

*Review Article*The Sung Examination System and the *Shih*

During the reign of the Tang emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗 (r. 712-755) the legislated number of officials "within the stream [for further promotion]" (*liu-nei kuan* 流內官), that is, men holding offices in the nine ranks, was 18,815. A limited number qualified to "enter the stream" (*ju-liu* 入流) by virtue of their fathers' or grandfathers' high rank (the *yin* 隱 privilege), but a large proportion of those promoted into the nine ranks gained eligibility through some form of official service. For example, there were about 50,000 senior clerks and minor officials who, as "officials outside the stream" (*liu-wai kuan* 流外官), became eligible for promotion into the nine ranks after a certain tenure of service. In all, there were, in 737, at least 138,000 men in twenty-three official statuses involving some form of service that led to eligibility to enter the stream. As many as 2,000 men qualified annually for selection to a post within the stream and there were eight or nine candidates for every vacancy. Thus although the 138,000 on track to gain eligibility included 60,000 students, the vast majority of those qualifying were men with years of service or family tradition behind them, for the examination degree holders were rarely more than five percent of officialdom. Under these circumstances, men from good families could begin their careers in official service by finding clerical posts in the local administration or gaining a position in the guards, for example, and then, on the basis of performance, tenure, and recommendations, enter the stream of the nine ranks.¹ This kind of arrangement, and the fact that great clan families, as the

¹ My understanding of the Tang bureaucratic system and its size in the 730s is taken, with some qualifications, from Denis Twitchett, "The Bureaucracy," draft chapter for *Sui and Tang China, 589-906, Part II* (forthcoming), vol. 3 of J. K. Fairbank and D. C. Twitchett, gen. eds., *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.), esp. pp. 1-9, 52-53. I have also drawn on Ch'ing-lien Huang, *The Recruitment and Assessment of Civil Officials under the Tang Dynasty* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton U., 1986), in particular chap. 2 and the discussion of the eligibility list of 737 in sect. 2 of chap. 4. For an early discussion of the relative unimportance of the examinations in staffing the bureaucracy relative to *yin* privilege and recruitment from the ranks of officials "outside the stream," see Sun Kuo-tung 孫國棟, "T'ang Sung chih chi she-hui men-ti chih hsiao-jung: T'ang Sung chih chi she-hui chuan-pien yen-chiu chih i 唐宋之際社會門第之消融: 唐宋之際社會轉變研究之一," *Hsin-ya hsieh-pao* 新亞學報 4.1 (1959), pp. 246-50. The eligibility list of 737 is found in *Hsin Tang-shu* 新唐書 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1975) 45, p. 1180, and Tu Yu 杜祐, *T'ung tien* 通典 (1902

preeminent families of society, treated government service as the family occupation, made it possible for the national elite of the T'ang dynasty to define itself as men who "served" rather than "learned."

In early Sung the examination system was expanded into the primary mechanism for official recruitment. Most of the various forms of service that had led to eligibility for promotion in T'ang disappeared and the *jin* privilege was initially restricted. In particular, the Sung government made it nearly impossible for men serving in the clerical bureaucracy to enter the stream of ranked officials eligible for further promotion. The rise of the examinations as a means of official recruitment has traditionally been seen as one of the enduring achievements of Sung. Not all Sung writers thought its effects were entirely positive, although few believed that a return to T'ang recruitment practices was possible or advantageous.

It is not hard to imagine how the recruitment of officials directly from the educated elite without respect to family tradition and practical experience could have had negative consequences for the quality of Sung governance. First, denying "officials outside the stream" the opportunity for promotion discouraged ambitious and talented men from beginning their careers in the clerical service in favor of gaining the literary education required for the examinations. Second, the increasing social distance between aspirants for higher office and those who, as clerks, found themselves in what had now become a deadend career lowered the morale among those charged with practical day-to-day administration; this set the stage for greater corruption, because clerks sought financial rewards for their labors. Wang An-shih 王安石 was one of many who complained about clerical corruption; he also associated it with the lack of career prospects and sought ways to encourage literati to serve as clerks once again. Third, when officials were recruited directly from among educated men who lacked practical experience there ought to have been a decline in administrative expertise in the upper levels of government. Ssu-ma Kuang 司馬光 certainly thought this had occurred and faulted men for being too literary. Fourth, because the examinations tested the types of literary education that led to civil appointments, and because the Sung court intentionally favored civil over military officials, the distinctions between the two services ought to have sharpened to the detriment of military competence and preparedness. Sung literati complained about this trend as well. Yet the Sung state was not

unsuccessful. And, as John Chaffee shows in his masterful social history of the Sung examinations,² the system thrived. This went together with a shift in the identity of the national elite from those who served to those who learned.

Why was Sung successful, given the lack of integration between ranked officials and the larger bureaucracy? Undoubtedly economic expansion, the centralization of power, and the need for unity in the face of powerful states to the north played important roles. Yet the fact that Sung could govern a population of between 60 and 100 million with between 10 and 20 thousand civil officials and a slightly larger group of military officials suggests that its success must be seen in the context of the order that was emerging from social, political, and cultural patterns. John Chaffee argues that understanding the examination system is crucial to the analysis of that order, for it was instrumental to its creation. "The examination system occupied a critical nexus in Sung society," he writes, and furthermore it was a "complex institution; it served many interests and performed many functions, not merely bureaucratic selection but also elite advancement and representation, social and intellectual control, and imperial symbolism, to name just a few."³ His topic, then, is the "conjunction between institution and society," as revealed through "the social functions of the examination system and people's perceptions of it, and especially how these changed during three centuries of Sung."⁴ His study is valuable both as an account of the Sung examination system over time and as an approach to understanding the ways in which institutions, society, and culture came together to form an order that survived into Ming and Ch'ing.

But were the examinations of real historical importance? As Chaffee notes, recent critiques of the thesis concerning social mobility articulated by E. A. Kracke, Jr., and Ping-ti Ho, in which gaining an examination degree is seen as a mechanism of upward mobility, have tended to treat examination degrees as the consequence of gaining elite status rather than its cause. But a failure to foster social mobility does not preclude the examination system from having important historical functions. Chaffee's analysis points to three: the recruitment of civil officials, the definition of a national elite, and the creation of a national literati culture.

In one signal regard, however, Chaffee's account of the history of the Sung examinations is quite unexpected. He demonstrates that during the

edn.) 15, pp. 3a-3b, where competition for vacancies is also discussed. T'ang rules limited the use of *jin* for appointment to office within the stream to the sons and grandsons of officials in the first through fifth ranks, about 2,000 officials.

