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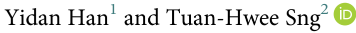
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Extending The Reach of State: The Administrative Town in Song China



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Abstract
This study revisits the long-standing consensus that the number and nature of basic-level administrative units in imperial China remained static over two millennia. It argues that this view underestimates the size and sophistication of field administration during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). During this period, towns (*zhen*) emerged as administrative centers, undertaking roles akin to the predominantly rural counties but within urban settings. Through a systematic analysis of the administrative functions of towns, this article reveals that approximately 30 percent of the 1,891 towns documented in 1085 were staffed by imperial officials and played a crucial role in delivering urban public goods such as fire prevention and law enforcement. In doing so, they supported the Song state's extraordinary reliance on commercial taxation. These findings prompt a reassessment of the prevailing view in Chinese urban history that a disconnect between administration and commerce began during the Tang-Song transition.

Keywords: administrative town; reach of state; fiscal history; urban public goods; Song China

Historians have long recognized that China's centralized bureaucratic state emerged both earlier and on a larger scale than comparable systems elsewhere.[1] Some of the core institutions of this system, established even before the first imperial dynasty, the Qin, persisted throughout the imperial period. One such institution was the division of China proper into thousands of contiguous counties (*xian* 縣), each administered by one or more centrally appointed officials responsible for fiscal, judicial, and security duties.[2]

[1]Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 17–20; R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 73–79, 105–11; Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–4.

[2]H. G. Creel, "The Beginnings of Bureaucracy in China: The Origin of the *Hsien*," *Journal of Asian Studies* 23.2 (1964), 155–84.

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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:[3]

> 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, 1,230 in Sung, 1,115 in Yüan, 1,385 in Ming, and 1,360 in Ch'ing.

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 to the end of the imperial era, a steady reduction in basic-level administrative central functions from one era to the next."[4]

Despite widespread historical objections to the notion of an immutable China, Skinner's proposition that an invisible, low ceiling persistently limited the number of county-level units has, notably, 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.[5] 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.[6] Harriet Zurndorfer, in a recently published essay, also posits that the proliferation of market towns from the Song onward led to a disconnect between administration and commerce.[7]

However, the argument is not without its critics. Conrad Schirokauer and Robert Hymes argue that the lack of state expansion was not solely due to technological limitations but also resulted from negotiations and compromises between the Chinese state and its elites.[8] Ruth Mostern critiques Skinner for overlooking dynamic changes in the spatial structure of prefectures, which were situated above the counties.[9] Focusing on

[3] G. W. Skinner, "Introduction: Urban Development in Imperial China," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, edited by G. W. Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 19.

[4] Skinner, "Introduction," 19.

[5] Shiba Yoshinobu 斯波義信, "Sōdai no toshika o kangaeru" 宋代の都市化を考える, *Tōhōgaku* 東方學 102 (2001), 1–19.

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

[7] Harriet Zurndorfer, "Cities and the Urban Economy," in *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, edited by Debin Ma and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1:522–23.

[8] Conrad Schirokauer and Robert Hymes, "Introduction," in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, edited by Robert Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.

[9] Ruth 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), 31–34.

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the Southern Song, Sukhee Lee points out that Skinner fails to consider 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.[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. 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 number of county-level units during at least one major dynasty, the Northern Song (960–1127), far exceeds Skinner's proposed range of 1,180–1,385 units.[11] By our estimate, there were more than 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China, which implies a broader reach of the Song state and greater variability in the number of basic-level administrative units in imperial China than Skinner portrayed.

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 (1636–1912) 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), walled settlements (*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 public services to the residents, and (4) reported directly to the prefecture (*zhou* 州). This subset of jurisdictions, like the *xian*, executed basic-level administrative central functions under the direct supervision of the prefecture. If the objective is to measure the state's physical presence at the local level, then these alternative territorial administration units need to be brought into the discourse.

In this article, we focus on the *zhen*, which administered urban households and could be found in almost every corner of Song China.[13] We demonstrate that out of the 1,891 *zhen* documented predominantly in the Song official geographical treatise *Yuanfeng jiuyu zhi* 元豐九域志 (*The Yuanfeng Treatise of the Nine Regions*, hereafter the *Yuanfeng Treatise*),[14] compiled in 1085 to provide a geographic account of the empire at the end of Emperor Shenzong's reign, about 30 percent fulfilled the four abovementioned criteria of

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

[11]We 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), an approach warranted by the organic institutional continuity between the two.

