

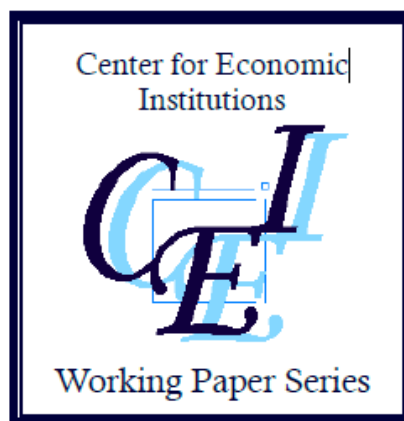
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**“Revisiting Skinner:
Counting Counties in Song China”**

Yidan Han and Tuan-Hwee Sng

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Institute of Economic Research
Hitotsubashi University
2-1 Naka, Kunitachi, Tokyo, 186-8603 JAPAN
<https://cei.ier.hit-u.ac.jp/English/index.html>
Tel: +81-42-580-8405/Fax: +81-42-580-8333

Revisiting Skinner: Counting Counties in Song China

Yidan Han and Tuan-Hwee Sng*

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Abstract

We revisit a long-held consensus that the number of county-level units in imperial China remained stable and consistently hovered around 1,250 for two millennia. We argue that this consensus, traceable to G. W. Skinner’s influential introductory chapter in *The City in Late Imperial China*, focuses excessively on the county (*xian*), which existed throughout the imperial period, and overlooks other dynasty-specific types of field administration. During the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), alongside the predominantly rural counties, the state established various alternative types of field administration, most notably the towns (*zhen*), which administered urban households. Approximately 30% of the 1,900 towns existing in the year 1084 were staffed by centrally-appointed bureaucrats. These officials collected taxes, provided basic public services, interacted with the population daily, and were directly accountable to the prefect. Overlooking the existence of these towns means underestimating not only the scale of the Song field administration, but also its sophistication. Unlike later dynasties, the Song state differentiated between urban and rural settlements administratively, and its urban coverage was unsurpassed until the modern age. We trace the precocity of the Song system to institutional innovations during the two centuries of political fragmentation that preceded the Song dynasty.

*Yidan Han, Department of History, Sun Yat-sen University (Zhuhai). Email: smxhanyidan@163.com. Tuan-Hwee Sng, Department of Economics, National University of Singapore. Email: tsng@nus.edu.sg. We thank participants at seminars and conferences at Harvard University, Northwestern University, the London School of Economics, Peking University, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University for helpful comments and suggestions. We also thank Zhang Aijia for excellent research assistance. A revised version of this paper has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Chinese History* under the title “Extending the Reach of State: The Administrative Town in Song China” (DOI: 10.1017/jch.2025.10087).

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been a growing scholarly recognition that China was a world leader in building a modern bureaucracy.¹ According to Fukuyama, China became the first civilization to witness the emergence of a Weberian state—centralized, bureaucratic, and meritocratic—when the Qin kingdom completed the first unification of China in 221 BCE. This was a significant milestone, occurring nearly eighteen centuries before modern states emerged in Europe around 1500.²

A salient feature of the Qin’s bureaucratic government was its county system, which divided the empire into thousands of contiguous counties (*xian* 縣). Each of these was administered by one or more centrally appointed officials responsible for fiscal and security duties.³ This system was basically preserved for two millennia until the fall of imperial China in 1912.

In a much-cited quote, G.W. Skinner observed that the number of county-level units among unified Chinese dynasties had hovered around 1,250 throughout the imperial period and varied surprisingly little from the times of the Punic Wars to the eve of World War I:⁴

[...] the record shows a remarkable stability in the number of county-level units throughout imperial history. Taking the approximate figure that applied during the heyday of each dynasty, we find 1,180 in Han, 1,255 in Sui, 1,235 in T’ang [Tang], 1,230 in Sung [Song], 1,115 in Yüan [Yuan], 1,385 in Ming, and 1,360 in Ch’ing [Qing].

Skinner took this observation further, proposing that it holds significant implications for understanding China’s political and developmental trajectories. According to him, the number of county-level units served as a bellwether for the breadth and reach of the Chinese state. The fact that existing counties were routinely abolished as new ones were set up, keeping the overall number effectively unchanged, pointed to the presence of enduring forces that prevented the imperial Chinese state from expanding its administrative apparatus. Considering that China’s population steadily grew from 60 million in 180 to 425 million in 1850, an unchanging number of county-level units signifies “a secular decline in governmental effectiveness from mid-T’ang on

¹See, for instance, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 17–24; Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), pp. 113–4.

²Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, pp. 124–6.

³H. G. Creel, “The Beginnings of Bureaucracy in China: The Origin of the Hsien,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 23.2 (1964): 155–184.

⁴G. W. Skinner, “Introduction: Urban Development in Imperial China,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. W. Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), p. 19. Text in parenthesis added by the authors.

to the end of the imperial era, a steady reduction in basic-level administrative central functions from one era to the next.”⁵

Although historians of China have generally dismissed the notion of an unchanging China, Skinner’s contention that an invisible ceiling capped the number of county-level units—which implies a static China in the administrative sense—has found acceptance among many experts. Shiba Yoshinobu refers to it as an “unsolved mystery” that the number of counties from the Song to the Qing dynasties remained fixed at 1200–1300.⁶ In his authoritative account of the rise and endurance of Neo-Confucianism in China, Peter Bol draws on Skinner’s characterization to argue that between 750 and 1050, China experienced “an overall decline in governance” and a divergence between its economic and administrative networks due to the unresponsive nature of county numbers in relation to population growth and the proliferation of market towns.⁷

However, the argument is not without its critics. Schirokauer and Hymes argue that the lack of state expansion was not solely due to technological limitations but was also shaped by negotiation and compromise between the Chinese state and its elites.⁸ Ruth Mostern critiques Skinner’s focus on the county as “excessively blunt,” particularly because it overlooks dynamic adjustments in spatial structure of prefectures, which were situated above the counties, during the Song dynasty.⁹ Likewise, Sukhee Lee points out that Skinner fails to consider the function of other regional and local levels of administration, such as the expansion of the Pacification Commission (*xuanfusi* 宣撫司) and the Military Commission (*zhizhisi* 制置司) as well as the presence of administrators in some market towns during the Southern Song dynasty.¹⁰

We build on these insights to reassess Skinner’s claim about the decline in basic-level administrative intensity from the Tang through the Qing, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. We find that, if we set aside statutory status and interpret a county as a basic-level territorial administration unit—just as Skinner himself did—the actual number of county-level units during at least one of the major dynasties, the Northern Song (960–1127), exceeds Skinner’s proposed range of 1,180–1,385 units substantially.¹¹ By our estimate, there

⁵Skinner, “Introduction,” p. 19.

⁶Shiba Yoshinobu 斯波義信, “Sōdai no toshika wo kangaeru” 宋代の都市化を考える, *Tōhōgaku* 東方學 102 (2001): 1–19.

⁷Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), p. 20.

⁸Conrad Schirokauer and Robert Hymes, “Introduction,” in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, ed. Robert Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁹Ruth Mostern, *Dividing the Realm in order to Govern: the Spatial Organization of the Song State (960–1276 CE)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 31–34.

¹⁰Sukhee Lee, *Negotiated Power: The State, Elites, and Local Governance in Twelfth- to Fourteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), pp. 12–15.

¹¹We focus particularly on the Northern Song to align with Skinner’s emphasis on unified dynasties. However, due to limited historical records from the Northern Song, we also draw upon historical materials from the Southern Song (1127–1279). It is worth noting that despite the organic institutional continuity between the Northern and Southern Song, the foundations for some key socio-cultural differences between the Northern Song

were more than 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China, which implies a more expansive reach of the state compared to Ming-Qing China. (Figure 1).

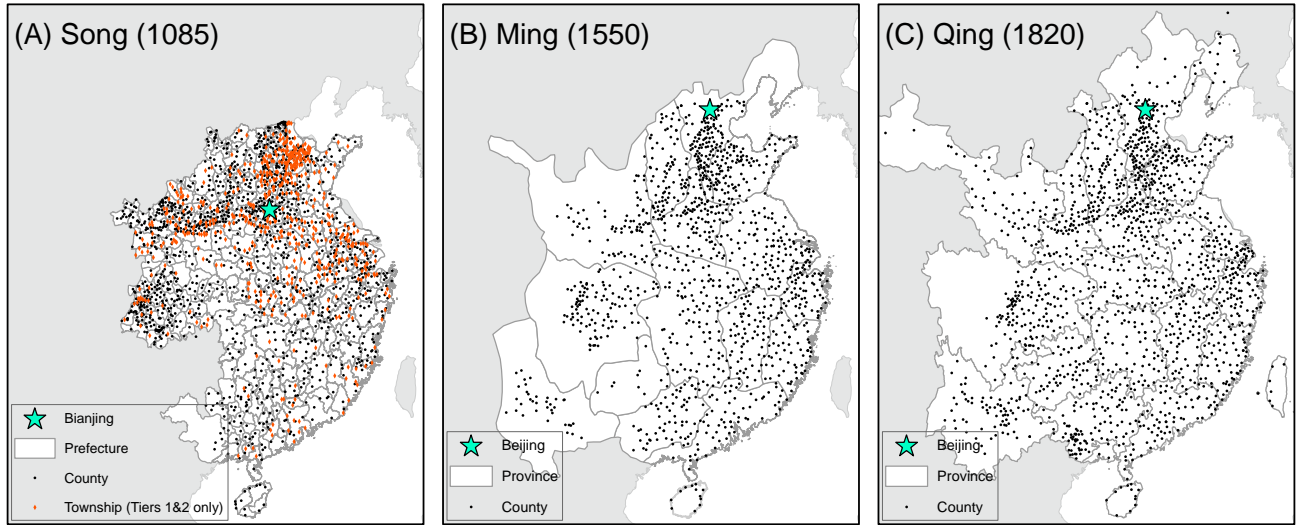


Figure 1: Basic-level territorial administration units in Song, Ming, and Qing (Panels B–C adapted from CHGIS, Version 6. Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies of Harvard University and the Center for Historical Geographical Studies at Fudan University, 2016).

