ Such a career had never been universal (any official career was the exception among Southern Sung literati) and no one argued that it was necessary for realizing one's humanity, for had not Confucius been a political failure? In fact much of the *Analects* is devoted to showing how the superior man can overcome adversity and maintain his commitment to the *tao*.

Yet there is reason to believe that the career and age expectations described above were deeply held by Sung literati. Examination success brought with it the key change from commoner to official and, at a more personal level, could be seen as marking the transition from early- to mid-adulthood, from youth (*shao*) to manhood (*chuang*). By extension, then, the examination life was viewed as a typically youthful (or early adult) endeavor. Conversely, the failure to advance when and as expected was often regarded as a failure to develop as an adult. There were alternatives, of course; most

unsuccessful literati at some point quit the examinations and turned to other learned or not so learned careers.⁷⁹ But those who failed yet persevered lived almost as if in a delayed state of adolescence or early adulthood.

Nothing set examination candidates off from the rest of society so much as their mobility. They were constantly on the move visiting each other, requesting instruction from well known scholars, attending schools and academies, and taking examinations. Other groups such as merchants, transport workers, and officials were also very mobile. But unlike the first two, the literati were leisured, elite, and often well connected. Unlike the last, they were relatively young, free from responsibilities, and tended to gather in large groups.

This is not to say that the candidate's life was easy and free from cares. In a world where parents could not be wired for emergency funds, distant travel could be a hazardous undertaking. This was particularly true for *chü-jen*, since they had to leave their prefectures where they and their families were known and make the trip to the capital, braving bandits, thieves, and government underlings collecting transit taxes. Ho Wei tells of Wu Wei-tao, a *chü-jen* from Nan-chien chou (in Fu-chien) who was brought before Su Shih in 1090 when he was prefect of Hang-chou. He had been caught smuggling two hundred pieces of silk in two trunks labelled with Su's own brevet and K'ai-feng address. Confessing all, Wu told how he had bought the silk, which he was using to pay for his travel expenses, with cash gifts that people in his community (*hsiang-jen*) had given him. Because he feared losing the better part of it to transit taxes, he decided 'to use the name of a great official known for encouraging young scholars.' His mistake was to choose Su, who had recently arrived in Hang-chou, for it was right on the way from Nan-chien to K'ai-feng. Su's response was to laugh and send Wu on to the capital with his trunks protected by Su's genuine papers. The following year Wu passed the examinations and returned to thank Su, who spent several days with him in celebration.⁸⁰

Hung Mai tells a similar story of a *chü-jen* named Li from the Kuang-nan prefecture of Ch'iung-chou, who left a bag containing his travel capital of gold, silver, and gold hairpins at an inn in Chiang-nan where he had spent the night on his way to the departmental examination. Fortunately a kind and honest innkeeper had stored the bag unopened, so Li was able to collect it and continue on his way. But for a time he thought the bag stolen and was 'black in the face, dumbfounded with mouth agape.' To the innkeeper's query he said,

My home is beyond the ocean. For a trip of five thousand *li*, I could only take a few things to use for travel expenses. In one night I have lost them and now I will die on the road, unable to return my bones.⁸¹

Not all accounts were so sympathetic. What some saw as the legitimate peddling of goods to pay for travel expenses others saw as smuggling, and there undoubtedly were literati who were smugglers on the side. Witness the damning by Mei Yao-ch'en (1002–62) in his poem, 'On Hearing that *Chin-shih* Are Dealing in Tea':⁸²

The fourth and fifth months are when the tea is best in mountain groves;
 then southern traders like wolves and jackals sell it secretly.
 Foolish youths risk crossing the dangerous peaks
 and work at night in teams, like soldiers with swords or spears.
 The vagrant students also lust for profit,
 their book bags are turned into smugglers' sacks!
 Officers may apprehend them at the fords,
 but the judges let them off, out of pity for their scholars' robes.
 And then they come to the cities, where they prate of Confucius and Mencius,
 not hesitating to criticize Yao and T'ang in their speeches.
 If there are three days of summer rain, they rant about drowning floods;
 after five days of hot weather, they complain of a drought.
 They make money in a hundred ways, dining on roast meat and wine
 while their hungry wives at home lack dry provisions.
 – If you end up in a ditch, you're only getting your deserts:
 the *chin-shih* degree of generals and ministers are not for the likes of you.

Clearly more was involved for Mei than a simple worry about smuggling. His target was the 'wandering literati' (*yu-shih*), men who left their homes ostensibly to study but in fact to make mischief, or so claimed many Sung writers.⁸³ We saw in Chapter 3 how they were accused of going to prefectures with more liberal prefectoral quotas than their own and fabricating family backgrounds so as to claim residency there.