² John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of the Examinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1985).

³ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 13. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

course of the Sung the examinations became ever less important in official recruitment. Of the 12,700 men with civil rank (*wen-kuan* 文官) in 1046, as many as 57 percent may have been holders of regular examination degrees, that is, they had passed both the departmental and palace examinations. In 1213, when the holders of civil rank numbered over 19,000, only 27 percent were holders of regular examination degrees. The decline in examination recruitment is even more startling when calculations include holders of both the regular and the "facilitated" degrees (granted to those who had repeatedly failed the palace or departmental examination): 89 percent of civil officials may have held degrees in 1046 but only 54 percent did in 1213.⁵ Yet over the course of the Sung the numbers of men participating in the examination system at all levels increased, from 79,000 at the end of the eleventh century to as many as 400,000 by the end of Southern Sung, perhaps the highest rate of examination participation relative to total population in Chinese history. The historical significance of this paradox of declining recruitment through examinations set against increasing examination candidacy is the focus of the following discussion of Chaffee's work.

First, a brief survey of the contents of *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*. After an introduction (chapter 1), Chaffee surveys the changing structure of bureaucratic recruitment. In contrast to the elaborate examination system of Ming and Ch'ing, the Sung system did not qualify *chü-jen* 舉人, those who passed the preliminary examinations at the prefectural level, for office, nor, for example, did it offer prefectural students formal degree status as *sheng-yüan* 生員. Chaffee demonstrates the decline in civil official recruitment and the increase in examination participation, the resurgence of *yin* privilege, eventually less restricted in Sung than in T'ang, and the increasing dispensation of facilitated degrees. The emergence of the paradox roughly corresponds to the transition from Northern to Southern Sung (chapter 2). He then describes the Northern Sung expansion of the examinations into the primary mechanism of official recruitment and the institutionalization of fairness, the part of the story perhaps best known from standard histories. At the same time he notes that the high proportion of degrees given to students at the capital (fifty percent in the mid-eleventh century) served the interests of what Robert M. Hartwell has called the "professional elite," the several tens of

bureaucratic families that held a disproportionate share of high offices in the mid-eleventh century (chapter 3).⁶ Increased participation in the examinations accompanied the spread of schools. In Northern Sung schools were mostly "state" schools, identified as the school of a particular prefecture or subprefecture, although they in fact depended heavily on local initiative and support. The real increase in state support began in the 1070s when the government, led by men committed to the New Policies of Wang An-shih, began systematically to endow schools with lands and appoint officials as teachers. By the early twelfth century the state school system was highly elaborated, its 1.5 million acres of land providing room and board for about 200,000 students.⁷ Although Southern Sung governments forsook the New Policies goals of using schools to increase government involvement in local society and promote intellectual uniformity, state schools continued to thrive, while from the 1130s onward private academies became increasingly common (261 citations for Southern Sung against 56 for Northern Sung), a development Chaffee relates to the spread of neo-Confucian *tao-hsiieh* 道學, with its desire to direct education toward self-cultivation rather than examinations (chapter 4). It was also in Southern Sung that bureaucratic families, confronted with legislated prefectural pass-fail ratios of 1:100 in 1156 and 1:200 by 1275 and some local ratios as high as 1:700, found new ways of securing advantages for themselves. Special preliminary examinations and the separate departmental examinations for the relatives of officials and imperial clansmen, both with more advantageous pass-fail ratios, marked what Chaffee calls "the failure of fairness." It is possible, he concludes, that a majority of Southern Sung *chin-shih* 進士 had passed at least one special examination on the way to the degree (chapter 5).

At the same time participation in the examinations grew at an extraordinary rate. In a series of analyses of the regional distribution of regular *chin-shih* degree holders during the Sung period, Chaffee shows that educational developments were empire-wide, but, beginning in the eleventh century, prefectures in the southeast coast and lower Yangtze regions dominated the examinations. Chaffee argues that a region's continued success was based on a combination of prosperity, belief in education, and the continued residence of degree holders who, having become officials, could provide their kin with access to special examinations. Success bred success (chapter 6). As the pool of candidates grew, a "culture of the examinations"

⁵ The figures for 1213 are based on the classification for the civil service for that year, discussed below. Those for 1046 are derived by assuming thirty-six years of service from the time of the degree for regular degree holders, a calculation based on the 1213 figures (Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 26). On the same grounds the assumption of a 24-year career for facilitated degree holders is warranted.

⁶ Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750-1550," *HJAS* 42.2 (1982), pp. 365-442.

⁷ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 78.

emerged: rituals, myths and practical investments to help candidates maintain their status, spirit, and body (chapter 7). The final chapter concludes that (1) the Sung attempt at meritocracy was subverted by the ability of the bureaucrats to perpetuate their success, (2) the failure of the New Policies to tie the examinations to the state school system meant that literati learning would maintain a certain degree of autonomy from state authority, and (3) increased competition, on one hand, prepared a broader elite to replace the "professional elite" of the eleventh century and, on the other hand, encouraged families to rely more on lineage and marriage ties and to develop alternative careers for educated men (chapter 7). Chaffee's conclusions are largely congruent with Robert P. Hymes' account of the transformation of the Northern Sung bureaucratic elite to the locally-rooted elite of Southern Sung that would be typical of late imperial China.⁹

This summary hardly does justice to a book that is bound to become the classic study of the Sung examination system. It contains much more on the workings of the Sung examination system, the spread of schools, and, above all, the prefectural distribution of degree holders for both Northern and Southern Sung. Moreover this work provides the social and institutional context for further studies of examination-related issues. For some matters, particularly those relating to schools and education, readers may profitably turn to Thomas H. C. Lee's richly detailed *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China*, published in 1985 by The Chinese University Press of Hong Kong. Other matters relating to the actual content of the examinations still need to be fully addressed. One would like to know, for example, what men learned in order to prepare for the exams, how that learning changed, what kinds of question candidates were asked, who defined those questions, and what were acceptable answers. The rich history of objections to the examinations and the intellectual and moral values they encouraged has yet to be fully explored.¹⁰