Our estimate for the Song dynasty is substantially larger because there is an inherent limitation in Skinner’s use of the number of *de jure* counties—*xian* and other administrative units of equivalent nominal rank—to measure the intensity of “basic-level administrative central functions.”¹² His premise is sound for the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1912) when *xian* and other *xian*-level units were indeed the only basic-level territorial administration units. But during the Song dynasty, the picture is murkier.

Alongside the *xian*, the Song state established a variety of other field administration units, including towns (*zhen* 鎮), stockades (*zhai* 寨), fortifications (*bao* 堡), castles (*cheng* 城), land passes (*guan* 關), fords (*jin* 津), production centers (*chang* 場), and so on. These territorial units were below the *xian* in administrative rank. However, a closer examination of the historical record reveals that a subset of these units: (1) were territorial jurisdictions with demarcated boundaries and registered households, (2) were staffed by one or more centrally-appointed officials, (3) were responsible for collecting taxes from and providing essential public services to the residents, and (4) reported directly to the prefecture (*zhou* 州).

and Ming-Qing China were likely laid during the Southern Song period, see Robert Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550,” *HJAS* 42.2 (1982): 365–552; Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 32–75; Conrad Schirokauer and Robert Hymes, “Introduction,” in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, ed. Robert Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1–58; Robert Hymes, “Sung Society and Social Change,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, bk. 2: *Sung China, 960–1279*, ed. John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 526–664.

¹²Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, p. 19.

This subset of jurisdictions, like the *xian*, executed basic-level administrative central functions under the direct supervision of the prefecture. If the objective—like Skinner’s—is to measure the state’s physical presence at the local level, these alternative territorial administration units need to be brought into the discourse.

In this paper, we focus on the towns, which administered urban households and could be found in almost every corner of Song China.¹³ We demonstrate that out of the approximately 1,900 towns documented in the Song official geographical treatise *The Yuanfeng Treatise of the Nine Regions* (元豐九域志), about 30% fulfilled all four abovementioned criteria. This subset of towns is represented as red dots in Figure 1. Our estimate of more than 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China is derived by adding these approximately 560 towns to the 1,135 counties and 176 other county-level units in the mid-1080s.¹⁴

More important than identifying a numerical difference in basic-level administrative units between Song and Ming-Qing China, our research underscores the sophistication of the Song territorial administration. Studies of urban management in Ming-Qing China have commonly found that formal administration had little penetration into cities; an overwhelming majority—more than 95%—of cities and market towns lacked a permanent bureaucratic presence.¹⁵ Moreover, the Ming-Qing county was predominantly rural in outlook, providing urban services mainly to residents of the county seat, if such services were provided at all.¹⁶ Some studies have pointed out that this stands in contrast to some early modern states, such as Tokugawa Japan, where urban magistrates (*machi-bugyō* 町奉行) administered towns and cities, and rural magistrates (*daikan* 代官) governed the countryside.¹⁷ However, this distinction cannot be extended to Song China, which was in fact ahead of its time in recognizing and accommodating the distinct characteristics of rural and urban areas within its territorial administration.

It is instructive to note that during the Ming-Qing period, the terms *zhen* and *shi* were used almost interchangeably to describe a market town typically lacking bureaucratic oversight. As Faure’s study on Foshan illustrates, the Ming-Qing *zhen* was “commercially a town, but

¹³In contrast, the stockades, fortifications, and castles were primarily concentrated in the frontier, while land passes, fords, and production centers were limited to areas with specific topographic features or natural resources.

¹⁴The number of counties and county-level units are based on Wang Cun 王存, *Yuanfeng jiyu zhi* 元豐九域志, ed. Wang Wenchu 王文楚 et al., 10 *juan* in 2 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984). For other county-level units, see Li Changxian 李昌憲, *Zhongguo xingzheng quhua tongshi—Song Xixia juan* 中國行政區劃通史·宋西夏卷 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2007), pp. 108–112.

¹⁵Madeleine Zelin, “Economic Freedom in Late Imperial China,” in *Realms of Freedom in Modern China*, ed. William C. Kirby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 57–83.

¹⁶Si-yen Fei, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 13–20.

¹⁷Gilbert Rozman, *Urban Networks in Ch’ing China and Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 98; Tuan-Hwee Sng and Chiaki Moriguchi, “Asia’s Little Divergence: State Capacity in China and Japan before 1850,” *Journal of Economic Growth*, 19.4 (2014): 439–470.

politically a *xiang*” (rural canton; 鄉).¹⁸ In contrast, in Song China the terms *zhen* and *shi* had distinct connotations: the former referred to a state-administered market town, while the latter indicated a market town without direct state involvement, typically smaller in scale.¹⁹ This nuance further underscores that the Chinese experience in field administration is more intricate and varied than snapshots from either 1500 or 1800 might suggest.

To the best of our knowledge, there has yet to be a systematic investigation of subprefectural administration in Song China in the English literature.²⁰ To date, the most comprehensive work on Song territorial administration is Mostern’s in-depth study of the prefecture, the primary unit that the Song state used to spatially organize itself.²¹ Hartwell notes that the prefecture was eclipsed by the emergence of large, regional-sized provinces post-Song.²² We build on these studies to examine the layer beneath the prefecture that directly administered the people.

Our paper also connects with a large and prominent body of work documenting the precocity of Song China’s development. Mark Elvin famously discussed the advent of “medieval economic revolution” in Song China.²³ Similarly, John Fairbank described the opening two centuries of the second millennium as “China’s Greatest Age” that saw it indisputably leading the rest of the world in technology, production, political ideas, government, and cultural achievements.²⁴

¹⁸David Faure, “What Made Foshan a Town?: The Evolution of Rural-Urban Identities in Ming-Qing China,” *Late Imperial China* 11.2 (1990): 24.

¹⁹It is not uncommon even among modern researchers to overlook this distinction and to assume, mistakenly, that all market towns had always lacked direct state presence. See, for instance, Rozman, *Urban Networks*, p. 31; Frederick W. Mote, “The Transformation of Nanking, 1350–1400,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, p. 107. Other scholars have recognized the Song *zhen*’s bureaucratic presence, but they primarily investigated the *zhen* in the context of urban history, focusing on its roles as a market and urban settlement. See Umehara Kaoru 梅原郁, “Sōdai chihō shō toshi no ichi men: chin no hensen o chūshin toshite” 宋代地方小都市の一面: 鎮の変遷を中心として, *Shirin* 史林 41.6 (1958): 475–491; Shiba Yoshinobu, *Sōdai shōgyō shi kenkyū* 宋代商業史研究 (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1968), p. 315; Kawakatsu Mamoru 川勝守, “Chūgoku chihō gyōsei niokeru ken to chin” 中国地方行政における県と鎮, *Kyūshūdaigaku tōyōshi ronshū* 九州大学東洋史論集 15 (1986): 153–90; Fu Zongwen 傅宗文, *Songdai caoshizhen yanjiu* 宋代草市鎮研究 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1989), p. 86. Two important exceptions are Maemura Yoshiyuki 前村佳幸 and Richard von Glahn. Maemura studies Song *zhen* administrators with the title of “fire regulating and legal cases” (煙火公事); von Glahn documents that “market towns typically were supervised by public security and tax-collection agents.” Maemura, “Sōdai no chin chūzaikan” 宋代の鎮駐在官, *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 107.4 (1998): 515–42; von Glahn, “Towns and Temples: Urban Growth and Decline in the Yangzi Delta, 1100–1400,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul J. Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), p. 177.