A more common claim was that they engaged in malicious slander and lawsuits. Liu Tsai (1166–1239) devoted a lengthy memorial to the problem of 'wandering literati who gather in the capital and scatter to the four quarters [of the city].'⁸⁴ They come to the capital with schemes of advancing through the avoidance examinations, or through entry into the prefectoral school or University. 'For a long time now their numbers have been increasing daily. These students are truly troublesome and they are, moreover, suffering from hunger and cold [yet] are led on by music and pleasure.' His catalogue of their sins includes colluding in improper litigation, public slander in the marketplace or through songs and writings, and writing essays to gain the ear of officials. Most interesting, though, is Liu's explanation for how the literati got away with their activities in his description of the government's sources of

information:

The ears and eyes of the court are entrusted on the outside [of the bureaucracy] to circuit officials and prefects and on the inside to censors. But circuit officials and prefects cannot know all of the affairs of every circuit and prefecture and censors cannot know all of the affairs of the empire. So they make inquiries and make use of rumors [*feng-wen*, literally the 'news of the wind'] and the wandering literati know this. Thus when [the literati] choose to treat individuals well they have many ways of inviting praise, and when they [choose to] oppose them, they defame them in the marketplace.⁸⁵

Liu's proposed solutions involved examination reforms to reduce the attractiveness of coming to the capital; he had no recommendations concerning their activities as such, which frequently involved the connivance of officials.⁸⁶

The music and pleasure which attracted Liu's wandering literati raise one further subject common in examination stories, that of licentiousness. As we noted above, most literati were either married or betrothed. But even when married, their mobile lifestyle frequently separated them from their wives and families. It was then that they were most vulnerable, for in examination stories with sexual themes, the literatus is almost invariably living away from home, without social ties to help rein in his passions.

Most of these stories end unhappily, in a moralistic manner. We find young literati seduced by a ghost in the guise of a prostitute,⁸⁷ by the spirit of a drowned ewe in human form who claimed to be a widow,⁸⁸ and by the ghost of the woman who was the man's wife three incarnations earlier and whom he deserted for a prostitute.⁸⁹ In each case the man dies as a result. A University student disappears from his dormitory in K'ai-feng and is found to have been murdered in a brothel, one especially popular among Chiang-nan-tung literati.⁹⁰ Liu Yao-chü's punishment is longer in coming. Having bought a boat to travel from Hsiu-chou to Lin-an for the examinations in the fall of 1147,⁹¹ Yao-chü is attracted by the boatman's daughter who, however, is zealously guarded by her parents. On the examination's second day, Yao-chü finishes his answers early, rushes back to the boat on which he is staying and seduces the girl. That night his parents are told in a dream: 'Your son has committed an immoral act and Heaven has suspended him for an examination.' But even though passing three years later, he dies before taking office.⁹²

The few stories with happy endings are equally instructive. A University student becomes so caught up in the pleasures of the flesh that he develops consumption and almost dies, but is saved by a Taoist priest who gives him

medicine and converts him to a life of total abstinence.⁹³ In another, a Ssu-ch'uan literatus who is living with a family in Ch'eng-tu while preparing for the examinations spurns the advances of his host's concubine. In his village his wife is immediately informed through a dream:

Your husband is living alone in another district but has been able to maintain his resolution and has not taken advantage of a darkened room. The gods all know this and are ordering that he be set before all other scholars to be a reward.

The following year he placed first in the Ssu-ch'uan examinations.⁹⁴

What is noteworthy in these stories is less their moralistic tone than their view of the literati as prey to their own lustfulness and vulnerable to seduction. Why is this theme so prominent? In the rootlessness of the literatus away from home we can find part of the explanation, but part too lay in the literati's presumed youth. Confucius observed that in his youth when his blood and vital humors (*hsüeh ch'i*) are not yet settled, the superior man guards against lust.⁹⁵ Obviously many literati were not 'superior men', but their very susceptibility to lust suggests that the examination life was indeed regarded as a youthful endeavor.

The problem of age

But what, then, of age? Were those who failed to pass regarded as somehow stunted, as continuing on in an untimely youth as we suggested earlier?

From accounts of elderly candidates, who were often the objects of pity and derision, one would have to answer yes. Thus one Liu Shih, who had 'grown old in the examination hall,' finally received a facilitated *chin-shih* degree in 1142.⁹⁶ His kinsmen were not impressed, calling him 'Liu the unsalaried minister' as he waited to fill a minor post. When word of its vacancy arrived he said to them: 'All my life you said I wouldn't obtain an office, but now in old age it has arrived.' They made their apologies. As he left home he said, 'If only I can receive a salary, I will not again speak of fate.' But fate remained unkind to him and he died *en route* to his post.⁹⁷