[12]Skinner, "Introduction," 19.

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

[14]The full list of 1,891 *zhen* is available at https://tinyurl.com/TownsAll. Missing data for Qizhou 齊州 and Mizhou 密州 in the *Yuanfeng Treatise* were recovered from *Jin shi* 金史, edited by Tuo Tuo 脱脱 et al., 135 *juan* in 8 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 2:25.611–12; and *Song shi* 宋史, edited by Tuo Tuo et al., 496 *juan* in 40 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 7:85.2108.

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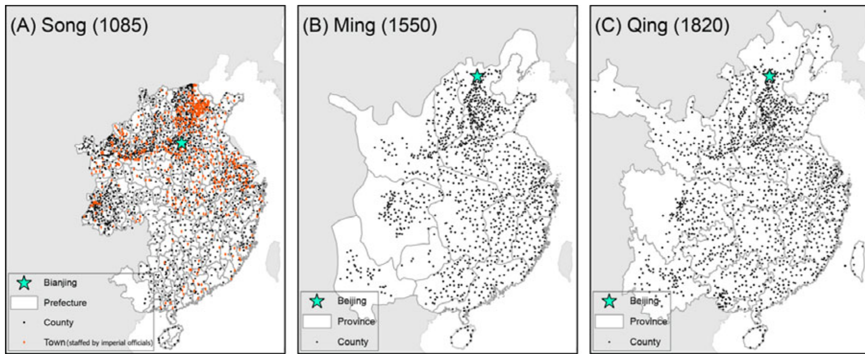

Figure 1. County-level units and administrative towns staffed by imperial officials in the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Administrative towns staffed by quasi-officials are not included in Panel A. Base map source: CHGIS 2016; administrative towns based on the *Yuanfeng Treatise*, *Jin shi*, *Song shi*, and *Song huiyao* (see note 15).

having demarcated boundaries and registered households, being staffed by appointed imperial officials, collecting taxes and providing public services, and reporting directly to the prefecture. This subset of *zhen* is represented as red dots in Figure 1.[15] Our estimate of more than 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China is derived by adding these approximately 560 *zhen* to the 1,135 *xian* and 176 other *xian*-level units in the mid-1080s.[16]

More important than revising upward the number of basic-level administrative units in Song China, this finding underscores the sophistication of the Song territorial administration. Studies of urban management in Ming–Qing China have revealed that an overwhelming majority—more than 95 percent—of urban settlements, including market towns, lacked a permanent bureaucratic presence.[17] Consequently, the Ming–Qing counties were predominantly rural in outlook, providing urban services mainly to residents of the county seat, if such services were provided at all.[18] Some studies have argued 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.[19] However, this distinction does not apply to Song China, which was in fact ahead of its time in recognizing and addressing the distinct characteristics—and therefore the administrative needs—of rural and urban populations.

[15]Details on this subset of *zhen* are available at https://tinyurl.com/TownsImperial. The method for identifying these *zhen*, which were staffed by appointed imperial officials, as opposed to quasi-officials, is described below in the section "Three Tiers of Administrative Towns."

[16]The number of counties and county-level units are based on Wang Cun 王存, *Yuanfeng jiuyu zhi*, edited by Wang Wenchu 王文楚 and Wei Songshan 魏嵩山, 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), 108–12.

[17]Madeleine Zelin, "Economic Freedom in Late Imperial China," in *Realms of Freedom in Modern China*, edited by William C. Kirby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 57–83.

[18]Si-yen Fei, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 15–16.

[19]Gilbert Rozman, *Urban Networks in Ch'ing China and Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 98.