²⁰There are several surveys in the Chinese literature that descriptively review the different types of subprefectural units in Song China, such as Yu Wei 余蔚, “Songdai de xianji zhengqu he xian yixia zhengqu” 宋代的縣級政區和縣以下政區, *Lishi dili* 歷史地理 21 (2006): 73–86; Yu Yuezū 郁越祖, “Guanyu Songdai jianzhi zhen de jige lishi dili wenti” 關於宋代建制鎮的幾個歷史地理問題, *Lishi dili* 歷史地理 6 (1988): 94–125; Chiang Tien-chien 江天健, “Beisong Shaanxi lu yanbian baozhai” 北宋陝西路沿邊堡寨, *Shihuo yuekan* 食貨月刊 15.7–8 (1986): 356–369, etc.

²¹Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*.

²²Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations,” p. 395.

²³Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973).

²⁴John K. Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 88.

Central to these developments was the emergence of a national market made possible by increasing regional specialization and the development of transport and communications.²⁵

Other studies have highlighted the role of the state in the management of the Song economy. Paul Smith’s insightful inquiry into the tea and horse trade in Song Sichuan demonstrates a degree of bureaucratic activism and commercial interventionism unseen in later dynasties.²⁶ Some scholars see the Song state’s eagerness to increase revenue and money supply as the engine that propelled Song’s economic transformation.²⁷ William Liu finds that unlike Ming-Qing China, which relied heavily on agricultural sources to meet the fiscal needs of the state, the Song tax regime derived as much as two-thirds of its annual revenues from urban indirect taxes.²⁸ We complement these studies by shedding light on the institutional foundation that made the high tax regime and expansionary economic policies of Song China feasible. Our findings suggest that the state activism of the Song era was embedded in and supported by a network of field administration nodes—the seats of the prefectures and the counties, the towns and other subprefectures—that was more extensive than what has been observed in imperial China subsequently. These nodes provided security, fire protection, dispute resolution, and other basic public goods to their residents in return for the taxes paid, without which the Song high tax regime would not have been sustainable.

Finally, our paper speaks to the literature centering on the Naito Hypothesis, which argues that the Chinese state, society, and economy underwent a major transformation between the Tang and Song dynasties.²⁹ We document how the Song *zhen* was borne out of the fierce political and military competition that profoundly shaped the Tang-Song transition. However, our findings also lend support to other research that has pointed out that lumping Song and its successors together as China’s modern period (*kinsei* 近世) obfuscates the considerable differences between these dynasties.³⁰ We single out the realm of field administration as an epitome of the subtle but salient institutional differences between the Song and the Ming-Qing dynasties.

²⁵Shiba Yoshinobu, *Commerce and Society in Sung China*, trans. Mark Elvin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1970), chapters II and III.

²⁶Paul J. Smith, *Taxing Heaven’s Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry, 1074–1224* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²⁷Kent Deng and Lucy Zheng, “Economic Restructuring and Demographic Growth: Demystifying Growth and Development in Northern Song China, 960–1127,” *Economic History Review* 68.4 (2015): 1107–31.

²⁸William Guanglin Liu, “The Making of a Fiscal State in Song China, 960–1279,” *Economic History Review* 68.1 (2015): 48–78.

²⁹Miyakawa Hisayuki, “An Outline of the Naito Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14.4 (1955): 533–552; Joshua A. Fogel, *Politics and Sinology: The Case of Naito Konan (1866–1934)* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984); Yuhua Wang, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

³⁰Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 32–75; Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*; Schirokauer and Hymes, “Introduction”; the set of essays in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*; Richard von Glahn, “Modalities of the Fiscal State in Imperial China,” *Journal of Chinese History* 4.1 (2020): 1–29.

2 Territorial Administration of Song China

2.1 Song and Ming-Qing

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, territorial administration in imperial China followed a relatively simple hierarchical structure consisting of four main tiers: the center, province, prefecture, and county (Figure 2).³¹ The county functioned as the lowest level of government, operating under the jurisdiction and oversight of the province, facilitated through the prefecture.

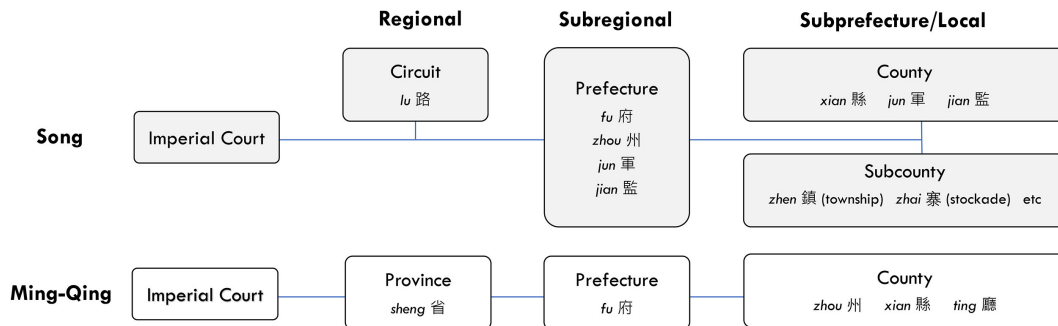


Figure 2: Structure of territorial administration in Song and Ming-Qing.

By comparison, the administrative structure during the Song dynasty was more intricate. The Song equivalent to the Ming-Qing province was the circuit. However, despite some superficial similarities,³² the circuit did not possess comparable authority. Each circuit was overseen by several mutually independent intendants, each tasked with a distinct set of functions: taxation, defense, judicial matters, or agriculture. Rather, the primary unit of territorial administration during the Song dynasty was the prefecture, which functioned as a miniature administrative body representing the central government within its territorial boundaries. As Mostern explains, “[t]he prefecture was the nuclear unit of Song territorial administration, and the three hundred-some prefectures were the regime’s stable and executive political face outside the court.”³³ Prefectures held significant civil, fiscal, and even military authority. They directly communicated with the court and exercised direct jurisdiction over counties and various sub-county units.

These sub-county units constitute another distinctive feature of the Song administrative structure. Unlike the Ming-Qing case, when counties formed the basic building blocks of formal administration outside the capital city, the Song state established a variety of sub-county field

³¹The preceding Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which existed between the Song and Ming dynasties, had a similar yet more hierarchical structure. See Li Zhi-an 李治安 and Xue Lei 薛磊, *Zhongguo xingzheng quhua tongshi–Yuandai juan* 中國行政區劃通史·元代卷 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2009), pp. 1–2.

³²Winston W. Lo, “Circuits and Circuit Intendants in the Territorial Administration of Sung China,” *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1974–1975): 39–107.

³³Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, p. 38.

entities performing fiscal, defense, mining, or other production functions. They included towns as well as stockades, fortifications, castles, land passes, fords, and production centers.

In official records such as *The Yuanfeng Treatise of the Nine Regions*, these units were listed under the counties to which they belonged. However, in practice, they were often directly accountable to the prefecture rather than the county. According to Mostern, “counties had only a limited range of administrative functions. They were largely outposts for managing tax collection. County administrative staff reported to the prefect, not to the county magistrate.”³⁴

The most compelling evidence for this organizational workflow structure lies in the system of fiscal oversight.³⁵ All officials in charge of fiscal affairs within a prefecture’s territory were required to submit revenue data directly to the prefecture for verification. This included officials from the counties, towns, and other field units.³⁶ Upon the conclusion of an official’s term, the prefecture was required to provide a summary of the official’s fiscal performance.³⁷

More broadly, the prefect held the responsibility of conducting annual appraisals for all sub-prefectural officials within its territorial scope, irrespective of whether their duties pertained to fiscal matters.³⁸ Furthermore, the vice-prefect was tasked to conduct quarterly reviews of these officials.³⁹ Essentially, it was the prefecture, rather than the county, that exercised bureaucratic oversight over subcounty officials.

Among the various types of subcounty units, our focus is on the towns. It is in these towns that we find the most compelling evidence suggesting they were considered by the Song state as basic units of territorial administration. A clear example of this comes from the imperial maps produced by the government. The Northern Song state required prefecture governments to routinely compile maps to capture specific socio-economic and administrative information within each prefecture.⁴⁰ These prefectural maps were in turn used to generate empire-wide maps.⁴¹ In 1071, the Shenzong emperor appointed Zhao Yanruo as chief director

³⁴Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, pp. 38, 46.

³⁵Maemura Yoshiyuki, “Sōdai chihō zaisei kikō to kanchinkan,” 宋代地方財政機構と監鎮官, *Nagoyadaigaku tōyōshi kenkyū hōkoku* 名古屋大学東洋史研究報告 25 (2001): 175–89.

³⁶Xie Shenfu 謝深甫 (twelfth century), *Qingyuan tiaofa shilei* 慶元條法事類, 80 *juan* (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2002) [hereafter *QYTF*], j. 36, pp. 539–41; *Song shi* 宋史, ed. Tuo Tuo 脫脫 (1313–1355) et al., 496 *juan* in 40 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), j. 167, p. 3983.

³⁷“Zhiguan” 職官, in *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿, ed. Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848), Liu Lin 劉琳 et al., 16 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014) [hereafter *SHY*], v. 6, j. 11, p. 3313; E. A. Kracke, Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960–1067* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 93; Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南, *Songdai wenguan xuanren zhidu zhu cengmian* 宋代文官選任制度諸層面 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), pp. 76–78.