Of greater interest are the complaints associated with elderly candidates that they had not 'accomplished' (*ch'eng*) anything. This is the same *ch'eng* as in *ch'eng-jen* ('becoming a person') which, as we saw above, is central to the Confucian concept of adulthood, and its use in fact contains a sense of arrested development. One individual who entered the Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*) at the ripe age of fifty, was soon discouraged by his age: 'I have no accomplishments. I wish to quit the examinations and return [home].' But he stayed, encouraged by two propitious dreams, and not only won a

chin-shih degree but had a moderately successful career as well.⁹⁸ Even more revealing is the story of Shen Wei-fu, a native of Wen-chou in the early twelfth century, who had studied for a long time at the University without 'establishing his name' (*pu-ch'eng-ming*). Returning home, he made his living in a way familiar to students of Ch'ing social history, by living off the gifts given to him for interceding with officials. He continued to take the prefec-tural examinations but always without success, and one day in despair he said:

Wei-fu is an unlucky failure without accomplishments. [I am] the object of satirical songs in the district and my five viscera are split apart [*wu-nei fen-lieh*]. Does Heaven know me?⁹⁹

However self-pitying this remark, the complaint of physical distress suggests a profound sense of disharmony; lack of accomplishment had led to personal disintegration and not merely to arrested development, or so he is claiming.

Another indication of the special character of the examination life is its association with the feminine principle of *yin*. Hung Mai tells of one Hsü Shu-wei, a poor scholar who was told in a dream one night: 'If you want to rise in the examinations, you must store up your *yin* virtue. But if your efforts are unsuccessful then you should become a doctor,' for as he was later told in a second dream, 'medicine has secret merits [*yin-kung*].'¹⁰⁰ Such an association may seem surprising in light of the stress placed upon literati virility in the preceding section, but we must distinguish between the literati's lifestyle and their occupational role. The student's task was essentially passive, concerned with acquiring knowledge and preparing for the active, *yang* life of the official, and indeed, one might argue that the passiveness of his life created an imbalance of *yin* and *yang* which contributed to his reputed licentiousness. And since *yin* was the female principle, this may help to explain the cryptic remark of one Chang Hsien-t'u who, after years of attempting the examinations, finally became an official through protection and said to his wife, 'I have now received office. You can no longer complain about my being the orphan of the Luan bird.'¹⁰¹ As Luan was the fabulous female bird of Chinese mythology, the counterpart to the male P'eng bird, Chang appears to be saying that his prolonged (thus the 'orphan') *yin* life had come to an end.

Also revealing is the story of Ch'en Hsiu-kung of Chien-yang county in Fu-chien, an impoverished literatus who was debating whether or not to take the examinations. Entering a country temple one day, he prayed to the temple's god for guidance, threw three bamboo strips which all fell *yin*, and returned despondently to town. That night he was summoned in a dream to an audience with the goddess of the temple, who explained that she had been off at a banquet at the time of his prayer and her husband had improperly

investigated Ch'en's case. The *yin* strips were in fact mistaken, for Ch'en would not only pass the examinations but would even become a chief counselor. Needless to say, the goddess was right.¹⁰²

While the problem of untimeliness was most evident among elderly examination candidates, unusual precocity was also considered to be a problem. The Neo-Confucian philosopher Ch'eng I (1033–1107) once said that attaining a high degree at a very young age was one of the three things that are unlucky for men.¹⁰³ In a similar vein, Wang P'i-chih tells of a youth who received his *chin-shih* at nineteen and was told by a physiognomist:

Your appearance is very noble, but you have passed the examinations at too young an age and I am afraid that your end will be unfortunate. If you [wish to] succeed, you should retire young in order to avoid great calamity.¹⁰⁴

Such views were not universal, and in fact the Sung continued the T'ang practice of holding special examinations for young prodigies (*t'ung-tzu-k'o*).¹⁰⁵ But these examinations were controversial. Banned on several occasions during the Sung, they were abolished for good in 1266.¹⁰⁶

It is important to remember that the cultural patterning presented here represent only one of several systems that gave life to Sung culture. Military power, wealth, religion, and above all the family and lineage all had their own ways of organizing society and of creating expectations and handling their fulfillment or the lack thereof, so that failure in the examinations by no means insured that one would be or see oneself a failure in life. But it helped, given the influence of office on wealth and kinship and the ever-increasing popularity of the examinations. Indeed, such were the rewards and uncertainties of the examination life that an appeal for divine aid became yet another common feature of the examination life.

With help from the spirits

Judging from the examination stories, Sung literati lived in a world full of gods, ghosts, omens, prophecies, fortune tellers, dragons and the like. Indeed, such is the wealth and diversity of the material on these subjects that it is sometimes difficult to do much more than catalogue their uses. Yet the material is revealing, so revealing in fact, that to ignore it as writers on the examinations have almost always done is to miss a major aspect of literati culture.