It seems to me, however, that the paradox of declining official recruitment with increasing candidacy changes the way we commonly think about the socio-intellectual history of the Sung literati. Should we accept it as historically accurate? What does it imply for the analysis of the Sung social-

political order? How can we best account for it in historical terms? In pursuing these matters I shall draw almost exclusively on Chaffee's material, but the discussion will at times stray from the book to take up questions the author is not asking and work toward conclusions he allows but are not always central to his project. Chaffee is aware of the problem of accounting for why the paradox came into being and heightened over time.¹⁰ He gives part of the answer, I think, in his discussion of the failure of fairness, for the evident desire of bureaucrats to ensure the success of their sons through special examinations accounts equally well for the increased use of *yin* privilege. At the same time the other side of the paradox needs to be addressed: why did families keep participating in a system that kept the vast majority from succeeding most of the time? This Chaffee addresses only indirectly, in my reading, by asking why such institutional tensions did not apparently threaten the Sung social order.¹¹ I argue here that the paradox of declining success and increasing participation can best be understood by supposing that participation alone was adequate to secure a preeminent social good in Sung society: recognition by elite and state that the participant was one of the *shih* 士 ("literati") versus merely one of the *min* 民, the commoners, or a farmer, craftsman, or merchant. In other words, the frustration of failing was compensated for by the certification of social status. In this view, the emergence of the paradox reveals a shift in the primary function of the examination system from the government's mechanism for recruiting *shih* for office to an institution maintained at government expense to acknowledge the elite status of *shih* families who could no longer secure official careers for all their male descendants.

An examination of Chaffee's historical paradox must begin with the various kinds of statistical data he analyzes. These include the following six sets:

1. the *chin-shih* lists of 1148 and 1256 studied by Kracke;¹²
2. the numbers of degrees granted in examinations for the *chin-shih* from 960-1271, the *chu k'o* 諸科 or "various fields" (tests of memorization of various classics, ritual texts, and the like, offered until 1076), departmental graduates (960-1223, with lacunae), and facilitated degrees (1015-1094 and, with lacunae, 1132-1262);
3. the numbers of regular (non-facilitated) *chin-shih* by prefecture (*chou* 州) and by circuit (*lu* 路) for Northern and Southern Sung, collected from local histories;

¹⁰ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 41. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹² E. A. Kracke, Jr., "Family versus Merit in Chinese Civil Service Examinations under the Empire," *HJAS* 10 (1947), pp. 103-23.

⁹ Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-chow, Chiang-hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986).

¹⁰ Much on the examination curriculum and debates over reform will be found in the multi-part institutional study of the Northern Sung examinations by Chin Chung-shu 金中樞, "Pei Sung k'o-chü chih-tu yen-chiu" 北宋科舉制度研究, *Hsin-ya hsüeh-pao* 6.1 and 6.2 (1964), and *idem*, *Ch'eng-kung ta-hsüeh li-shih-hsi hsüeh-pao* 成功大學歷史系學報 5, 6, 7, and 9 (1978-1982).

4. the legislated pass-fail ratios for the prefectural examinations for various years;
5. Sung estimates of the total numbers of officials eligible for appointment;
6. figures for the appearance of schools, compiled from various sources.

Chaffee's use of local histories (explained in appendix 4) allows him to define the prefectural origin for 50 percent of the 18,812 regular Northern Sung *chin-shih* and 18,694 of the 20,793 regular *chin-shih* of Southern Sung.¹³ Because this book deals almost exclusively with the "civil service" in the sense of officials with civil rank (*wen-kuan*) it should be understood that all references to officials and bureaucrats in what follows pertain only to men with civil rank.¹⁴

Crucial to establishing the paradox is a unique set of figures provided by the eminent historian Li Hsin-ch'uan 李心傳 (1166-1243). As Chaffee's table, reproduced below, indicates, Li records the mode of entry of all civil officials below rank five registered with the selection bureaus as eligible for appointment. (A second table for military officials is not reproduced here.) The 1213 figures pertain to men holding rank (*kuan*) as distinct from those receiving substantive appointments (the total number of serving bureaucrats). Chaffee is aware that Li's point in giving these figures is to evidence his conclusion: "We can see [from these figures] that *kuan* are in excess [of the available posts]."¹⁵ We do not know how many substantive posts were available, except that there were markedly fewer than the 19,398 *kuan* eligible for appointment. In Sung, being a *kuan* meant possessing an official title that gave the holder rank, made him eligible for appointment either to a post commensurate with his rank and tenure in bureaucratic posts or to a sinecure, entitled him to such legal privileges as the commutation of punishments, and allowed him certain tax exemptions.¹⁶ Among those with

¹³ To locate prefectural lists and citations of schools one must refer to John Chaffee, "Education and Examinations in Sung Society (960-1279)" (Ph.D. diss., U. of Chicago, 1979).

¹⁴ We should distinguish the civil service (as the men holding civil rank) from the civil administration. Winston W. Lo has argued that officials who held military rank (in 1213 51% of those listed had entered through protection, 17% were imperial clansmen, and 15% were promoted from the ranks), but were registered with the selection bureaus of the Department of Personnel, served in the civil administration and had little connection with actual military service; see Lo, "A New Perspective on the Sung Civil Service," *Journal of Asian History*, 17 (1983), pp. 121-35, and also Umehara Kaoru 梅原郁, *Sōdai kanryō seido kenkyū* 宋代官僚制度研究 (Kyoto: Dohosha, 1985), pp. 99-184.

¹⁵ Li Hsin-ch'uan, *Chien-yen i-lai ch'ao yeh tsa-chi* 建炎以來朝野雜記 (Taipei: Wen-hai, 1967), second collection, ch. 14, p. 15b.

¹⁶ Holders of official rank were exempt, on land held within the quota of acreage for that

kuan status the most important division was between the "executory" class (*hsüan-jen* 選人), the lowest seven of thirty-two classification ranks, and the "administrative" class of officials whose rank titles corresponded to the nine-rank system of T'ang.¹⁷ Entering the latter generally required serving in a progression of posts with real administrative responsibility (beginning with subprefectural administrative posts) and gaining the sponsorship of superior administrative class officials. Thus we can distinguish the two classes absolutely within officialdom as a whole and generally within the total pool of civil administrative posts. Only those who joined the administrative class gained protection rights (on reaching the equivalent of the seventh rank), and thus the ability to place kin in office.¹⁸

Because we have yet to discover a similar breakdown for any other year, using the figures in his table 3 to construct a thesis about historical change, Chaffee must make a number of inferences to conclude that "the proportion

rank, from the obligation to fill (or provide substitutes for) various roles in the local sub-bureaucracy. This exemption could be passed on to sons. Thus the increase in numbers of "official households" (*kuan hu* 官戶) in Southern Sung meant that this service obligation was increasingly shifted to other families. For an account of the Sung system of rank titles see Umehara Kaoru, "Civil and Military Officials in the Sung: The *Chi-tu-kuan* System," *Acta Asiatica* 50 (1986), pp. 1-30.