³⁸Kracke, *Civil Service in Early Sung China*, pp. 88, 93; Wei Feng 魏峰, “Songdai yinzhì pishu shilun—yì xīn faxiàn ‘Xú Wèilǐ wénshū’ wèilǐ” 宋代印紙批書試論——以新發現“徐謂禮文書”為例, *Wenshi* 文史 105.4 (2013): 181–98.

³⁹“Fangyu” 方域, in *SHY*, v. 16, j. 19, p. 9674.

⁴⁰Aoyama Sadao 青山定雄, *Tōsō jidai no kōtsū to chishi chizu no kenkyū* 唐宋時代の交通と地誌地圖の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan), pp. 527–29; Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, pp. 92–93.

⁴¹De Weerd, *Information, Territory, and Networks*, p. 113.

of a state project to produce an “All-under-Heaven Map of Prefectures (*zhou-fu-jun-jian*), and Counties and towns (*xian-zhen*)” (天下州府軍監縣鎮圖), which Zhao delivered two years later.⁴² Although the maps produced by Zhao and his team have long been lost, the title of the project suggests that the Song state visualized counties and towns as basic cells that, together, formed the constituent parts of a larger prefecture, and indeed the entire empire.

Other imperial directives, too, occasionally hinted at the Song state’s perception of towns as functionally equivalent to counties. For instance, an edict enacted at the end of the tenth century stipulated that prefectures were allowed to retain fiscal reserves up to three years of their budgets, while counties and towns were permitted to keep reserves up to two years of their budgets if they were non-distant and up to one year otherwise.⁴³

The administrative role of the Song *zhen* was also recognized by contemporaries. A Southern Song source stated that “[just like prefects and county magistrates,] the supervisors of towns and stockades were also responsible for administering and looking after the people [親民: 理治百姓, 監鎮知寨亦然].”⁴⁴

2.2 The Three Tiers of Towns

To be sure, not all towns possessed authority or responsibilities comparable to those of a county. Although there was no explicit tiered system in place for towns, they could be informally classified into three tiers, corresponding to the varying powers and responsibilities of their appointed supervisors. This distribution of authority was influenced by a range of factors from population and commercial activity levels to geographical location, reflecting the importance of a town in the eyes of the state.⁴⁵

Town administrators across all three tiers were responsible for collecting taxes and providing urban public goods.⁴⁶ However, the specifics of tax collection, the scope of public goods provided, and the authority vested in these officials varied. For first-tier towns, the Song state bestowed their supervisors with the title “fire regulating and legal cases” (*yanhuo gongshi* 煙火公事). These officials were typically appointed by the Bureau of Administrative Personnel (*shenguan yuan* 審官院), selected from candidates who were qualified to serve as county magistrates and who had completed at least one term as a task supervisor.⁴⁷

⁴²Li Tao 李燾 (1115–1184), *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編, 520 *juan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004) [hereafter *CB*], j. 220, pp. 5354–55; j. 247, p. 6033.

⁴³Ma Duanlin 馬端臨, *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考, 348 *juan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), j. 23, pp. 694–95.

⁴⁴Zhao Sheng 趙升, *Chaoye leiyao* 朝野類要, ed. Wang Ruilai 王瑞來 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), p. 46.

⁴⁵Sudō Yoshiyuki, “Sōdaino gōson ni okeru shōtoshi no ha ten jō tokuni mise shi ho wo chūshin to shite” 宋代の郷村における小都市の発展-上-特に店・市・歩を中心として, *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 59.9-10 (1950): 808–33, 901–29; Shiba, *Sōdai shōgyō shi kenkyū*, pp. 337–76; Fu, *Songdai caoshizhen yanjiu*, pp. 87–91.

⁴⁶“Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 7, j. 48, pp. 4371–72.

⁴⁷*Libu tiaofa canben* 吏部條法 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1981) [hereafter *LBTF*], in *Yongle dadian* 永樂

Depending on their standing in the administrative hierarchy, these officials could be further subdivided into two sub-tiers. The upper sub-tier comprised town supervisors who held the distinguished title of a capital officer (*jingchao guan* 京朝官). Like county magistrates with the same titular title, these town supervisors were authorized to adjudicate crimes punishable by up to one hundred blows by heavy stick.⁴⁸ The lower sub-tier, in contrast, included officers from the less distinguished executory class (*xuanren* 選人). While they were permitted to adjudicate legal cases, it appears that their authorization was restricted to lesser crimes punishable by the light stick (*xiaozhang* 小杖).⁴⁹

Towns of the second tier were staffed by court-appointed officials who were assigned to handle daily administrative affairs and collect taxes. These officials, appointed by the Bureau of Executory Personnel (*liunei quan* 流內銓), held the title of task supervisors (*jiandang* 監當).⁵⁰ Nonetheless, their responsibilities encompassed a range of tasks beyond tax collection. They maintained fire regulations compliance, enforced the law, and implemented various state policies such as preventing smuggling and disbursing famine relief.⁵¹ A key distinction between these officials and those in first-tier towns, however, lay in their punitive authority. They were only authorized to administer punishment up to 10 blows by the light rod (笞).⁵²

Towns of the third and lowest tier, unlike their higher-tier counterparts, had no court-stipulated commercial and liquor tax quotas and consequently, no tax-inspecting officials. Oversight was provided by garrison commanders (*zhenjiang* 鎮將), a role that was a legacy inherited from the regional commandant system (*jiedu shi* 節度使) of the Late Tang and the Five Dynasties. Contrary to their title, the Song garrison commanders were not military officers but powerful and wealthy local individuals appointed by the prefectural government to act as quasi-officials.⁵³ They were granted local tax-farming rights (買撲) and in return, were responsible for providing local public security.⁵⁴

One could consider all towns in Song China as *de facto* county-level units, based on the

大典, j. 14622, p. 15a.

⁴⁸For the judicial power of a typical magistrate, see *CB*, j. 95, p. 2190; j. 226, p. 5503. For the similar power of town officials, see “Fangyu,” in *SHY*, v. 16, j. 12, pp. 9530–31; *CB*, j. 217, pp. 5277–78; *LBTF*, in *Yongle dadian*, j. 14621, p. 13b.

⁴⁹See Hu Qu 胡渠 et al., *Baoqing Siming zhi* 寶慶四明志 (1854 edition), 21 *juan* in vol. 5 of *Song Yuan fangzhi congkan* 宋元方志叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), j. 3, p. 21a. According to a Southern Song source, the authority to hear crimes punishable by heavy stick was bestowed not only to capital officers, but also to all other first-tier town supervisors, *QYTF*, j. 73, p. 745.

⁵⁰*LBTF*, in *Yongle dadian*, j. 14622, pp. 1b–3a, 24a.

⁵¹See Section 3 for a detailed discussion.

⁵²Those positioned at border towns (and border stockades), like the first tier town officials, could hear crimes punishable by the heavy stick. See *QYTF*, j. 73, p. 745.

⁵³Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, “Sōdai shūken seido no yurai to sono tokushoku: Toku ni gazen no hensen ni tsuite” 宋代州県制度の由来とその特色 特に衙前の変遷について, *Shirin* 36.2 (1953): 101–27; Sudō Yoshiyuki 周藤吉之, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū* 宋代經濟史研究 (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1962), pp. 577, 623–45, 657–704.

⁵⁴“Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 7, j. 48, p. 4371; *CB*, j. 227, p. 5521; j. 263, p. 6418.

Tier	Title	Demarcated Boundaries	Local Public Goods	Taxation	Centrally Appointed Official	Directly Accountable to Prefect	#
1	Town supervisor with special duties 監鎮兼煙火公事	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~200
2	Town supervisor (監鎮), Task supervisor (監當)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~350
3	Garrison commander (鎮將), etc.	✓	✓ (Fire; Security)	~ (Tax farming)	~ (Quasi-official)	~ (Quasi-official)	~1300

(Total: ~1,900)

Table 1: The Three Tiers of towns in Song China

premise that the three tiers of towns, each with varying degrees of authority and direct control from above, served as state outposts responsible for taxation and public security. By this definition, there were 3,200 county-level units, or approximately 1,300 counties and 1,900 towns, in late eleventh-century China. This total significantly exceeds the historical average of 1,250 county-level units for unified Chinese dynasties spanning two millennia.

However, if we adopt a more stringent definition that requires a county-level unit to be staffed by at least one centrally-appointed career official directly accountable to the prefect, then only towns of the upper two tiers should be considered. There were approximately 560 towns meeting the definition. Accordingly, the total number of basic territorial administration units during Song China’s height would be approximately 1,860, which is still 50% higher than 1,250.