The phenomena which concern us here fall roughly under the headings of omens, prophecies, and dreams and apparitions. Of the three, omens are perhaps the most familiar to students of Chinese history, for ever since Tung Chung-shu's cosmological Confucianism with its theory of correspondences in

the Western Han and probably well before, omens had had an accepted place in orthodox cosmology. Indeed, Chu Hsi wrote that 'There is no harm if one dreams of something which is an omen,' and his thirteenth century commentator elaborated that 'When they [omens] are revealed in dreams, it means that the mind is acting according to the principle of influences and response. There is no harm in this.'¹⁰⁷ Most of the Sung examination omens concerned unusual natural phenomena which foretold someone's success in the examinations: the splitting apart of a treetrunk with the resulting cracks forming characters,¹⁰⁸ a tiger breaking down a wall and carrying away a pig,¹⁰⁹ the falling of a large rock or the appearance of an unusual flower,¹¹⁰ or even something as insignificant as finding a piece of paper whose characters contained some hidden meaning.¹¹¹ Even more auspicious were the appearances of dragons in school ponds, which augured well for all local literati in the examinations.¹¹² We should note that where traditional omenology was concerned primarily with imperial conduct and the state of the empire, these omens were given far more particular readings.

We might also include here the effects that *feng-shui*, that is the placement of buildings or tombs in relation to the winds and waters, had upon the examinations. This was seen most commonly in the building or moving of local government schools,¹¹³ but it could involve other buildings as well.¹¹⁴ The most interesting case that I have found involved an official family in the northern prefecture of Cheng-chou. They became so frightened at a scholar's comment that the *feng-shui* of their tombs was so good that the family would one day produce an emperor, a treasonous prophecy to Sung dynastic ears, that they intentionally damaged the *feng-shui* by flattening out the site. As a result the family stopped producing *chin-shih*. But then after a great flood a stream appeared beside the tombs and within seven years they produced two *chin-shih*, though both had modest careers.¹¹⁵

Like the omens, examination prophecies by the living did not usually involve recourse to the spirit world. They most frequently occurred as unexplained and often unsolicited pronouncements about someone's future, but could also be based upon such practices as physiognomy¹¹⁶ or divination with hexagrams.¹¹⁷ The practitioners of prophecy were a diverse lot, coming from all levels of society. They included officials and their kin,¹¹⁸ recluses (*shan-jen*),¹¹⁹ magicians (*shu-shih*),¹²⁰ professional fortune tellers,¹²¹ shamans,¹²² monks (the most numerous category),¹²³ and madmen,¹²⁴ all of whom shared a gift for clairvoyance. There is even an account of an ugly and illiterate farmer who, after eating half a bitter peach given to him by an immortal, is filled with a divine madness which makes him clairvoyant, a master of the brush, and adept at chanting hymns. Becoming a monk, he is popular with the local elite and known for his examination prophecies.¹²⁵

This social diversity helps to explain the movement of ideas, beliefs, and customs between elite and non-elite which we noted in our discussion of the examination stories. More to the point, this involvement of many non-elite individuals in the examination life adds credence to our thesis that the promise of examination success was one of the great myths underlying the Sung social order, for such a promise would have been of little moment had the non-elite not been aware of it.

The combination of dreams and apparitions may seem strange, but in fact both involve communication with the spirit world, the major difference being whether that is accomplished in a sleeping or a waking state. But in contrast to a multitude of dream stories, I have found only a handful of stories about apparitions. Three of them feature literati encounters with ghosts; in two, the literatus returns home in a fright, ails, and dies,¹²⁶ while in the third the ghost (the literatus' late brother-in-law) foretells his success in the examinations, which occurs, but only after a violent and debilitating illness.¹²⁷ Clearly ghosts were dangerous creatures. Three other cases involve examination halls, in one of which a spirit in the guise of a proctor helps a virtuous candidate pass.¹²⁸ One wonders whether the normal emptiness of the halls punctuated by the stressfulness of the examinations might not have made them appear particularly conducive to encounters with ghosts and spirits.

The great majority of contacts with the spirit world, however, come through dreams, and as with the omens and prophecies, the dreams take all forms. Most common are those that simply involve 'dream people' (*meng-jen*) who utter a prophecy and disappear. Deceased relatives are also well represented, not merely ancestors returning to help their descendants on their way or to urge them to observe the ancestral rites,¹²⁹ as one would predict, but also dead children returning to console their grieving parents and announce examination successes that they will achieve in future incarnations.¹³⁰ We also see emperors (including Wen-ti of the Wei dynasty),¹³¹ and famous characters from history. For example, there is a story about the annual examination of the Hu-chou prefectoral school, where it was the custom to award five bottles of wine to the first place student, three each to those placing second and third, and two each for those fourth and fifth. In 1151, one student named Ch'en Yen dreamed that he was called to the head of the hall and given five bottles by Confucius, but that Confucius's disciple Tzu-hsia angrily kicked away two of them. When the results were announced, Ch'en was second. The preceptor told him that he had originally placed first but that a mistake had been found in his treatment of an incident involving Tzu-hsia, so he had been dropped to second.¹³²