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The differing approaches to territorial administration between the Song and the Ming–Qing states are reflected in the subtle shift in the meaning of the term *zhen*. In the context of Ming–Qing China, *zhen* was largely synonymous with the term *shi* 市 or the compound term *shi-zhen* 市鎮, describing market towns that typically lacked formal bureaucratic oversight. As Faure's study on Foshan illustrates, the Ming–Qing *zhen* was "commercially a town, but politically a *xiang*" (rural canton; 鄉).[20] In contrast, in Song China the two terms had distinct connotations: a *zhen* was a state-administered town, with its establishment and abolishment recorded in the *Song State Compendium* (*Song huiyao* 宋會要) under the category "Administrative Geography" (*fangyu* 方域); while a *shi* indicated a market town without direct state involvement, typically smaller in scale. The distinction underscores that the Chinese experience in field administration is more intricate and varied than snapshots from either 1500 or 1800 might suggest.

Tellingly, it is not uncommon for contemporary researchers to overlook this subtlety and assume that all market towns had always lacked direct state presence.[21] Among those who recognize the administrative role of the Song *zhen*, most have not delved deeper, focusing instead on examining it within the framework of urban history, especially on its roles as a market and an urban settlement.[22] Important exceptions include Kawakatsu Mamoru, who demonstrates that the *zhen* carried administrative functions during the Song–Yuan period, and Maemura Yoshiyuki, who investigates Song *zhen* administrators with the commission (*chaiqian* 差遣) of "routine local administrative affairs" (*yanhuo gongshi* 煙火公事).[23]

To the best of our knowledge, there has yet to be a systematic investigation of sub-prefectural administration in Song China in the English literature;[24] to date, the most comprehensive work on Song territorial administration is Mostern's in-depth study of the

[20]David Faure, "What Made Foshan a Town?: The Evolution of Rural–Urban Identities in Ming–Qing China," *Late Imperial China* 11.2 (1990), 24.

[21]See, for instance, Rozman, *Urban Networks*, 31; Frederick W. Mote, "The Transformation of Nanking, 1350–1400," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, 107; Zurndorfer, "Cities and the Urban Economy," 522–23. A Chinese magazine, recognized for its well-researched articles that blend academic insights with accessible narratives, recently noted that towns did not become administrative units until the early twentieth century. "Zhen: cong junshi jigou dao shijing fanhua di" 鎮:從軍事機構到市井繁華地, *Zhonghua Yichan* 中華遺產 2024.10, 146–47.

[22]See Umehara Kaoru 梅原郁, "Sōdai chihō shōtoshi no ichimen: 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), 475–91; Shiba Yoshinobu, *Sōdai shōgyō shi kenkyū*宋代商業史研究 (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1968), 315, 337–76; Fu Zongwen 傅宗文, *Songdai caoshizhen yanjiu* 宋代草市鎮研究 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1989), passim; Richard von Glahn, "Towns and Temples: Urban Growth and Decline in the Yangzi Delta, 1100–1400," in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, edited by Paul J. Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 176–211.

[23]Kawakatsu Mamoru 川勝守, "Chūgoku chihō gyōsei ni okeru ken to chin" 中国地方行政における県と鎮, *Kyūshū daigaku Tōyōshi ronshū* 九州大学東洋史論集 15 (1986), 182; Maemura Yoshiyuki 前村佳幸, "Sōdai no chin chūzaikan" 宋代の鎮駐在官, *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 107.4 (1998), 515–42. For the meaning of *yanhuo*, see Liao Yin 廖寅, "Yanhuo gongshi zai songdai jiceng zhili zhong de zhuanxing," 煙火公事在宋代基層治理中的轉型, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 2 (2023): 207–8.

[24]Several surveys in the Chinese literature descriptively review Song China's sub-prefectural units, see 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 Yuezu 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.

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prefecture, the primary unit that the Song state used to spatially organize itself.[25] Hartwell notes that the prefecture was eclipsed by the emergence of large, regional-sized provinces post-Song.[26]

This article builds on these studies to examine the layer beneath the prefecture that directly administered the people. In doing so, it reassesses a prevailing view in urban history that identifies the Tang–Song Transition as a watershed when the disconnect between administrative and economic urban networks—so evident in late imperial China—first emerged. According to this view, economically significant cities or towns in the Tang dynasty often doubled as prefectural or county seats, and it was from the Song onward that a proliferation of private commercial centers led to a divergence between sites of administration and centers of commerce.[27] By demonstrating that economically important towns with tax quotas also functioned as basic-level administrative units in Song China, this study suggests that the extent to which urbanization and commercialization developed independently of state administration was more limited, and occurred later, than previously assumed.