Our estimate of 560 first and second-tier towns is based on the fact that third-tier towns, which had no court-appointed officials and practiced tax farming, had no court-stipulated commercial tax quotas. The *Yuanfeng Treatise of the Nine Regions* listed a snapshot of the towns in existence in 1085, the closing year of Shenzong’s reign;⁵⁵ the *State Compendium of the Song* (*Song huiyao*) recorded exhaustive information on the state-stipulated tax quota of every commercial tax station in 1077.⁵⁶ By matching the names of towns and tax stations in every prefecture in these records, we derive the estimate that 556–569 towns recorded in the *Yuanfeng Treatise* were of the upper two tiers; we round this off to 560.^{57,58}

⁵⁵Wang Cun, *Yuanfeng jiuwu zhi*.

⁵⁶“Shihuo,” in *SHY*, v. 11, j. 15-17, pp. 6293–6349.

⁵⁷We derive the lower-bound estimate of 556 by matching names in the 1077 and 1085 texts. A number of towns that collected commercial taxes in 1077 were not found in the 1085 record. This might be due to several reasons: the town was either downgraded or upgraded between 1077 and 1085, recorded under a different name, or unintentionally omitted. We obtain the upper-bound estimate of 569 by including the towns that taxed more than 1,000 strings of cash in 1077 but were neither recorded nor upgraded to *xian* in 1085, assuming they were unlikely to be downgraded over such a short period. The 1085 town data of two counties of *Mi zhou* prefecture and the entirety of *Qi zhou* prefecture were missing. To recover them, we utilize *Jin shi* 金史, ed. Tuo Tuo et al., 135 *juan* in 8 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), j. 25, pp. 610–12.

⁵⁸We derive the first-tier town estimate of 200 on the assumption that all towns with tax quotas above 1000 or 1500 strings were first-tier. This assumption is based on our knowledge that known first-tier towns had

3 Functions of the Administrative Town

The towns played a broader role in territorial administration than has been previously understood in the literature. In the following, we focus on towns of the upper two tiers and demonstrate that the centrally-appointed officials of these approximately 560 towns did more than just collect taxes. As territorial administrators, they enforced state laws, provided public goods to the local populations, handled official documents, and communicated directly with chief administrators of other jurisdictions.

Social Control and Extraction. In the Song period, households were classified as urban or rural based on their place of residence. Not only residents of prefecture and county seats, but also those living in towns, were considered part of urban households, or *fang-guo hu* (坊郭戶).⁵⁹ Administratively, these households were treated differently from their rural counterparts, or *xiang-cun hu* (鄉村戶). They were taxed on their real estate rather than agricultural lands. They were largely exempt from corvée.⁶⁰ Furthermore, they shouldered a disproportionate share of the financial burdens imposed by the state's monopolies on liquor, salt, and tea, which were managed from the urban administrative network.

The towns, being an integral part of this network, played an indispensable role in locally managing the monopolies. They facilitated the production and sale of monopoly goods and combated smuggling.⁶¹ For the liquor monopoly, town officials, like officials in the county seats, were responsible for operating government-owned wineries and preventing smuggled liquor from entering the restricted zone, which was defined as the area within ten *li* from the boundaries of the town or county seat.⁶² In the case of salt and tea monopolies, like the prefecture and county seats, the towns served as distribution centers for these goods. The performance of their

higher tax quotas. For instance, the towns of Daning (Nanxiong *zhou*), Jiu Sungeng (Qi *zhou*), Ganpu (Xiu *zhou*), and Deping (De *zhou*) had first-tier officials around the 1070s, and their tax quotas were 992, 1966, 1819, and 1260 strings respectively. There were approximately 160 towns with quotas above 1500 strings and about 240 towns with quotas above 1000 strings. We use the middle value of these ranges, 200, as our estimate for the number of first-tier towns. For the four towns, see *Yongle dadian*, j. 665, p. 10b, Kyoto University, <http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/toho/html/C0120001.html>, accessed 17 Sep 2022; *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, ed. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 et al., 8345 *juan* in 360 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe and Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006) [hereafter *QSW*], v. 110, j. 2388, p. 200; Xu Fupei 許傅霈 et al., *Haining zhou zhi gao* 海寧州志稿, 41 *juan* plus 2 *juan*, in vol. 22 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng Zhejiang fuxian zhi ji* 中國地方志集成·浙江府縣志輯 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2000), j. 18, p. 27a; Su Shi 蘇軾, *Su Shi wenji* 蘇軾文集, ed. Kong Fanli 孔凡禮, 73 *juan* in 6 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), v. 3, j. 29, pp. 827–28, respectively.

⁵⁹“Bing” 兵, in *SHY*, v. 15, j. 24, p. 9121; *QYTF*, j. 48, p. 667. See also Wang Zengyu 王曾瑜, *Songchao jieji jiegou* 宋朝階級結構 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), p. 418.

⁶⁰For urban taxes and other burdens, see Umehara Kaoru 梅原郁, “Sōdai toshi no zeifu” 宋代都市の税賦, *Tōyōshi kenkyū* 東洋史研究 28.4 (1970): 306–38; Wang, *Songchao jieji jiegou*, pp. 414–35; Peter Golas, “The Sung Fiscal Administration,” in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, bk. 2, pp. 175–76.

⁶¹Golas, “The Sung Fiscal Administration,” p. 188.

⁶²*QYTF*, j. 28, p. 395.

officials was evaluated based on the volume of salt or tea sold in their jurisdictions.⁶³

Fire Regulation. One of the foremost responsibilities of the town was fire prevention and control. An imperial ordinance (令)⁶⁴ on urban fire regulations explicitly stipulated that town officials, like those in the prefectures and counties, were responsible for organizing the population and maintaining fire protection equipment for the public.

In prefecture seats, county seats, towns, and stockades, every ten households are to be organized into one guard (*jia*), headed by one family as chief. A card recording every household should be signed by the families, stamped by the government, and preserved by the chief. When a fire takes place, the chief should lead the other nine representatives in the same guard to fight the fire. After the fire is put out, the chief does a roll call according to the card in front of the official. Use official funds to purchase appropriate quantities of fire extinguishers. The officials should maintain the equipment, and repair or place them when they are damaged or lost.⁶⁵

An imperial edict (敕) further specified the punishments for officials in prefectures, counties, towns alike, should they fail in their responsibilities to fight a fire and protect property:

When a fire breaks out in the prefecture seat or in a straw market next to the prefecture seat, the director-general [*du-jian*] should put out the fire immediately, and the vice prefect should monitor the process. Failure to do so would leave them both punishable with eighty strokes by the heavy stick. Even though they had done so, they would still be punishable with sixty strokes by the heavy stick if more than 200 public and private houses were destroyed [...]. In the event of a fire in the county seat, town, or stockade, what applies to the director-general above applies to the vice magistrate, sheriff, and town or stockade official.⁶⁶

Law Enforcement. Officials of first-tier towns held considerable judicial authority, enabling them to punish crimes within their jurisdiction. Take, for instance, a case in the 1100s when Xie Fu, a town administrator of Xin Sungeng in Qi *zhou* prefecture, successfully apprehended a local strongman and sent him to the court of the police inspector of the prefecture.⁶⁷ Similarly, in the

⁶³ *CB*, j. 280, pp. 6869–70; “Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 8, j. 59, p. 4651; “Shihuo,” in *SHY*, v. 11, j. 32, p. 6700.

⁶⁴ For the different types of Song laws, see Brian McKnight, “From statute to precedent: An Introduction to Sung law and Its Transformation,” in *Law and the State in Traditional East Asia: Six Studies on the Sources of East Asian Law*, ed. Brian McKnight (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), pp. 111–31.

⁶⁵ *QYTF*, j. 80, p. 913.

⁶⁶ *QYTF*, j. 80, pp. 913–14.

⁶⁷ *QSW*, v. 190, j. 4190, pp. 214–15.

late 12th century, the town administrator of Wuqing in Hu *zhou* prefecture used his authority to investigate and resolve community disputes related to the illegal retention of individuals.⁶⁸

The legal authority of first-tier town supervisors is highlighted by their title “fire regulating and legal cases.” A case in 1114 saw the fiscal commissioner of Liangzhe circuit suggesting that the town administrator of Meixi in Hu *zhou* prefecture be given this title to address the high crime rate in the town.⁶⁹ In 1082, the same title was conferred to the administrator of the newly established Xiangshan town in Guang *zhou* prefecture, so local residents could seek litigation without traveling far.⁷⁰ An 1178 edict further confirmed the judicial responsibility of the position, stressing that understanding the legal codes was a prerequisite for titular military officers to be appointed to it.⁷¹ This suggests that town administrators, including those appointed from the lower echelons of the Song civil service system, such as the minor military servitors and the executory class, were entrusted with the responsibility of making legal decisions as part of their daily duties.