¹⁷ The terms "executory class" (literally "selected men") and "administrative class" were established by E. A. Kracke, Jr., *The Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960-1067* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1963), p. 79. Kracke's description of the early Sung official system was superseded by Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎裕定 in his introduction to Saeki Tomi 佐伯高, ed., *Soshi shokukanshi sakuin* 宋史職官志索引 (Kyoto: Toyoshi kenkyūkai, 1963). This has now been superseded by Umehara's *Sōdai kanryō seido kenkyū*. The "executory" and "administrative" division was primarily a rank division with certain functional implications. *Hsüan-jen* 選人 were registered with their own selection bureau and generally served in subprefectural posts and prefectural staff posts indefinitely, unless sponsored into the ranks of "capital and court officials" 京朝官 (ranks 9B-7B), although even then they frequently served in local government. This was an official's single most important promotion; it tracked him into promotion to the ministerial ranks 良官 (ranks 7A-5B) and imperial attendant ranks 侍從 (ranks 5A-1A). As Li's record shows, the "administrative class," defined as 京朝官, actually included only officials of ranks 6-9 for whom there was a separate selection bureau. Officials of ranks 1-5 were appointed by imperial command rather than by a selection bureau. In spite of this division there was a series of 32 ranked classification titles that included both classes, so executory class officials were also "ranked" officials. In terms of the distribution of officials over the ranks, there is little difference between the T'ang and Sung systems. The 2,392 men in the Sung administrative class correspond to the 2,200 men ranked 1-5 in T'ang (within this group there was an upper echelon: 200 were ranks 1-3 in T'ang and it is likely that a similar proportion for Sung were ranked 1-5), while the 17,006 Sung executory class officials correspond to the 16,000 in the T'ang, ranks 7-9.

¹⁸ For a table showing the extent of protection (the very highest officials could even protect family tutors), see Umehara, *Sōdai kanryō*, p. 447. Within the "nine-rank" system in Sung, those in rank 7 and above had protection rights. In terms of the number of those with rights this probably was a decrease (T'ang ranks 1-5, with 2,000 men, were equivalent to Sung ranks 6-9, with 2,392 in 1213). The increase over T'ang lay in the frequency of use and distance of kin that could be favored.

The Civil Services in 1213 according to Entry Method

METHOD OF ENTRY	ADMINISTRATIVE CLASS		EXECUTORY 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 youth	0	0	68	0.4	68	0.3
Protection ^a	1,255	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
Promotion 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
Totals	2,392	100.0	17,006	100.0	19,398	100.0

NOTES: This table (including notes) is based directly on Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, p. 25. The figure "1,255" in the first column has been emended from "255," a typographical error in Chaffee. The columns "Administrative class" and "Total civil service" include only administrative officials in ranks six through nine.

^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 (11). Protected executory officials are all grouped under the category "recommended" in the sources, but refer to protection.

^b These appear to have entered through protection privileges specially granted to certain imperial clansmen.

^c The classification of the 8 administrative officials is problematical. Their entry reads, "admission to office [through] the Three Departments," that is, the three departments of the Secretariat-Chancellery. According to Chaffee's note here, it may refer to ex-clerks of those departments.

^d This includes 21 listed as "admission to office upon the special receipt of the title literatus," 2 admitted because of their families' perpetual rights to office, and 52 listed "admission to office for demonstrations of service."

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 . . . [and] other channels were becoming more important. Which? The evidence suggests both facilitated degrees and protection.¹⁹

Chaffee arrives at this in the following manner: he calculates that it took thirty-six years to produce the 5,300 regular *chin-shih* degree holders listed

in 1213 (a total of 5,256 degrees were granted in the twelve triennial examinations to 1213),²⁰ and then, accepting the estimates for "civil service qualified officials" for earlier years, he calculates the proportion of those figures constituted by the number of regular *chin-shih* degrees granted in the thirty-six years prior to the time of the estimate (tables 4 and 5). Chaffee thus concludes that 57 percent of the civil service held regular degrees in 1046, 45 percent in 1119, 31 percent in 1191, and 27 percent in 1213. When this finding is juxtaposed with an increase in the number of candidates at the prefectural examination level that is indicated by changing legislated pass-fail ratios (5:10 in 1023, 2:10 in 1045, 1:10 in 1093, 1:100 in 1156, and 1:200 in 1275) and other data, he arrives at the paradox: the examination system was becoming less important in recruitment while the numbers involved in the examination system were increasing.²¹

In my view, this paradox makes it difficult to accept the usual assumption that families invested in examination education in order to become officials. We thus seek other explanations for the continual growth of examination candidacy, growth relative to both the number of those passing the prefectural qualifying exams and the total population of adult males.²²

One of the themes running through Chaffee's discussion of the examinations is the successful way bureaucratic families (those having at least one male with *kuan* status) used the bureaucratic and examination systems to perpetuate their positions. The pool of bureaucratic families was probably larger in 1213 than in the mid-eleventh century,²³ but in both cases there

²⁰ On the average, men gained the *chin-shih* degree in their mid-thirties, according to the 1148 and 1256 lists; a career of 36 years would mean that officials on the average lived into their seventies. While this seems to be unlikely, it is supported by the 1213 figures and the degree totals for the triennial examinations. A similar procedure can be followed to calculate the proportion of facilitated degree holders in the civil service: it took 24 years (averaging over lacunae) to produce the number of facilitated *chin-shih* listed in 1213. Using 36 (or 24) years for comparative purposes assumes that the age distribution of degree recipients remained constant; the 1148 and 1256 lists support this assumption.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-39. Note that 167,622 students are said to have been registered with state schools in 1108 (a decline from the 210,000 noted for 1104) (*ibid.*, p. 77; cf. Lee, *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China*, p. 132), while in 1104 there were 79,000 prefectural candidates. Chaffee estimates that there were 400,000 candidates attending prefectural examinations by the end of Southern Sung (Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 35); this figure is justified in his dissertation ("Education and Examinations," pp. 48 and 59), where he refers to a map giving prefectural examination quotas totaling at least 2,000 (which can then be combined with a pass-fail ratio of 1:200).

²² Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, pp. 37-38.