The paper also engages with the scholarship on fiscal history in Song China. Paul Smith's insightful inquiry into the tea and horse trade in Song Sichuan demonstrates a degree of bureaucratic activism and commercial interventionism that exceeded later dynasties.[28] Recent research has shown that, unlike the Ming and Qing dynasties, which maintained comparatively lower taxation levels and derived approximately three-quarters of their revenue from land taxes, the Song state imposed heavy taxes, particularly on commerce and consumption, which accounted for over 60 percent of its revenue.[29] We complement this scholarship 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—not only the seats of prefectures and counties, but also *zhen* and other sub-prefectures—that was more extensive than observed in subsequent periods of imperial China. These nodes provided security, fire protection, dispute resolution, and other basic public goods to their residents in return for the taxes they paid, without which the Song high tax regime would not have been sustainable.

The rise of the administrative town

The emergence of the Song town could be traced to the late Tang and Five Dynasties that preceded the establishment of the Song state. Specifically, it was rooted in the convergence

[25] Mostern, *Dividing the Realm.*

[26] Robert Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42.2 (1982), 395.

[27] Denis Twitchett, "The T'ang Market System," *Asia Major*, new series 12.2 (1966), 202–4; Skinner, "Introduction," 23–26; Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 20–26; Toby Lincoln, *An Urban History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 82; Zurndorfer, "Cities and the Urban Economy," 522–23.

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

[29] William Guanglin Liu, "The Making of a Fiscal State in Song China, 960–1279," *Economic History Review* 68.1 (2015), 48–78; Richard von Glahn, "Modalities of the Fiscal State in Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese History* 4.1 (2020), 1–29; Kent 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.

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of two significant historical developments: the flourishing of rural markets outside the county and prefecture seats after the disintegration of the early Tang official market system, and the establishment of garrison towns (*waizhen*/*xunzhen* 外鎮/巡鎮) in response to the An Lushan 安祿山 Rebellion (755–763).[30] 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 political system that dominated China for two centuries following the An Lushan Rebellion. During this era, regional military governors wielded extensive civil, military, personnel, and financial powers within their domains. In a situation that bears some parallels to early modern Europe, where "war made the state, and the state made war,"[31] these warlords established garrison towns at strategic locations and appointed loyal military subordinates as garrison commanders to safeguard their positions against rival governors and central government incursions.[32]

Garrison towns were strategically located at four types of sites: prefectural seats, county seats, militarily important locations, and economic centers, particularly market towns.[33] 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 peace and order in the market and protect their source of revenue.[34]

By the Five Dynasties, garrison commanders had developed civil-administrative capabilities not possessed by their late Tang predecessors.[35] They assumed roles in policing, judicial proceedings, and tax collection, thereby redefining garrison towns into administrative units. This expansion of functions brought them into direct competition with counties, which represented the established civil-administrative system.

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 regional military governors, and to rationalize the territorial administrative structure.[36] 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 abolishment of garrison towns that

[30]Sogabe Shizuo 曾我部静雄, "Tō-Sō jidai no sōshi" 唐宋時代の草市, *Shakai keizai shigaku* 社会経済史学 24.1 (1958), 31–40; Denis Twitchett, "The T'ang Market System," 202–48; Joseph P. McDermott and Shiba Yoshinobu, "Economic Change in China, 960–1279," in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, bk. 2: *Sung China, 960–1279*, edited by John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.2:383; Hino Kaizaburō 日野開三郎, "Godai chinshō kō" 五代鎮將考, *Tōyō gakuhō* 學報 25.2 (1938), 216–47.

[31]Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, edited by Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 42.

[32]Hino Kaizaburō, "Tō dai hanchin no bakko to chinshō" 唐代藩鎮の跋扈と鎮將, *Tōyō gakuhō* 26–27 (1939–40), 503–39, 1–62, 153–212, 311–50.

[33]Sudō Yoshiyuki 周藤吉之, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū* 宋代經濟史研究 (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1962), 623–40.

[34]Hino Kaizaburō, "Tō dai hanchin no bakko to chinshō," 35–52.

[35]Hino Kaizaburō, "Godai chinshō kō," 216–47.