Officials in the second-tier towns possessed more limited legal authority, yet they were still empowered to preside over minor legal cases. Additionally, they were responsible for carrying out regular legal and regulatory interventions to ensure the enforcement of state laws and regulations within their jurisdictions. For instance, an official recommendation from the Ministry of Justice in 1200 proposed the circulation of woodblocks containing edicts (*chi*), ordinances (*ling*), regulations (*ge*), and specifications (*shi*) compiled by the court to all counties and towns twice a year. This measure aimed to facilitate the resolution of disputes, as officials in the county and town were in closest proximity to the people.⁷²

The recommendation is substantiated by a case recorded in *The Enlightened Judgements* (*Qingming ji* 清明集). In the town of Ruikou of Xin *zhou* prefecture during Southern Song, a boat race led to a deadly altercation with thirteen casualties.⁷³ Song laws had prohibited some types of boat racing due to gambling concerns, and violators could face up to one year of penal servitude.⁷⁴ The town administrator, a minor military servitor, failed to prevent the illegal boat race and did not intervene when the dispute turned violent. Consequently, he was transferred to a minor position in the prefecture, highlighting that law enforcement as well as the management of civil affairs were part of the town administrator’s job scope.

⁶⁸ *QSW*, v. 286, j. 6503, p. 235.

⁶⁹ “Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 7, j. 48, p. 4372.

⁷⁰ *CB*, j. 331, p. 7970.

⁷¹ “Zhiguan,” *SHY*, v. 7, j. 48, p. 4370; *QSW*, v. 232, j. 5180, p. 351. For the role of titular military officers in the Song officialdom, see Charles Hartman, “Sung Government and Politics,” in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, bk. 2, pp. 49–54.

⁷² “Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 6, j. 15, p. 3422.

⁷³ For a translation and detailed study of the text, see Brian McKnight and Cai Jiuxuan 蔡久軒, “Riot at a Song Dynasty Boat Race: A Settlement of Legal Cases from the ‘Minggong shupan qingming ji,’ ” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 25 (1995): 229–40.

⁷⁴ *YTF*, j. 80, p. 924.

Famine Relief and Drug Distribution. As administrative nodes, towns served as relief distribution hubs during times of natural disasters, providing aid to nearby communities that faced challenges in accessing support from the prefecture and county seats. For instance, in 1048, Fu Bi (1004–1083), serving as the pacification commissioner of Jingdong Circuit, successfully coordinated efforts among prefecture, county, and town officials as well as canton elderlies to provide lodging and relief for hundreds of thousands of refugees from the flood-stricken Hebei Circuit.⁷⁵ In another example, sometime during the 1060s and 1070s, Wei Shao, the administrator of Heliu town in Xu *zhou* prefecture, was commended for selling grains from the state granary at a low price to local residents during a severe food shortage.⁷⁶

Towns also performed the vital function of facilitating the distribution of state-sponsored medication to the general population and specific groups, including war veterans. In 1077, Emperor Shenzong issued a decree to address the welfare of sick veterans returning from war. According to this decree, prefecture director-generals, county registrars, and town administrators were obliged to ensure an adequate supply of food and medicine for the veterans within their respective jurisdictions.⁷⁷

In 1113, Emperor Huizong approved a proposal that granted administrators in towns and stockades across the empire the authority to supply licensed processed drugs to residents and travelers. These areas, located remotely from the prefecture and county seats, often experienced shortages in medical supplies.⁷⁸ Early Southern Song directives further emphasized the responsibility of officials in prefectures, counties, towns, and stockades to ensure an adequate supply of medicine to meet the local demand.⁷⁹ This underscores the important role played by towns in fulfilling the medical needs of the urban population.

Weights and Measures. Historically, weights and measures varied considerably both across and within markets, leading to inconvenience and allegations of cheating. An illustrative story from *Yi-jian zhi* recounts a merchant in a non-administrative market town in Qu *zhou* prefecture who profited by selling under-measured goods to customers. Finally, he and his family faced retribution, believed to be divine punishment, for his dishonest practices.⁸⁰

To promote market order and facilitate market exchange, it is in the interest of society to establish accurate, uniform standards. The Song state recognized this and sought to standardize volume measurement by devising a standard one *shi* container and distributing copies to

⁷⁵Dong Wei 董燭, *Jiuhuang huomin shu* 救荒活民書, 3 *juan* plus 1 suppl., in vol. 662 of *Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983–87), j. 3, pp. 18b–20b.

⁷⁶*QSW*, v. 124, j. 2671, p. 18.

⁷⁷*CB*, j. 282, p. 6901.

⁷⁸“Zhiguan,” *SHY*, v. 6, j. 27, p. 3721.

⁷⁹“Zhiguan,” in *SHY*, v. 7, j. 36, p. 3948; “Shihuo,” in *SHY*, v. 12, j. 59, pp. 7395–96.

⁸⁰“Zhujiatan” 祝家潭, in Hong Mai 洪邁, *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志, ed. He Zhuo 何卓, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), v. 4, *zhi bu* 志補, j. 7, pp. 1610–11.

officials in prefectures, counties, and towns.⁸¹ This, like the previous examples, underscores the importance of towns as nodes in the administrative network.

Official Communications. We conclude this section with an incident recounted by Su Shi.

In 1091, while serving as the prefect of Ying *zhou* prefecture, Su Shi lodged a complaint with the imperial court, highlighting the actions of various officials in the neighboring circuit of West Huainan that were causing delays in rice shipments to his prefecture. Su Shi mentioned reaching out to the judicial and fiscal commissioners of Huainan circuit, Guang *zhou* prefecture, Gushi county, and Zhugao town for assistance in expediting grain shipments. Among them, only the officials of Zhugao town responded, stating that they were adhering to a directive from the circuit judicial commissioners prohibiting the transportation of more than one *shi* of rice across the Huai River.⁸²

Su Shi's account brings two pertinent points to the fore. Firstly, as the preceding examples have repeatedly illustrated, the town held the responsibility of implementing policies, regulations, and directives from higher authorities. Secondly, the written correspondence between Su Shi and the administrator of Zhugao town serves as evidence that the town functioned as a formal node within the bureaucratic communication network. As part of their daily routine, town administrators engaged in written communication with other bureaucrats in different locations. This included receiving instructions, addressing complaints and requests, providing information, and fulfilling their role as court-appointed administrators and custodians of their respective territorial jurisdictions.

4 Two Case Studies: Ganshui and Shijing

We will now delve into two case studies that provide a detailed examination of towns as territorial administrative units. Our exploration will primarily focus on the management of the irrigation system and town defense through the cases of Ganshui and Shijing, respectively.

Ganshui. The first case study focuses on Ganshui, which is the only town with an extant Song gazetteer. While many historical studies have studied Ganshui in the context of urban history,⁸³ our approach takes an administrative perspective centered on the town's irrigation system, utilizing town gazetteers compiled during the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

The irrigation system of Ganshui was uniquely shaped by its topography—a high terrain along the coast relative to the hinterland. In the Song era, local communities excavated an

⁸¹“Shihuo,” in *SHY*, v. 13, j. 69, p. 8052.

⁸²Su Shi, *Su Shi wenji*, v. 3, j. 33, pp. 946–47.

⁸³See, for example, Joseph P. McDermott and Shiba Yoshinobu, “Economic Change in China, 960–1279,” in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, bk. 2, pp. 424–25.

artificial Yong-an lake to serve as an irrigation reservoir. The lake was linked to the harbour town via a river channel on one end and to the lower inland waterways on the other. It not only provided drinking water to the local population and irrigation water for nearby farmlands, but also served as a conduit between the town and its hinterland.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the sustainability of this manmade water system faced constant threats from individuals attempting to divert water away from the lake. A significant instance occurred during the drought of 1249 when some residents erected a dam to hoard water for their own use, effectively obstructing the town's sole waterway to its hinterland and causing a dramatic decrease in the lake's water level. Responding to public outcry, a town official initiated the dismantling of the private dam.⁸⁵ This effort proved successful. According to the Song Ganshui gazetteer, the irrigation system consistently fulfilled its intended functions, providing a reliable water supply, preventing flood damage, and facilitating agriculture throughout the Song dynasty, thereby serving as a cornerstone of Ganshui's prosperity.

In the post-Song era, Ganshui lost its status as an administrative center. Like other towns throughout China, it was no longer governed by a centrally appointed official. A walled military battalion was established in Ganshui during the Ming era, but it did not perform civil administrative functions.⁸⁶ Concurrently, the Ming period saw a decline in the effectiveness of the irrigation system. The lake and river channel exhibited increased susceptibility to drying out, a vulnerability that was widely attributed as a major cause of Ganshui's economic decline.⁸⁷

Between the late 14th century and mid-16th century, the local population made at least seven requests to the state to refurbish the irrigation system—dredging the lake and river channels, bolstering the dam, and punishing individuals who built private dams upstream.⁸⁸ Each of these requests was approved by either the imperial court or provincial officials, but all ended with little being done after repeated delays and postponements.

One of these requests took place in 1445. The court approved the proposal to revamp the water conservation system. However, implementation did not commence until fourteen years later. Furthermore, the reconstruction was not completed. Despite the mobilization of over 20,000 laborers, the project was abruptly halted due to severe winter weather and was not resumed.⁸⁹

Thirteen years later, local village heads and elders initiated a request to restart the

⁸⁴Chang Tang 常棠, *Ganshui zhi* 澈水志 (1935 edition), 8 *juan*, in vol. 20 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng xiangzhen zhi zhuanji* 中國地方志集成·鄉鎮志專輯 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1992), j. 3, pp. 6a–7a; Dong Gu 董穀, *Xu Ganshui zhi* 續澈水志 (1936 edition), 9 *juan* in vol. 20 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng xiangzhen zhi zhuanji*, j. 1, pp. 3b–4a.