²³ In "Family versus Merit," Kracke showed that 24% of degree recipients in 1148 were descended from three generations of officials in the direct patriline but only 12% in 1256, suggesting that the pool of families supplying officials had in fact increased. Kracke did not specify the rank of the ancestors; a thorough argument for bureaucratic self-perpetuation would have to consider both the kinds of offices held and whether the ancestors had adminis-

¹⁹ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 26.

was a considerable degree of bureaucratic self-perpetuation (in 1213 through extended use of *yin* and special examinations and in the mid-eleventh century through *yin* and the Kaifeng examinations). In support of the thesis that families were investing in the examinations primarily for reasons other than becoming officials, I begin by taking up the case for bureaucratic self-perpetuation in order to prepare readers to expect elite society outside of government to share the same tendency toward self-perpetuation and to buttress the point that the chances of becoming an official through the examinations were so small that families producing candidates should have been seeking other rewards. I then suggest that participation in the examinations was of social value because it institutionally certified *shih* status, irrespective of success. Finally, I consider two possible reasons families had for using the examinations to seek status certification: the desire of local elites to join the national elite by transforming themselves into *shih* through education and the desire of existing *shih* families to avoid downward mobility.

To what extent do the 1213 figures evidence bureaucratic self-perpetuation? First, 39 percent of those included gained *kuan* status through *yin* privilege; in other words, they had a relative that had been promoted into the seventh rank. Of these, 50 percent (623 of 1255) of the administrative class officials had entered through *yin* on the occasion of the Great Rites and were thus kin to high officials still in service, further reducing the number of families in the bureaucracy. Second, of the 5,300 *kuan* (27 percent of the total) who had entered through gaining a regular examination degree, we can suppose that between 44 percent and 42 percent were from families having at least one official in three generations of the direct patriline on the basis of the examination lists of 1148 and 1256.²⁴ This leaves us with about 3,000 men to be accounted for. A lack of officials in the direct patriline does not mean a man did not come from a family with *kuan* in the three previous generations. If we regard as a "family" those for whom *yin* privilege could be used in Sung, then those descended from a common great-grandfather can be included. Robert Hymes has pointed out that, first, given the lack of reference to male relatives outside of the direct patriline in the examination lists of 1148 and 1256, it cannot be proved that 56 and 58 percent, respectively, of the degree recipients were not related to officials. In fact, under certain circumstances these percentages are consistent with no new blood at

traive or executive rank. It is also generally accepted that there was greater rotation in high office in Southern Sung than in Northern Sung.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

all, and, second, that of the Fu-chou degree recipients on the two lists at best 6.7 percent (or 20 percent if maternal kin are discounted) were not related to officials. If these last figures hold nationally, either only 355 or 1,060 of the regular degree-holding officials were "new" men—about 2, or 5, percent of all officials. Under these circumstances it is difficult to assume that the examinations thwarted bureaucratic self-perpetuation.²⁵ It is possible of course, if a descent group of many generations is taken into account, that almost all candidates had at least one official as an ancestor (more on this below); and it is surely the case, as Chaffee demonstrates, that the combination of better training and special examinations advantaged the sons of official families. In some of the most cultured prefectures as many as 80 percent of the regular degree holders qualified for the capital exams through special examinations, while the totals for graduates reveal that from 20 to 40 percent throughout Southern Sung had not taken part in the regular departmental examination.²⁶

The real problem is presented by the facilitated degree holders, about whom little is known except that they qualified by repeated failing of the capital exams. I would suggest that rather than being an obstacle to bureaucratic self-perpetuation they were a sign of it. Li's figures show that in 1213 facilitated degree holders were, after those who purchased rank, the least likely to be promoted into the administrative class and gain *yin* privilege. Although they represented twenty-six percent of officialdom they almost certainly constituted a less significant proportion of those with substantive posts. Facilitated degree holders did not have equal opportunity to advance in rank due to a combination of factors:

1. they were generally eligible for entry-level appointments in the educational system rather than local administrative appointments on the regular career path;
2. they were older and more likely to die before they had acquired the tenure necessary to be considered for such appointments;
3. when eligible for such appointments they had to wait until regular *chin-shih* and protected men had been offered the vacancies (leaving them only the most undesirable posts);
4. when the number of *kuan* exceeded the number of posts those most likely to be denied the opportunity of service and promotion were the facilitated degree holders.

²⁵ Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*, pp. 34-41.

²⁶ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, pp. 112-13.

These, and the low esteem in which they were held, explain why less than one percent of *kuan* with facilitated degrees had advanced into the ranks of administrative class officials in 1213.²⁷

We have reason to suppose, then, that in 1213 those officials with the best prospects for rising within the bureaucracy, gaining *yin* rights, and placing their progeny in special examinations were for the most part already related to officials. Why then did the Sung government allow facilitated degrees? Chaffee's figures show that such degrees exceeded regular degrees by 36 percent in the period 1196–1223 (but only by 14 percent from 1247 to 1262). Clearly the candidates approved. But why did the government not simply increase the number of regular degrees? It seems likely that the combination of protection and regular degrees satisfied the institutional need of the government for new bureaucrats and that the kin of existing officials were adequate to supply the necessary men. What the increase in facilitated degrees did do was make up for the increasing loss of regular posts to those who gained rank by protection. In other words, the government rewarded men for persevering in examination education by granting *kuan* status to those willing to spend much of their life failing the departmental examinations, but then proceeded to exclude most of them from the career opportunities that would have given them a chance to help their descendants maintain that status. This satisfied the candidates to some extent without disadvantaging officials of higher rank.

Still, one might argue that in 1213 the examination system was marginally the best way of reaching *kuan* status. As has already been noted, however, here too there was a significant decline from earlier periods (89 percent of the 1046 civil service had either regular or facilitated degrees but

²⁷ Citing two sources, Chaffee (*Thorny Gates*, p. 28, n. 38) argues that as of 1128 facilitated degree holders were grouped in five classes with the fifth class becoming (prefectural) assistant instructors (*chu-chiao* 助教) but not being counted as officials. The first source, *Sung hui-yao* 宋會要 (Rpt. Taipei: Shih-chieh, 1964), sect. "hsüan-chü" 選舉 4, p. 17a, is a special "amnesty edict" granting titles to all facilitated degree applicants without examination according to the number of times they have failed the departmental exam. Those who had failed six times received a low classification title, all others were given educational and assistant instructor titles. Although the educational titles were outside and below the system of classification titles, they made men eligible for appointment to certain bureaucratic functions of the same name (these were not positions with administrative responsibility). But the second source, Li Hsin-ch'uan, *Ch'ao-yeh isa-chi*, first collection, ch. 13 p. 20b, contends that an 1128 edict determined that "those entering the fifth rank [in the special facilitated degree examination] are all to be appointed to posts and this has remained a precedent to the present." Li also notes that in the past half of those who took the facilitated examination were selected and given official rank, but recently only 1/3 were being passed in an effort to reduce the excess. This suggests that in 1213 all those who received facilitated degrees received titles of some sort and were eligible for appointment. In any case, they were registered with the executory-class selection bureau.