[36]Charles A. Peterson, "The Restoration Completed: Emperor Hsien-tsung and the Provinces," in *Perspectives on the T'ang*, edited by Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 181–83; Hino Kaizaburō, "Tō dai hanchin no bakko to chinshō," 311–29.

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were located in the prefectural and county seats,[37] while garrisoned market towns were repurposed and retained as civil administrative units, thereby completing the transformation of garrison towns into administrative towns.

Territorial administration of Song China

Song and Ming–Qing

In Ming–Qing China, territorial administration outside the capital followed a straightforward three-tier hierarchy. At the base was the county (*xian* 縣), widely regarded as the basic building block of the governing hierarchy, along with other county-level units.[38] Above the county level was the prefecture, which served as an intermediary administrative unit, while the province constituted the highest tier of this structure (Figure 2).

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,[39] 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, "the three hundred-some prefectures were the regime's stable and executive political face outside the court."[40] 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.

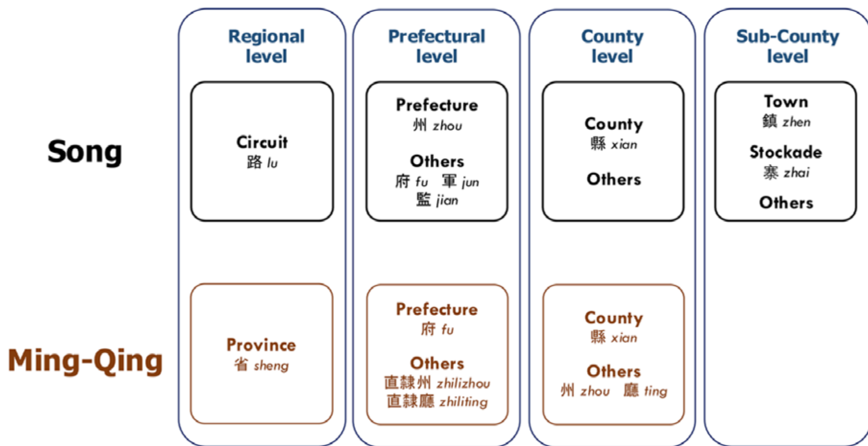

Figure 2. Structure of territorial administration in the Song and Ming–Qing dynasties.

[37]Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū*, 640–44.

[38]Zhou Zhenhe 周振鶴, *Zhongguo difang xingzheng zhidu shi* 中國地方行政制度史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2005), 81, 205.

[39]Winston W. Lo, "Circuits and Circuit Intendants in the Territorial Administration of Sung China," *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1974–1975), 39–107.

[40]Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, 38.

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These sub-county units constitute another distinctive feature of the Song administrative structure. Unlike in Ming–Qing China, when counties formed the basic building blocks of formal administration outside the capital city, the Song state established not only counties but also a variety of sub-county field entities performing fiscal, defense, mining, or other production functions.

In official records such as the *Yuanfeng Treatise*, 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.[41] The prefecture, rather than the county, exercised bureaucratic oversight over the sub-county officials. The prefect was responsible for conducting annual appraisals of all sub-prefectural officials,[42] while the vice prefect performed quarterly reviews.[43] Additionally, officials responsible for fiscal affairs within the prefecture's territory, including those from counties, towns, and other administrative units, were required to submit revenue data directly to the prefecture for verification.[44]

Among the various types of sub-county units, it is in the 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; these prefectural maps were in turn used to generate empire-wide maps.[45] In 1071, the Shenzong emperor appointed Zhao Yanruo 趙彥若 as chief director of a state project to produce "All-under-Heaven Maps of Prefectures [*zhou-fu-jun-jian*], and Counties and Towns [*xian-zhen*]" ("Tianxia zhou fu jun jian xian zhen tu" 天下州府軍監縣鎮圖), which Zhao delivered two years later.[46] 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 forming the larger prefecture, and, by extension, the empire.

In 1075, Zhao Yanruo was appointed again, this time to compile *The Maps of the Nine Regions* (*Jiuyu tu* 九域圖). When Zhao resigned, the task was taken over by Wang Cun, whose work culminated in the *Yuanfeng Treatise*. The *Yuanfeng Treatise* was a landmark work, documenting not only the historical evolution of territorial administration but also detailed information on sub-county units, including *zhen*.[47]

[41] Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, 46.