⁸⁵Chang Tang, *Ganshui zhi*, j. 3, p. 7a.

⁸⁶Charles O. Hucker, "Governmental Organization of the Ming Dynasty," *HJAS* 21 (1958): 60.

⁸⁷Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, j. 1, p. 4a; j. 8, pp. 39b–40a.

⁸⁸Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, j. 8, pp. 34a–39b; j. 9, pp. 61a–62b.

⁸⁹Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, j. 8, pp. 34b–37a.

previously abandoned project. However, no official maintenance work was carried out. Instead, the provincial government delegated the responsibility for maintaining the irrigation system to Haiyan county. Eventually, the task was handed over to a county subofficial. Lacking sufficient authority, the subofficial effectively shifted the onus of lake management and repair back onto local community leaders.⁹⁰

In the 1530s, Dong Yun, a notable Ganshui literati and the father of the Ming Ganshui gazetteer's compiler, attributed the persistent issues confronting the town's irrigation system to the self-serving actions of individuals who illegally diverted water from the irrigation system. He noted that the state's inability to restrain such actions was exacerbated by Ganshui's geographical remoteness from the prefectural and county seats.⁹¹ This observation suggests that Ganshui's loss of administrative status was one of the culprits behind its irrigation crisis.

Shijing. Our second case study looks at Shijing, a town of the Quan *zhou* prefecture in what is now Fujian province. Shijing was established as a town in 1130 to administer two local markets (*shi*) engaged in overseas trade. At the time, it was a first-tier town with an administrator vested with penal powers to uphold peace and order.⁹² Among its administrators was Zhu Song, the father of the esteemed philosopher Zhu Xi.⁹³ In 1156, the town supervisor constructed a fortress to shield the residents from pirate attacks.⁹⁴

During the Ming dynasty, like Ganshui, Shijing lost its formal administrative standing. Subsequently, the town was administered as a rural entity under the jurisdiction of Jinjiang county. In response to an increased piracy threat, the town was renamed Anping, a name that translates to "Peace and Tranquility." Because of its distance from the county seat, the county magistrate expediently relied on the town's local leaders to organize communal self-defense against the pirates.⁹⁵ In 1558, in the midst of a surge in piracy that was afflicting China's entire southeastern coastline, the prefect of Quanzhou *fu* tasked the magistrate of Jinjiang with the reconstruction of the Song fortress. However, mid-construction, the pirates struck, laying waste to the town. Following the wreckage, a local literati, Ke Shiqing, saw to the completion of the fortress.⁹⁶ From 1606 onward, a vice-prefect was assigned to oversee the town's maritime

⁹⁰Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, j. 8, pp. 36a–39a.

⁹¹Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, j. 9, pp. 61a–62b.

⁹²Anon., *Anhai zhi*, 9 *juan* in vol. 26 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng xiangzhen zhi zhuanji*, j. 2, p.11a.

⁹³He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠, *Min shu* 閩書 (Ming Chongzhen edition), 154 *juan* in vols. 204–207 of *Siku quanshu canmu congshu shibu* 四庫全書存目叢書·史部, v. 204, j. 33, p. 19a.

⁹⁴He Qiaoyuan, *Min shu*, j. 33, p. 23b.

⁹⁵Fu Xiaqi 傅夏器, *Chongke shuzu Jinquan xiansheng wenji* 重刻叔祖錦泉先生文集, 5 *juan* in vol. 21 of *Siku weishou shu jikan Wu* 四庫未收書輯刊·伍 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1998), j. 4, pp. 6a–7b.

⁹⁶Huaiyinbu 懷蔭布 et al., *Qianlong Quanzhou fu zhi* 乾隆泉州府志 (1882 edition), 76 *juan* in vols. 22–24 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng Fujian fujian zhi ji* 中國地方志集成·福建府縣志輯 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2000), v. 22, j. 11, pp. 16a–b.

defense, but his visits to the town were sporadic at best.⁹⁷

Historical accounts suggest that the construction of the first fortress in 1156 was a preemptive measure, initiated proactively to safeguard the town against piracy. In contrast, the reconstruction of the fortress post-1558 was a reactive step hastily implemented in anticipation of an impending pirate assault. While a comprehensive evaluation of this contrast requires further study, it is evident that the presence or lack thereof of administrative oversight played a crucial role in shaping these outcomes, as in the previous case study of Ganshui.

5 The Rise and Fall of the Administrative Town

The emergence of the town could be traced to the warlord period that preceded the establishment of the Song state. Specifically, it was rooted in the convergence of two significant historical developments: the flourishing of rural markets after the disintegration of the Tang market system, and the establishment of garrison towns in response to the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763).⁹⁸ The first development created an impetus for the Chinese state to extend its administrative network beyond the conventional precincts of prefectural and county seats, while the second furnished the mechanism for such an expansion.

The garrison town, the predecessor of the administrative town, emerged from the polycentric provincial system that dominated China for two centuries following the An Lushan Rebellion. During this era, provincial governors wielded extensive civil, military, personnel, and financial powers within their domains. To safeguard their positions against rival governors and central government incursions, they set up garrison towns at strategic locations and appointed loyal military subordinates as garrison commanders.⁹⁹

As outlined by Hino Kaizaburō and Sudō Yoshiyuki, garrison towns were strategically located at four types of sites: prefectural seats, county seats, militarily important locations, and economic centers, particularly market towns.¹⁰⁰ Over time, a symbiotic relationship developed between the markets and the garrisons. The markets and nearby residents were taxed to financially support the garrison troops, which, in turn, incentivized the troops to maintain

⁹⁷He Qiaoyuan, *Min shu*, j. 33, p. 24a.

⁹⁸Sogabe Shizuo 曾我部静雄, “Tō sō jidai no kusaichi” 唐宋時代の草市, *Shakai keizaishigaku* 社会経済史学 24.1 (1958): 31–40; Denis Twitchett, “The T’ang Market System,” *Asia Major*, new series 12.2 (1966): 203; McDermott and Shiba, “Economic Change in China,” p. 383.

⁹⁹Hino Kaizaburō 日野開三郎, “Tōdai hanchin no bakko to chinshō” 唐代藩鎮の跋扈と鎮將, *Tōyō gaku* 東洋学報 26-27 (1939–40): pp. 503–39, 1–62, 153–212, 311–50; Charles A. Peterson, “The Restoration Completed: Emperor Hsien-tsung and the Provinces,” in *Perspectives on the T’ang*, ed. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 172–73; Gungwu Wang, *The Structure of Power in North China During the Five Dynasties* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1963), p. 146.

¹⁰⁰Hino Kaizaburō, “Tōdai hanchin no bakko to chinshō;” Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū*, pp. 623–40.

peace and order in the market and protect their source of revenue.¹⁰¹

Gradually, the garrison town evolved from a strictly military establishment to encompassing a broad range of civil-administrative functions. As Hino noted, garrison commanders in the Five Dynasties developed civil-administrative capabilities not possessed by their late Tang predecessors.¹⁰² They assumed roles in policing, judicial proceedings, and tax collection, thereby redefining garrison towns into territorial administrative units. As a result, these towns found themselves contesting and competing for influence with the established county structure.

In their bid to recentralize power, the sovereigns of the late Tang and the Five Dynasties made repeated attempts to have garrison commanders report to court-appointed prefects instead of the autonomous provincial governors, and to rationalize the territorial administrative structure.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, these processes were only completed when the Song dynasty pacified China and ended the two centuries of warlordism. The ensuing demilitarization led to the disappearance of garrison towns that were located in the prefectural and county seats.¹⁰⁴ While demilitarization also affected garrisoned market towns, they were repurposed and retained as administrative units, thereby completing the transformation of garrison towns into towns.

Although towns ceased to exist as administrative entities only after the fall of the Southern Song in the late thirteenth century, their demise had already commenced after the Jurchens' capture of Northern China in 1127. During the Southern Song period, the number of towns in Southern China showed an overall decline when compared with the Northern Song period, even though the region was largely untouched by the Jurchen invasions. As Yu Yuezhu noted, the number of towns in Sichuan significantly decreased after 1127.¹⁰⁵ The number of towns in Southeast China also experienced stagnation, if not a reduction, despite the region's uninterrupted commercial expansion and an increase of rural markets from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century.¹⁰⁶

Several factors might have contributed to this development. One of them was the growing influence of local elites during the Southern Song. These elites increasingly took on responsibilities previously held by centrally-appointed officials, thereby reducing the state's reliance on bureaucratic structures for maintaining social control.¹⁰⁷

This bottom-up development was paralleled by a top-down transformation in the Song governance structure, particularly marked by the emergence of four superprovincial directorates-

¹⁰¹Hino Kaizaburō, “Tōdai hanchin no bakko to chinshō,” pp. 35–52.