Special mention should be made of the god (*shen*) of Tzu-t'ung. Ts'ai T'ao

(d. after 1147) tells of a temple to this god on the road from Ch'ang-an to Ssu-ch'uan which rewarded officials who passed in stormy weather with the post of Chief Councilor and similarly *chin-shih* candidates with first place (*k'uei-shou*) in the examinations.¹³³ Hung Mai likewise tells of a Ch'eng-tu official who successfully prayed to the Tzu-t'ung-shen in 1134 to learn who would succeed in that year's provincial examinations.¹³⁴ Tzu-t'ung-shen appears to have begun as a local thunder deity of very ancient origin.¹³⁵ At some point he became associated with a Szechuanese general, Chang Ya-tzu, who died in battle during the Chin (265–420) and who, according to myth, was 'charged by the Jade Emperor with keeping the registers of the titles and dignities of men, and distinguishing between good and bad literati, rewarding and advancing the first and punishing the second'.¹³⁶ Most interesting, however, is the fact that by Yüan times, Tzu-t'ung was identified with the God of Literature (Wen-ch'ang ti-chün) who with his associated deities was worshipped in Ming and Ch'ing times by literati throughout the empire who were hoping for examination success.¹³⁷ These twelfth century references suggest, therefore, Sung origins for the examination-centered God of Literature cult.

There are, finally, dreams involving gods or spirits (*shen*), though usually these are deities of a lower order; temple gods like the one whose husband mishandled the supplicant's stick-throwing or beneficent but unnamed spirits.¹³⁸ The august gods do not appear nor should they, we might speculate, given the parochial nature of the literati's hopes, but occasionally their pronouncements are reported, as in the punishment of the adulterer mentioned earlier. However, the bureaucrats and functionaries of the underworld appear in force, and with good reason. They are frequently deceased friends or relatives of the literati who naturally occupy the official posts in the underworld since that is what they had trained for in life. As officials, moreover, they have access to the registers where not only times of birth and death but also details of examination results are recorded, and they are thus able to sneak this information out to the living.¹³⁹

Despite the diversity of these stories of omens, prophecies, and dreams, there is a remarkable unity of purpose: they are overwhelmingly concerned with foretelling examination success. For example, when one dead literatus who is toiling unhappily in the service of the City God (*Ch'eng-huang*) gets the chance to appear to an old friend in a dream and, with tears streaming down his face, asks after his family, his friend replies:

Since you are the City God's retainer, you should know who from our district will pass this fall's examination and the names of those who will receive degrees in the spring.¹⁴⁰

The main interest in many of the stories therefore lies in the examinations

themselves, in conditions that are required for success or in the misinterpretations that men make of their prophecies. Some are given advice on how to prepare for the examinations: which classics to specialize in, poems to write on, or biographies to study.¹⁴¹ Others are told to change their names.¹⁴²

Another poor soul was told that he would become an official only after meeting the 'three Hans'. After years of seeking out men named Han, he accompanied an envoy to Korea and only then did he learn that Korea was known as the 'land of the three Hans.' He subsequently passed.¹⁴³ Far less lucky was Hsü Kuo-hua, a University student during the Hsüan-ho period (1119–25), who had a dream in which a gold-armored man struck a large golden bell and made a cryptic remark which Hsü interpreted to mean that he would place first in the examinations. In fact the remark gave the location of the grave where he was buried after dying of beriberi when K'ai-feng was under seige by the Jurchen in 1126.¹⁴⁴

Hsü's fate illustrates the pitfalls which could await one when interpreting dreams. But why, might we ask, was there such great interest in examination dreams and prophecies as to give rise to this literature? After all, whatever prophecies one might have received, one still had to pass the examinations. First, the great majority of the stories date from the late Northern Sung or later, just when the examinations were becoming extremely competitive and increasingly arbitrary; there was no guarantee that talent or virtue would be rewarded. Against the feelings of insecurity and powerlessness to which the examinations gave rise, omens and prophecies offered reassurance and some certitude.

But even more important, dreams and prophecies were popular because the literati believed that they helped. Although they often talked of their 'fate' (*ming*) being fixed,¹⁴⁵ that did not mean predestined, for with knowledge and perhaps some help from the spirits, one could improve one's lot. Communication with the spirits could therefore be considered yet one more success strategy to be employed by ambitious but frustrated literati. Nowhere is that clearer than in the common literati practice of praying for a dream. With an examination approaching, candidates would enter a Buddhist or Taoist temple and pray for a dream or ask the gods a question, which would then be answered in a dream.¹⁴⁶

This, I submit, was another examination ritual, a private one in contrast to the public rituals discussed earlier. Both had a place in the examination sequence and both were integrative -- tying the literatus to the imperium and elite order in the one case and to the spirit world in the other. But while the public ceremonies were primarily celebratory in nature, the prayers were invocatory, a plea for a sign that the thorny gates would, in fact, be surpassed.