only 54 percent in 1213). Real growth was in *yin* privilege (11 percent in 1046 to 39 percent in 1213).²⁸ Thus the examinations declined as a means of both distributing *kuan* status and recruiting men for bureaucratic responsibility. It seems to me that the general trend among Sung officials was to seek ways of ensuring that their families would continue in government service. This does not deny that during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, when the number of substantive posts was increasing and the court was working to bring more educated men into government to replace military men and personal retainers at the upper levels of the civil administration, the state expanded and made fair the examination system to bring in new men — although descendants of southern, low-ranking civil officials during the Five Dynasties period may have been the prime beneficiaries. It is also clear that such reform-minded political leaders as Fan Chung-yen 范仲淹 in 1043, Han Ch'i 韓琦, Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修 in 1056, and Wang An-shih in 1069 worked to limit *yin* privilege in favor of examination candidates. Yet it is noteworthy that exactly when recruitment via the regular examinations increased, during the second period of New Policies government, to an annual rate of 244 men between 1103 and 1120 (compared with an annual rate of 163 from 1208 to 1223), the ostensible reform leaders at court were making greater use of *yin* to solidify their own power within the bureaucracy, a practice that continued into Southern Sung.²⁹ The battle between examinations and *yin* privilege was, as reformers and their opponents realized, a battle for control of the government. Yet we can ask whether, once the imperial will to bring in men who were not from the families of those already serving had dissipated, proposals to expand examination recruitment were intended to accomplish more than recruit men from lower bureaucratic families or simply ensure that officials without access to *yin* would feel there was some chance that some of their descendants could also become officials.

Let us suppose that the government was, in 1213, run by a largely self-perpetuating group of official families. Can we imagine a situation in which, in spite of this, candidate families would still believe that the examinations offered them a reasonable chance to gain *kuan* status? Our givens are three

²⁸ During the 24 years prior to 1046, 4,143 men gained facilitated degrees, i.e. 32% of the 12,700+ civil officials in 1046, leaving 11% unaccounted for — presumably recipients of *yin*. The exercise of *yin* rights may have been just as frequent in the mid-eleventh century, but in many instances *yin* could only be used to obtain military rank for kin.

²⁹ Umehara, *Sōdai kanryō*, pp. 446–50. Umehara argues that the expanded use of *yin* in the civil bureaucracy by the highest officials evident in Southern Sung began with Ts'ai Ching 蔡京, who also used it to promote his supporters to high-ranking positions.

facts. First, privilege could be extended to kin by blood and marriage and used on occasions prior to retirement or death (for example, at the Great Rites) with higher officials having more *yin* rights than they did sons. Second, the turnover rate among administrative-class bureaucrats was higher in Southern Sung than in Northern Sung, increasing the number of *kuan* with protection rights. Third, the total number of civil *kuan* (19,398 in 1213) was only one-twentieth of the total number of prefectural candidates (at most 400,000 in 1213). Assuming some descent group solidarity, it is possible that a majority of candidates in any given year would be related to someone with *kuan* status at that time, and, although only a minority would become *kuan* themselves, a majority might expect that in the course of several generations someone in their larger descent group would become a *kuan*. The issue might then be which branches of the descent groups involved were dominant at any moment. All candidate families might then think of themselves as part of the pool supplying officials. They might further be inclined to pursue examination education in hopes of either passing at the prefectural level and then passing either the *chin-shih* or the facilitated examination, or demonstrating the kind of talent that would attract the attention of kin with protection rights. Yet in any generation of candidates exceedingly few succeeded in gaining *kuan* status by any means.

In fact, while the ratio of officials to candidates was far lower in Southern Sung than in later periods, this ratio changes radically once we begin to speculate about the total number of students preparing to take the exams and ex-candidates alive at a given moment. For example, let us suppose both that candidates stopped taking the prefectural test after failing five exams between the ages of twenty and thirty-five and that the 400,000 prefectural candidates Chaffee speaks of for the mid-thirteenth century were distributed evenly by age. Every three years 80,000 men would become ex-candidates. If all lived to age sixty-five there would be 800,000 ex-candidates and 400,000 candidates, and thus an official:(ex-) candidate ratio of 1:60. Let us suppose further that the ratio of students to candidates, such as found in 1104 (79,000 candidates among 210,000 students), continued to hold when there were 400,000 candidates. We then could suppose a student body of some 1.6 million students. This becomes 2.26 million when ex-candidates are added, making a ratio to officials of 1:113. At this point we would have almost seven percent of the male population involved in studying and taking examinations, and it is very hard to believe that our 20,000 officials were related to the majority of potential, active, and former candidates.

Using these same suppositions, the ratio of officials who entered

through the regular examinations to all aspirants—present, former, and future—is 1:426. With a bit more certainty we can say that the chance of one of the 400,000 candidates passing in any one year between 1208 and 1223, when on the average 434 degrees were granted at each triennial exam, was 1:816. These are poor odds indeed, if the only reward was status as an official. They might be acceptable in a lottery, but I find it difficult to equate a system that demanded years of preparation and considerable investment with a lottery, which promises great rewards for minimal effort. With this in mind I think it fair to assume that increased candidacy signified that investment in education carried minimal risk—that is, there was a ready return on investment. This return provided something of value to the candidate and the family that was investing. What then was the most obvious benefit gained by participating in the examinations, *even when one failed?*