[42] E. A. Kracke, Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960–1067* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 88, 93; Wei Feng 魏峰, "Songdai yinzhi pishu shilun—yi xin faxian 'Xu Weili wenshu' weili" 宋代印紙批書試論——以新發現「徐謂禮文書」為例, *Wenshi* 文史 2013.4, 181–98.

[43] Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848), *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿, edited by Liu Lin 劉琳 et al., 16 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014) (hereafter *SHY*), vol. 16, "Fangyu" 方域, 19.45–46, 9674.

[44] Xie Shenfu 謝深甫 (twelfth century), *Qingyuan tiaofa shilei* 慶元條法事類, 80 *juan* (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2002) (hereafter *QYTF*), 36.539–41; *Song shi*, 12:167.3983. Maemura Yoshiyuki observes that, in fiscal matters, towns were subject to the supervision of the vice prefect in the same way as counties. Maemura, "Sōdai chihō zaisei kikō to kanchinkan," 宋代地方財政機構と監鎮官, *Nagoya daigaku Tōyōshi kenkyū hōkoku* 名古屋大学東洋史研究報告 25 (2001), 176–81.

[45] Aoyama Sadao 青山定雄, Tō-Sō *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 Kō bunkan), 527–29; Hilde De Weerdt, *Information, Territory, and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 113.

[46] Li Tao 李燾 (1115–1184), *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編, 520 *juan* in 20 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004) (hereafter *CB*), 9:220.5354–55; 10:247.6033.

[47] The project, which contained no maps and consisted only of textual notes, was renamed *The* (*Yuanfeng*) *Treatise of the Nine Regions*. For a detailed discussion of the compilation process, see Wang Wenchu and Wei

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Other imperial directives, too, occasionally hinted at the Song state's perception of towns as functionally equivalent to counties. For instance, a late tenth-century edict allowed prefectures to retain fiscal reserves equivalent to up to three years of their budgets, while towns and counties could retain reserves for up to two years, or one year if distant.[48] Another illustrative example appears in *Chaoye Leiyao* 朝野類要, a Southern Song publication that explains bureaucratic terminology and jargon. In the entry on the term *qinmin* 親民 ("close to the people"), the author Zhao Sheng noted that town and stockade supervisors were also considered *qinmin* officials.[49] Traditionally, *qinmin* referred to imperial officials responsible for direct interaction with the populace. By identifying *zhen* supervisors as *qinmin*, this source affirms their official capacity during the Song dynasty.

Three tiers of administrative towns

To be sure, not all towns possessed authority or responsibilities comparable to those of a county. Although there was no explicit tiered system for towns, they can be classified into three tiers based on the commissions of their appointed supervisors, which indicate varying degrees of power and responsibility.[50] The commissions were 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.[51]

Town administrators across all three tiers were responsible for collecting taxes and providing urban public goods.[52] 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 assigned their supervisors the commission of "routine local administrative affairs." 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 (*jiandang* 監當).[53]

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 of the administrative class (*jingchao guan* 京朝官). Like county magistrates with the same

Songshan, "Yuanfeng jiuyu zhi de chengshu jiqi jiazhi" 元豐九域志的成書及其價值, *Lishi dili* 歷史地理 2 (1982): 201–5.

[48]Ma Duanlin 馬端臨, *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考, 348 *juan* in 14 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 2:23.694.

[49]Zhao Sheng 趙升, *Chaoye leiyao* 朝野類要, edited by Wang Ruilai 王瑞來 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 46.

[50]In Song China, an official's commission reflected the duties he performed, while his rank was indicated by his titular grade (*guanjie* 官階). The relationship between commission and grade was complex but generally correlated. For a detailed discussion, see E. A. Kracke, Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China*, 77–80.

[51]On the varied socio-economic conditions of market towns and administrative towns, see Sudō Yoshiyuki, "Sōdai no gōson ni okeru shōtoshi no hatten toku ni ten shi ho o chūshin to shite" 宋代の郷村における小都市の発展—特に店·市·歩を中心として, *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 59.9–10 (1950), 25–50, 16–44; Liang Gengyao 梁庚堯, *Songdai shehui jingji shi lunji* 宋代社會經濟史論集 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 1997), 2:14–99.