CONCLUSION

The attempt at meritocracy

It might seem presumptuous to claim a special Sung role for the Confucian literati, scholar-officials, examinations, and schools which have engaged our attention in this book, so central were all of them in the Chinese tradition. None was a Sung creation and all flourished to the end of the imperial age. Yet the Sung role was special, for it was then that the constellation of values, institutions, and social structures centering on the examinations assumed much of the shape that it was to have throughout the late imperial period.

Much of the praise — or blame — for this may be levelled at the Sung emperors themselves. As one thirteenth-century writer observed: 'The founding emperors used Confucian scholars to establish the dynasty and the examinations to obtain the scholars.'¹ By expanding degree numbers, adding a formal prefectoral examination, introducing such procedures as covered names and copied examinations, and, under Jen-tsung, promoting education, the early emperors were clearly trying to create a meritocratic state. Reacting against the T'ang example of great families among which the imperial Lis were merely *primus inter pares* and the military domination of the Five Dynasties, the Sung Chaos were determined to create a civil state in which selection for office was made with the utmost fairness, in which achievement was rewarded, by the emperor, with advancement. The result was to greatly enhance the emperor's power, though whether this should be seen as an essential step in the growth of Chinese autocracy, as some have argued, is open to question.²

In many respects this policy was a great success. Civil officials dominated the government even in times of military peril; witness the fate of Yüeh Fei.³ Although quite a few Northern Sung families or lineages succeeded in producing high officials over several generations, none could begin to rival the great families of the Six Dynasties and T'ang in longevity, prestige, or perhaps even power. Most important, the promise of the examinations transformed learning from an elite concern to a preoccupation. Education

became less the domain of scholarly families comprising one portion of elite society and more an activity urged upon academically promising boys and young men throughout elite society.

With the spread of learning, however, came the subversion of its meritocratic principle. That principle had always been qualified, for even in the early Sung past precedent had been followed in restricting the Directorate of Education to 'sons of the state' (*kuo-tzu*), that is the sons of officials. But only in the Southern Sung do we find avoidance examinations, which were designed to promote fairness, becoming a privileged means of advancement. In the proliferation of such special examinations and in the increasing use of protection, we can see both the considerable power of the bureaucratic families and the imperial clan, the chief recipients of privilege, and their reaction to the competitive rigors of the regular examinations. As was the case in early modern England, when the educational revolution of the seventeenth century led to the more aristocratic society of the eighteenth,⁴ the Sung expansion of education resulted in the contraction of opportunity and the growth of privilege.

The examinations also allowed certain regions and localities a degree of political influence that they never again matched, for the Sung's lack of regional quotas allowed for relatively unbridled competition between places. The debate between Ssu-ma Kuang and Ou-yang Hsiu in 1064 over regional quotas articulated the ambiguities inherent in the notion of fairness,⁵ for fairness to individuals entailed unfairness to certain regions, and vice versa. A century later the ambiguities were, if anything, heightened. In the empire's most successful region, the Southeast Coast, prefectoral candidate numbers were higher and quotas narrower — by policy — than anywhere else. Yet such was the size and power of its privileged groups that the use of special examinations was enormous. So while unprivileged literati faced the most competitive of examinations, for the elites in general success bred success. By contrast, localities without past histories of success had only the regular examinations and the University's entrance examination by which to achieve it.

A millennium earlier Confucian principles had been used to justify the Nine Rank Arbiter System of recruitment, in which individuals were ranked according to their virtue, and it quickly became a system of hereditary ranks. The meritocratic principles of the examination system were far more tenacious. Even amidst the special examinations and widespread allegations of abuse in the Southern Sung, the examinations were held as scheduled and their elaborate procedures were generally followed. And in later dynasties their meritocratic features actually increased. The use of protection was virtually eliminated in the early Ming,⁶ and so were the avoidance examinations,

for candidates with relatives among the examination officials were simply barred from the examinations.⁷ This was in large part a result of the despotic government of the late dynasties, for the examinations were an excellent way to secure talented but dependent and therefore unthreatening officials. But the examinations also owed much of their longevity to the cultural values which had developed about them, and to the social importance and utility which they came to assume for local elites, and these were, in large measure, a legacy of the Sung.

Learning and authority

Over the long history of the examinations, one of the things that most distinguished the Sung and other dynasties was its predilection for change. At no other time were the examinations challenged so fundamentally or experimented with so drastically as in the Northern Sung.