The one obvious answer to this, although it contains a variety of meanings, is that being able to participate in the examination system proved that one was a *shih*. The use of the social category of *shih* by Sung writers to identify the broader “elite,” not only those who served in government, is something on which both intellectual and social historians of the Sung period agree. This is evident in *The Thorny Gates*, where Chaffee, translating the term as “scholars” and “literati,” sees exam candidates as *shih*, in Patricia Buckley Ebrey’s discussion of Yüan Ts’ai’s *Precepts for Social Life*, and in Hymes’ discussion of the Fu-chou elite.³⁰ In Sung, as in later and earlier periods, being acknowledged as a *shih* was a social good of the first order. Yet *shih* was not a legal status in Sung—household registers did not identify households as *shih* households. It required a community of self-proclaimed *shih* to be acknowledged as one. This did not deter the government from recognizing that the *shih*, as the “best” of society from its perspective, were distinct from the *min* in general and farmers, merchants, and artisans specifically. Moreover, “the examinations were created for the *shih* stream,” as an edict from 989 states in the course of explaining why clerks should not be allowed into the examinations.³¹ The assumption behind this and many other passages from the time is that *shih* families were a preexisting group of families that had maintained particular traditions. Not only were they educated, in the specific sense of both knowing the texts regarded as integral to civil order and being able to compose in a cultured manner, but

³⁰ See the discussion of *shih-ta-fu* in Ebrey, *Family and Property in Sung China: Yuan Ts’ai’s Precepts for Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1984). Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*, p. 53, notes, “All the kinds of men that in my working definition fall within the ‘elite,’ whether or not they held office, turn up as *shih* in the sources.”

³¹ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 39, modified.

also they were geared toward state service. Chaffee points out that the examinations were initially expanded to bring *shih* throughout the empire into the Sung order: "What is remarkable about the early Sung emperors," he writes, "is that they used that power [to grant office] not so much to selectively coopt their rivals as to win the allegiance of the empire's scholarly families."³² In short, the examinations were presumed to be an acceptable means of selecting men from a self-perpetuating group (the *shih*) because they tested something members of that group possessed (an education). But in early Sung the mere possession of a *shih* education was not sufficient, one had to come from a *shih* family as well. (The degree to which the examination system undermined the assumption that *shih* were born of *shih* families will be noted shortly.)

Why did Sung elites need the examination to be recognized as *shih*? There are two larger explanations, of which one was more often true, I think, than the other. The first is that once the court made clear its intent to patronize the *shih* stream, local elites began to see that by acquiring an examination education they could claim to be *shih* as well and even become officials. Certainly all those who wished to become civil officials saw that they would have to pursue an education such as that tested in the examinations. In this view, the system offered men who had become dominant in their localities the opportunity to be recognized by the state as legitimately privileged. Chaffee states this from a different perspective in summing up his analysis of the regional distribution of *chin-shih* over time in his sixth chapter, and in the process suggests why the Sung social-political order worked.³³ He claims that the empire-wide nature of educational developments

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 Sung was due to the growing economic integration of the country. 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.³⁴

³² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³³ His goal in this chapter is not, it should be noted, to answer this question. It may be objected that an analysis of the regional distribution of *chin-shih* is less convincing than a similar analysis of the regional distribution of *kuan* over time. But only the *chin-shih* data allow the kind of analyses that are carried out here. At the very least the results can be taken as a major indicator of the spread and development of education.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

In this view, examination education helped define and spread to those who did not already have it the civil culture necessary to political unity. Moreover, because schools and examinations were found in most prefectures throughout the empire, they provided local elites with an institutional mechanism for defining themselves as participants in that culture. Local elites could remain entrenched in local society and, although they did not actually take part in the affairs of the nation unless they became officials, their education encouraged them to see themselves as similar to the elites of other regions and as cultural kin to officials in the post-aristocratic age. Thus Sung gained a group of men with similar values and aspirations that could mediate the relations between local society and the local government in a manner benefiting political unity under central authority.

It is not hard to see that participation in the examinations could have provided well-to-do families without *shih* traditions with a means of transforming themselves into *shih* and gaining recognition from existing *shih* families of the locality. There is biographical evidence for such conversions in early Sung (and the writing of biographies served as a way of providing recognition). It is true too that this would be an extraordinary achievement in cultural transformation, in which local elites who chose to be *shih* found themselves reading the same books, practicing on the same questions, learning the same methods of composition, knowing about the same great men, discussing the same ideas, practicing the same rituals, sharing the same aspirations, and (as the spread of neo-Confucian academies illustrates) choosing between the the same alternatives. Among other things their education taught them what it meant to be *shih*, a theme in much of what they read and wrote. They learned that historically *shih* had served in government, transmitted the cultural heritage of civilization, and, so Sung literati thinkers reminded them, were responsible for the morality of self, family, and community. The localities with the most *shih* were centers of literati culture and thought, providing less well-developed regions with contemporary models for *shih* socio-cultural life. The examination system, one might argue, made it possible for new wealth to show that it had paid its dues and the educational system, which led to the examinations, provided the opportunity for paying those dues. Hiring tutors, thus employing failed local candidates, and contributing to the local schools, of benefit to local *shih* society in general, were ways well-to-do outsiders could gain acceptance from established families. Such processes would be gradual and involve various forms of social negotiation, yet the conversion of wealth into status via culture would be made possible and, more to the point, necessary.

I do not doubt that this sometimes happened. Yet Chaffee points out that established *shih* also resisted the claims of others to *shih* status. Su Ch'e 蘇轍, although hardly from an old established family, reflects this in 1069 when he complains that "among [all three groups of] farmer, artisan, and merchant families today there are those who have forsaken their traditions in order to become *shih*."³⁵ Expanding the examinations into the primary mechanism of official recruitment and instituting fairness implied that the merit of education could be valued above family tradition. As a thirteenth-century official noted, being a "*shih* assuredly constitutes the stairway to high office and learning constitutes the stairway to becoming a *shih*."³⁶ The tension is evident in Chaffee's discussion of attempts to maintain occupational prohibitions,³⁷ and the rejection of such by Ou-yang Hsiu and others.³⁸ However, recent work by Hymes and Hartwell strongly indicates that gaining recognition as part of the elite of *shih* was far more difficult in Southern Sung than in Northern Sung.

This leads to the second explanation, the one I believe was more often true. Simply put, the various functions ascribed to the examination system as a mechanism for socio-cultural transformation also had value when the issue was not to gain but to preserve *shih* status from generation to generation. By Southern Sung, when most sons of existing *shih* families neither passed the examinations nor gained official rank, they needed a mechanism that allowed them to prove that they were still *shih* and still committed to the idea of service and good order in society and thus were of a kind with the most successful *shih*—the local families with official status and the bureaucrats sent from the court to govern. In this view the examination system provided the *shih* throughout the empire with a universal mechanism for educating the next generation in what it meant to be a *shih*, perpetuating their families in the local elite, and controlling membership therein.