[52]*SHY*, vol. 7, "Zhiguan" 職官, 48.92, 4371–72.

[53]*Libu tiaofa canben* 吏部條法殘本 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1981) (hereafter *LBTF*), in *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典, 14622.15a. In addition, military officers were appointed by the West Bureau (西院). Following the Yuanfeng Reform, the Bureau of Administrative Personnel and the West Bureau were replaced, respectively, by the Left and Right Subsections of the Minister of Personnel (吏部尚書左/右選).

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titular grade, these town supervisors were authorized to adjudicate crimes punishable by up to one hundred blows by the heavy stick.[54] The lower sub-tier, in contrast, comprised officials of lower grade drawn from the executory class (*xuanren* 選人) or from among the minor military servitors (*xiao shichen* 小使臣). 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).[55]

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) or by the Court of the Three Ranks (*sanban yuan* 三班院), held the commission of task supervisors.[56] In addition to tax collection, their responsibilities encompassed a range of tasks including maintaining compliance with fire regulations, enforcing the law, and implementing various state policies, such as preventing smuggling and disbursing famine relief. A key distinction between these officials and those in the first tier was their more limited punitive authority: they were only authorized to administer punishments of no more than 10 blows with the light rod.[57]

Unlike the first two tiers, towns in the third and final tier 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 legacy role inherited from the regional commandant system (*jiedu shi* 節度使) of the Late Tang and Five Dynasties. Contrary to their title, these Song garrison commanders were not military officers but rather powerful and wealthy local individuals appointed by the prefectural government to act as quasi-officials.[58] They were granted local tax-farming rights (*maipu* 買撲) and in return, were responsible for maintaining local public security (see Table 1).[59]

One could consider all towns in Song China as *de facto* county-level units, based on the 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 interpretation, there were 3,200 county-level units, or approximately 1,300 *xian* and *xian*-level units and 1,891 towns, in late eleventh-century China.

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-level administrative units during Song China's height would be approximately

[54]For the judicial power of a typical magistrate, see *CB*, 9:226.5503. For the similar power of town officials, see *SHY*, "Fangyu," 16:12.20, 9530–31; *CB*, 9:217.5277–78; *LBTF*, in *Yongle dadian*, 14621.13b.

[55]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), 3.21a. According to a Southern Song source, the authority to hear crimes punishable by heavy stick was bestowed not only to officials of the administrative class, but also to all other first-tier, non-military town supervisors, see *QYTF*, 73.745.

[56]*LBTF*, in *Yongle dadian*, 14622.1b–3a. The Yuanfeng Reform reorganized the two departments into the Left and Right Subsections of the Vice Minister of Personnel (吏部侍郎左/右選).

[57]*QYTF*, 73.745. Those positioned at border towns (and border stockades), like first-tier town officials, could hear crimes punishable by the heavy stick. See *QYTF*, 73.745.

[58]Miyazaki 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* 史林 36.2 (1953), 101–27; Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Sōdai Keizai shi kenkyū*, 577, 623–45, 657–704.

[59]*SHY*, "Zhiguan," 7:48.92, 4371; *CB*, 9:227.5521; 11:263.6418.

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Table 1. The three tiers of towns in Song China

Tier	Commission	Demarcated boundaries	Local Public Goods	Taxation	Centrally Appointed Official	Directly Accountable to Prefect	No.
1	Town supervisor with special duties 監鎮兼煙火公事	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~250
2	Town supervisor (監鎮), Task supervisor (監當)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~310
3	Garrison commander (鎮將), etc.	✓	✓ (Fire; Security)	~ (Tax farming)	~ (Quasi-official)	~ (Quasi-official)	1331
						(Total: 1,891)	

1,860, which is still 50 percent higher than the historical average of 1,250 county-level units for unified Chinese dynasties spanning two millennia.