Foremost among the challengers were the Northern Sung reformers. For them the issue was not meritocracy, which they favored, but rather the relationship between training and choosing, or education and recruitment. Their demand that selection be rooted in government schools meant, of course, a broadening of criteria for selecting officials to include character and academic record. It also meant that the purpose of those schools was to train students morally and practically to become officials. The result, as manifested in the Three Hall System of the early twelfth century with its recruitment functions as well as its specialized schools for law, medicine, mathematics, calligraphy, painting, and the military,⁸ was an incipient professionalism that stands in striking contrast to the generalist ideal that dominated most of Chinese educational history.⁹

This was also a period of institutional developments. The standardization of teaching personnel, school finances, entrance examinations, and grades through which students advanced were all products of reform. It was just such developments that Philippe Ariès has argued underlay the European transition from church school to *collegium* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a change which he regards as critical for the emergence of modern education.¹⁰ But where in Europe these changes led to institutions that long were to hold a virtual monopoly on formal education, the Three Hall System did not outlast its founders. Because of abuses, expenses, and the excesses of the reformers, the system was abandoned after just twenty years, and the ensuing loss of the north, which many blamed upon the reformers, insured against its resurrection. Despite its impressive legacy of institutional development and educational expansion, the separation of examinations from the government schools deprived the latter of their brief educational monopoly. Henceforth what really mattered was how well one could write examinations

and not where one had studied, and examination preparation became a primary educational task whether one studied with a tutor, in a community or lineage school, or in a government school. Thus the innovations of the Three Hall System never played the catalytic role that similar innovations later did in Europe.

In intellectual and cultural histories of China, the Sung is remembered largely as the age of Confucian revival. Thanks to protracted peace in most of the empire, economic prosperity, the spread of printing, and the stimulus of the examinations, the Northern Sung witnessed a remarkable and diverse flowering of thought and literature which drew heavily from the Confucian canon for its vocabulary and concerns. The reform movement was one fruit of this revival. Another was the attempt by Su Shih, most notably, to make the civil and literary value of *wen* the guiding principle of civilized life.¹¹ A third was the development of Neo-Confucian thought, the School of the Way or of Principle (*Tao-hsüeh*, *Li-hsüeh*), as it was known in the Sung. Though most famous for its philosophical accomplishments, Neo-Confucianism's educational influence was enormous and was closely related to the examinations.

Much, perhaps most of the epistemology and metaphysics developed by the Neo-Confucians was the work of the Northern Sung masters, particularly the Ch'eng brothers, but the popularization of Neo-Confucianism among the literati was a late twelfth-century phenomenon. It owed much to the teachings and writings of Chu Hsi and others, and to the spread of academies where literati gathered for self-cultivation and philosophical discussion. It is hardly surprising that this occurred in the first half of the Southern Sung, for the loss of the cultural heartland of the north together with the persuasive influence of Buddhism, especially the intellectually attractive Ch'an, had created a sense of crisis among twelfth-century thinkers, a feeling that something fundamental was amiss. As the Hunanese Neo-Confucian Hu Hung (1100–55) put it, 'When the Central Plain is without the Way [*Tao*] of the Central Plain, the barbarians enter; when it restores the Way of the Central Plain, the barbarians return to their territory.'¹² There was thus a large and receptive audience for the claims of the Neo-Confucians that truth was revealed in the texts of the classics, that learning and self-cultivation could lead to sagehood, that the Way of the Former Kings had been transmitted from Confucius and Mencius down to them, the Neo-Confucian masters, and that moral education was essential for the restoration of the empire. These claims were at once conservative, in their reliance on tradition, and radical, in their assertion of the autonomous authority of the true scholar. They were also controversial, leading to the short-lived ban on 'false learning' at the close of the twelfth century.

An instructive parallel to Neo-Confucianism can be found in the Jewish approach to learning, for they shared a belief in the authority of canonical texts, a veneration of learning, and an esteem for scholars. Just as rabbis were both teachers and priests, so in a way were the Sung Neo-Confucians, for their concern with ritual, moral cultivation, and transcendence gave them at least a semi-priestly role.¹³ One can even find similarities between the Neo-Confucian academy and the Jewish yeshiva in early modern Europe, for however striking their differences — the academies had nothing comparable to the yeshiva's training in casuistry — both were centered about a scholar-teacher, attracted students from afar, and had as their goal the rearing of mature scholars.¹⁴

In one respect, however, the Jewish and Neo-Confucian approaches to learning could not have been more different. Whereas the former was securely nested at the center of Jewish culture, the latter arose and flourished in uneasy opposition to examination-centered education. One took the examinations in order to advance in life; one went to the academies in search of philosophical understanding and moral self-improvement. The examinations were an imperial institution controlled by the emperor and his officials. Neo-Confucian education, by contrast, appealed directly to the classics and to interpretations of them by contemporary masters, thus bypassing the emperor entirely.