There is a very simple and, I hope, obvious explanation for why families who were already *shih* needed a way to prove that they were *shih*. In contrast to T'ang, the Sung government made no efforts to encourage or recognize claims to an illustrious pedigree of service in dispensing office and it failed to create a variety of legal status groups outside the ranked bureaucracy to absorb the extra sons of the officials and provide them with a means of "serving." In short, when two of the three pillars of the *shih* of T'ang, pedigree and official service, were removed, Sung official families found that the only institutionally recognized means of maintaining elite status was through

education. The pressure on bureaucratic families from the mid-eleventh century on was enormous.

Some speculation with numbers will illustrate this. If we assume that 12,500 officials in 1046 all had two surviving sons by age thirty, that they reached age thirty while the father was still in office, that the sons in turn had two sons (a conservative figure),³⁹ and so on, then by the middle of the thirteenth century their would be 2.4 million descendants of those 12,500 officials, slightly more than the supposed 2.26 million students and (ex-) candidates! Chaffee's remark that "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"⁴⁰ is echoed by Southern Sung writers. At the very least it is possible to imagine that the growth in examination candidacy in Southern Sung reflected the demographic growth of families, most of whom could claim some official ancestor and all of whom were desperate to avoid losing their status as *shih* and whatever advantages they could gain from being recognized as *shih* by the community and government. Given the size of officialdom and the ability of officials to favor their closer kin, the local *shih* may well have served the interests of their families better by remaining local elites in practice and members of the national elite of *shih* in name. This, of course, fits well with Hymes' analysis of the Fu-chou elite.

The paradox of declining recruitment against increased candidacy thus turns out not to be a paradox after all. The primary function of the examination system was simply no longer recruitment, its original purpose. Instead it had become the mechanism through which the most privileged element of Sung society reaffirmed its elite status. This does not deny that through the examinations the dynasty kept a connection to the leaders of local society and encouraged them to identify their local interests with institutional stability and political unity, or that "the cultural unity created, in large part, by schools and examinations was an important contributing

³⁹ Degree recipients in 1148 had more than three brothers on the average, in 1256 almost two; *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41. For examples of Southern Sung concern with maintaining *shih* status in the face of pressures of downward mobility, see the various charters for charitable estates discussed in Linda Walton, "Lineage and Community Charitable Organizations as an Aspect of Statecraft in Southern Sung China," conference paper, Workshop on Sung Dynasty Statecraft in Thought and Action, Scottsdale, Arizona, January 1986. As the writer and official Lu Yu 陸游 notes in 1207 about the reasons for creating such estates: "We want to have our descendants be *shih*, we do not want them to drift into being artisans and merchants, to descend into being clerks and victors, or to depart to be followers of Buddha and Lao-tzu"; *Lu Fang-weng ch'üan-chi* 陸放翁全集 (rpt. Peking: Chung-kuo shu-tien, 1986), p. 124.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40, modified. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39, modified. ³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 54-55.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 39.

factor to the political unity of late imperial China."⁴¹ Perhaps, though, we should ask at what cost to the state? When the pool of *shih* increased beyond the state's ability to supply official positions and local elites gained control over education and access to *shih* status, the fortunes of the *shih* were no longer directly tied to the state. The New Policies educational program, Chaffee argues, was an attempt to allow for an expansion of the *shih* pool while bringing the *shih* more directly under state authority, but it did not survive the fall of Northern Sung. In T'ang the court's clan lists, procedures for checking genealogical records, and recruitment system had made members of the great clans, then the dominant group among the *shih*, ever more dependent on central authority. Thus, as T'ang central authority gave way to the power of non-aristocratic military governors, the value of pedigree declined and disappeared. The *shih* of Sung were hardly less concerned with self-perpetuation than the *shih* of T'ang, but in Sung the perpetuation of elite family status became untied from official service. The fortunes of the Sung *shih* were weakly tied to the state, and, as Chaffee and others have pointed out, they increasingly developed "respectable" alternative careers for examination candidates, worked to encourage descent group solidarity, and developed marriage ties within their locality. Ultimately, as *shih* found that elite status could be maintained without success in service, the imperial government could not sustain its demands that the most influential, most educated, and wealthiest element in local society sacrifice its privileges in the interest of the state's fiscal well-being and judicial authority. The result was a new order in which the government effectively lost its ability to dominate local society.

This independence goes much of the way, I think, toward explaining why the *shih* families of Southern Sung were able to survive the Mongol conquest and the resulting loss of control over government. But if the Mongols did not hasten to reestablish an examination system, in the south particularly they supported a further expansion of the school system, recruited some officials through it, and tied the legal privileges of *ju* households to participation in the schools.⁴² From this perspective the Ming elaboration of the examination degree system through the creation of lower-level degrees can be seen as both a recognition of the social function of the examinations in defining *shih* status and an attempt to reassert the government's authority

over claims to elite status. It is worth noting that both Ming and Ch'ing began by temporarily breaking the power of the *shih* families in the south. In the end, however, the bureaucracy's powerlessness in later periods appears to result as much from its inability to maintain its authority over local society as from an increase in imperial despotism in Ming, while the increase in despotism might have something to do with the fact that the *shih*, having learned that government service was not necessary to perpetuate the elite status of their families, did not think their fortunes depended on standing up to the emperor, as had once been the case in T'ang.

John Chaffee's work leads us to conclude that in Sung the examination system was transformed from an institution for recruiting civil officials to something historically far more important: an institution that allowed local elites to claim the privilege of belonging to a relatively homogeneous national elite. The irony, perhaps, is that a system that prevented ninety-nine percent of its clients from attaining the goals for which it was created should have become the institutional bedrock for the self-perpetuation of the national elite of the later imperial period. In the longer span of Chinese history major redefinitions and expansions of the *shih* have occurred but rarely. When this happened in Sung a new configuration of society, politics, and culture emerged to survive for the remainder of the imperial era. It was not until this century that a comparable redefinition of China's national elite took place, and it was preceded by the abolition of the examination system and the rejection of the idea of being a *shih*. Yet the survival of the Sung conviction that the better educated, whether serving as state officials or not, should be the more privileged may not depend upon whether men continue to call themselves *shih*.

⁴¹ Chaffee, *Thorny Gates*, p. 142.

⁴² Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing 蕭啓慶, "Yüan-tai te ju-hu: Ju-shih ti-wei yen-chin-shih shang te i-chang" 元代的儒戶儒士地位演進史上的一章, *Journal of Oriental Studies* 16.1-2 (1978), pp. 151-78.