¹⁰²Hino Kaizaburō, “Godai chinshō kō” 五代鎮將考, *Tōyō gakuhō* 25.2 (1938): 216–47.

¹⁰³Peterson, “The Restoration Completed;” Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), pp. 155–70.

¹⁰⁴Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū*, pp. 640–44.

¹⁰⁵Yu Yuezhu, “Guanyu Songdai jianzhi zhen de jige lishi dili wenti,” pp. 110–111.

¹⁰⁶For example, the number of towns in Hu *zhou* prefecture decreased from six in 1085 to five in the 1200s. See Tan Yao 談鑰, *Jiatai Wuxing zhi* 嘉泰吳興志 (1914 edition), 20 *juan* in vol. 5 of *Songyuan fangzhi congkan*, j. 10, pp. 1a–3a. For the increase in markets, see McDermott and Shiba, “Economic Change in China,” p. 422.

¹⁰⁷See, for instance, Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*; Hymes, “Sung Society and Social Change.”

general (*zongling suo* 總領所), a response to persistent military tensions with the Jurchens.¹⁰⁸ Wielding effective executive control over several circuits each, these directorate-generals anticipated a new administrative entity—the province—during the Yuan dynasty. Meanwhile, the prefecture saw its status progressively diminished during the Southern Song as it was relegated to a subordinate unit subservient to the circuit and the even larger directorate-general. Historical records indicate a marked decrease in the frequency of prefects and high-ranking field administrators memorializing the court for the establishment of new towns during the Southern Song era.¹⁰⁹ This decrease might have been driven by a loss of authority and diminished incentives among prefects to initiate the creation of new towns. It is also possible that this upward shift in decision-making power caused the Southern Song state to be more removed from local realities and become less agile in its capacity to establish new towns in response to the evolving needs and circumstances of its local communities.

The analysis above suggests that, while Skinner’s assertion that the Chinese state’s reach stagnated absolutely and contracted relatively to the population over two millennia of imperial rule needs to be qualified, his larger point regarding the challenges of imperial oversight hindering the expansion of unified Chinese dynasties’ administrative apparatus seems to hold true. The town of the Song dynasty owed its existence to the polycentric political system of the late Tang and Five Dynasties, which not only fostered fierce regional competition, but also encouraged institutional experimentation among the regional warlords.

On the other hand, the administrative demise of the town coincided with the long-term secular trend of territorial decision-making power shifting upward from the prefecture to the province. The trend originated during the Southern Song dynasty and persisted throughout the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The loss of prefectural autonomy, coupled with the rise of the local elites in the context of local administration, likely rendered the town overly burdensome and unnecessary to maintain. Consequently, the town lost its administrative identity, symbolizing a full circle in which the imperial administration first expanded beyond the traditional walled cities and ultimately reverted back to the confines of these cities.

6 Conclusion

During the first half of the Tang dynasty’s three-century rule, the state heavily regulated markets, restricting commerce to walled administrative centers. Driven by population growth

¹⁰⁸Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations,” pp. 397–98; Wang Shengduo 汪聖鐸, *Liangsong caizheng shi* 兩宋財政史, 2 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), v. 1, pp. 131–36.

¹⁰⁹From various sources, we identified 126 newly established towns, excluding those that were recategorized from counties, stockades, etc. Among these, 115 were established during the Northern Song period, while only 11 were established during the Southern Song period. The data sources of these 126 towns are available at <https://tinyurl.com/TownsCreated>.

and sociopolitical change, this rigid, state-controlled system began to crumble during the Tang-Song transition, as freer markets sprang up beyond the prefecture and county seats.¹¹⁰

Influenced by Skinner’s observation that the number of basic administrative units in China remained relatively stable over time, a substantial body of literature contends that the Chinese state could neither forestall these developments nor expand beyond the traditional confines of these walled precincts to keep pace with them. Consequently, from the Song dynasty onward, there was an overall retreat of state influence in day-to-day life.¹¹¹

This study paints a picture of a process that is more complex. During the Tang-Song transition, administrative towns emerged. They extended the reach of the state beyond the traditional walled administrative cities. That they did not endure beyond the Song dynasty does not negate the fact that, for five centuries after the An Lushan rebellion, the Chinese state adapted more effectively to rapid socioeconomic changes than earlier accounts have recognized.

Specifically, if we focus on civil administrative functions and disregard statutory status, about 560 of the 1,900 towns in the late eleventh century should be recognized as basic-level administrative units akin to counties. This implies that there were over 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China, significantly surpassing the historical average of 1,250 county-level units for unified Chinese dynasties.

It is worth noting that our estimate of 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China is a conservative one. For one, we focus primarily on the town, and we did not delve into other subprefectural units specific to the Song dynasty, in particular, the stockade. As some of the historical evidence that we presented suggests, a subset of stockades likely functioned as basic administrative units in frontier regions.¹¹² A more comprehensive investigation encompassing these and other subprefectural units would likely increase the estimated number of the Song dynasty’s basic administrative units further.

Recent studies suggest that Ming-Qing China’s territorial administration was more expansive than previously considered, primarily because county-level staff such as vice magistrates and patrolling inspectors were often deployed beyond county seats for public order maintenance.¹¹³ Applying this criterion—the presence of an official responsible for public

¹¹⁰Katō Shigeshi 加藤繁, “Tō sō jidai no kusaichi oyobi sono hatten” 唐宋時代の草市及び其の発展, in *Ichimura Hakase koki kinen Tōyō-shi ronsō* 市村博士古稀記念東洋史論叢 (Tokyo: Fuzambō), pp. 287–334; Sogabe Shizuo, “Tō sō jidai no kusaichi;” Twitchett, “The T’ang Market System;” Denis Twitchett, “Merchant, Trade, and Government in Late Tang,” *Asia Major*, new series 14.1 (1968): 63–95; McDermott and Shiba, “Economic Change in China,” pp. 379–85.

¹¹¹Skinner, “Introduction,” pp. 23–26; Smith, “State Power and Economic Activism during the New Policies, 1068–1085: The Tea and Horse Trade and the ‘Green Sprouts’ Loan Policy,” in *Ordering the World*, pp. 76–77; Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 20–26.

¹¹²See Zhao Sheng, *Chaoye leiyaoyao*, p.46. For other units such as castles, see Chang Woei Ong, “The Limits of ‘Civilianization’: The New Policies and Shaanxi’s Territorial Administration in the Late Northern Song,” *T’oung Pao* 106 (2020): 171–210.

¹¹³See, for instance, Fu Linxiang 傅林祥, “Qingdai de ci xianji zhengquan yu xiaqu” 清代的次縣級政權與轄區, in *Dongbeiyu lishi dili yanjiu* 東北亞歷史地理研究, ed. Sun Jinji 孫進己 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji

order—would require a more significant upward revision in the estimated number of Song dynasty’s basic-level administrative units than in the Ming-Qing era. The 1,300 lowest-tier towns overseen by garrison commanders would meet this standard. Furthermore, we would need to include patrolling inspectors and county sheriffs who were positioned outside traditional administrative nodes by the Song state, especially during the Southern Song period.¹¹⁴ Such revisions would invariably yield a higher total.

While we build on the observations made by historians who have noted that the Song dynasty might have diverged from Skinner’s portrayal of a long-term trend of state decline, our goal is not to outright reject Skinner’s argument but rather to propose a reevaluation. Furthermore, by proposing that administrative towns be regarded as *de facto* county-level administrative units, we seek to improve—rather than repudiate—Skinner’s use of the number of county-level units as a proxy for gauging state penetration at the local level. Proxies, by their very nature, are incomplete representations. Nevertheless, when devoid of systematic biases, they can serve as useful approximations that capture the essence of a complex variable.

Our study demonstrates that neglecting the distinctions between *zhen* in the Song and Ming-Qing dynasties introduces a systematic bias, leading to an underestimation of the direct state presence at the grassroots level during the Song dynasty. While it is true that the Ming-Qing state may not have extended beyond the walled precincts of the prefecture and county seats, it would be misleading to extrapolate this limitation back to the Song dynasty. Contrary to Skinner’s argument, the Song state maintained a direct presence beyond these traditional administrative centers for a significant period. This begs the question: what factors might explain these discrepancies?

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that direct rule is not necessarily superior to a system that heavily relied on local elites to address local collective problems. Therefore, we must also ask: what were the implications of the differences in the mode of government between Song and Ming-Qing, particularly concerning ordinary people? We look forward to future scholarly research providing more specific answers to these questions.

chubanshe, 1994), pp. 59–68; Hu Heng 胡恆, *Huangquan bu xiaxian? Qingdai xianxia zhengqu yu jiceng shehui zhili* 皇權不下縣? 清代縣轄政區與基層社會治理 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015).

¹¹⁴Brian E. McKnight, *Law and Order in Sung China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 198–218.