The opposition was qualified, to be sure. Not only did the two forms of education share the same Confucian texts, but after the Yüan adopted Chu Hsi's commentaries on the Four Books and Five Classics as examination texts, they even shared Neo-Confucian texts. Moreover, even as the state depended on Confucian political theory for its legitimacy, so the literatus had to take the examinations if he wished to advance. But the opposition proved incapable of resolution, for the scholar's claim to autonomy remained and so did the examination system, degrading and aggravating to its critics but indispensable nevertheless. The result, then, was a continuing sense of tension, a dialectic underlying the cultural and political life which functioned up until both state and culture began to disintegrate at the end of the Ch'ing.

Examinations and society

Hung Mai tells a story of a wealthy family named Tsai that lived in Wu-hsi County (Ch'ang-chou) on the Yangtze delta in the late Northern Sung. The Tsaïs were blessed with two sons and a large productive estate that was worked by thirteen men. One night a 'cultivated talent' (*hsiu-ts'ai*) named Li Mo appeared to the father in a dream and a few years later a townsman and *chin-shih* by that name married his daughter. When the father was about to die he summoned his sons and told them: 'You are plain and unestablished

[*ju-tsao su pu li*] and certainly cannot protect your inheritance.' He urged them therefore to give the estate to Li rather than letting others take it. This they did and in the disorders of the early Southern Sung, Li's was the only estate in the area to escape destruction by 'bandits'.¹⁵

This is hardly a typical story, for it was highly unusual for a prosperous family with sons to give its land to a son-in-law and must reflect the extremely hazardous conditions of the time. But it is revealing, both for the clear view it provides of the concerns about which elite lives revolved — family, land, marriage, and the examinations — and for the father's belief that wealth without office offered little security. One might speculate that it was Li Mo's family, with military resources of its own, that really protected the estate, but if so Hung Mai, an official himself living in a more secure age, chose to ignore that fact and stress instead the role of the examinations in 'establishing' a family.

It has been a contention of this book that the examinations were a critical factor in the changes that elite society underwent during the Sung. Obviously other factors were also at work. As Robert Hartwell has argued so persuasively, the demographic and economic development of southern China produced a landholding elite stratum which became politically prominent in the late Northern Sung and exhibited a remarkable longevity from that time onwards.¹⁶ Kinship structure, marriage, occupational diversification, and at times the ability to command military power, all must be considered to understand these local elites. What set the examinations apart was not merely the rewards that flowed from success but also the influence they exerted on every facet of elite life.

The rewards were obvious. Office-holding offered prestige, wealth, especially if one had no compunction about accepting gifts and bribes, and fiscal and legal privileges, while high office held out power and recruitment privileges for one's relatives. Moreover, while there are examples of elite families that never produced officials,¹⁷ doing so nevertheless constituted an essential step in establishing a family and one which most Sung elite families achieved at some point in their history.¹⁸

The examinations' influence, while less obvious, is no less striking. The ever-increasing numbers of people who took to the examinations following their tenth-century expansion and the eleventh-century spread of schools was a social fact of major consequence. It meant that when the eleventh-century professional elite — itself an early product of the expanded examinations — disintegrated through factional struggle, into its place would step a far larger group of local elites bitterly competing for office. It meant that the chances for an individual elite family to obtain office worsened, thus increasing the importance of the lineage and contributing to the development of lineage

organizations. It meant an even stronger tie between learning and marriage than had existed before. On the one hand academic promise and examination success made a man highly desirable as a marriage partner; on the other hand a wife with high ranking relatives could be of great benefit in the examinations.

Paradoxically, the growth of the literati also contributed to occupational diversity within the elite. As competition in the examinations increased, families with scholarly traditions were less likely to encourage all of their sons to prepare for them, even while wealthy landlord and merchant families on the fringes of the elite were more likely to educate their brightest sons in hopes of social advancement through marriage and the examinations. This occupational diversity is illustrated in a story, again from Hung Mai, about a student from Fu-chien attending the University in the Ta-kuan period (1107–10). Reproached by a spirit in a dream for not having buried his deceased parents and ordered to go home and do so, he protested that he had brothers at home, so why should the guilt be solely his? The spirit answered: ‘Because you are a Confucian who practices the rites and righteousness, the fault is yours. The other sons are rough and irregular. They are not up to the responsibility.’¹⁹

In this story we can discern an audacious literati claim to sole moral authority, for the brothers are rendered almost inhuman by the spirit’s dismissal of their filial obligations. This helps to explain why occupational diversity was accompanied not by cultural diversity but rather by the growing dominance of literati values within elite society. If the spread of Neo-Confucianism and academies represented a growing literati claim to autonomous authority, the emergence of an examination culture can be seen as a claim to derived imperial authority. The institutions, ceremonies, symbols, and stories surrounding the examinations set off officials from commoners, literati from non-literati, and to the literati engaged in the examination life they offered the elusive, at times illusory, hope of success.