Our estimate of 560 first and second-tier towns is based on the identification of towns with court-stipulated commercial tax quotas, given that third-tier towns practiced tax farming and lacked such quotas. The *Yuanfeng Treatise* provides a snapshot of all towns in 1085;[60] while the *Song State Compendium* lists tax quotas for each commercial tax station in 1077.[61] By matching town and tax station names within each prefecture in these records, we estimate that 553 to 569 towns listed in the *Yuanfeng Treatise* fall into the upper two tiers, which we round to 560. This leaves 1,331 towns belonging to the third tier.[62]

Estimating the exact number of towns in the first and second tiers is more challenging. Existing historical records do not provide a comprehensive list of towns overseen by officials with the commission "routine local administrative affairs," i.e., the first tier towns. Among those explicitly mentioned in the records, Daning 大寧 (Nanxiongzhou 南雄州) had one of the lowest commercial tax quotas, at 992 strings.[63] Assuming that all towns with tax quotas at or above this level, like Daning, belonged to the first tier, we estimate 256 towns in the first tier and 313 in the second. Although these estimates are imprecise, the exact split between the first and second tiers matters less than their collective contrast with the third tier. What sets the first two tiers apart is their role as extensions of central authority, headed by imperial officials vested with judicial and civil administrative responsibilities.

[60]Wang Cun, *Yuanfeng jiuyu zhi*. Missing data were recovered from *Song shi* and *Jin shi*.

[61]*SHY*, "Shihuo" 食貨, 11:15.1–17.10, 6293–349.

[62]We estimate a lower bound of 553 by matching tax station and town names across prefectures in the 1077 and 1085 texts. The upper bound builds on this by adding tax stations listed as towns in 1077 that taxed over 1,000 strings of cash but whose names have no match in the 1085 town records. The assumption is that, given the fiscal importance of these towns, they were unlikely to disappear in such a short time frame and were most likely recorded under different names in 1085.

[63]*Yongle dadian*, facsimile at Kyoto University, http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/toho/html/C0120001.html, 665.10b.

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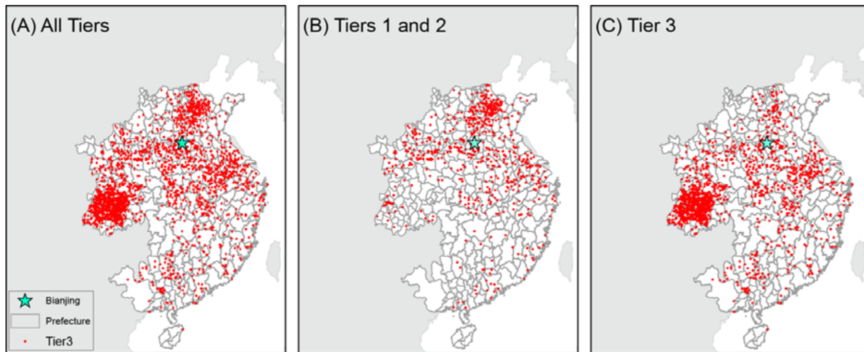

Figure 3. Spatial distribution of administrative towns in 1085. Towns of Tiers 1 and 2 were staffed by imperial officials, while Tier-3 towns were headed by quasi-officials. Data compiled from the *Yuanfeng Treatise*, *Jin shi*, *Song shi*, and *Song huiyao* (see notes 14 and 15). Base map source: CHGIS 2016.

Figure 3(A) provides a snapshot of administrative towns of all three tiers, as recorded in the 1085 *Yuanfeng Treatise*. Figure 3(B) maps the towns with centrally appointed officials, that is, those of the first two tiers. Their density was markedly higher in northern China, where the capital Bianjing was located, compared to the more populous south.[64] Beyond the capital region, a particularly dense clustering is evident in the circuits of Hebei and southern Shaanxi. Both were militarily strategic areas. In Hebei, autonomous regional governors had been especially concentrated during the late Tang and Five Dynasties, and under the Northern Song the region continued to shield the capital from potential Khitan invasions. By contrast, southern Shaanxi supported the ongoing campaigns against the Tanguts, particularly from the 1040s onward. A secondary cluster lay along the route connecting the capital with the Lower Yangtze region, where the Grand Canal was crucial for transporting grain from the surplus-producing southeastern China to the capital and beyond. The clustering of centrally appointed towns in these regions thus reflected not only demographic and economic realities but also fiscal-military priorities: by securing the movement of grain and supplies, they sustained both the capital and the armies.[65]

The spatial distribution of third-tier towns presents a markedly different pattern. With the important exception of Sichuan, these towns were relatively evenly distributed across the empire. Sichuan, however, stood out for its particularly high density of third-tier towns. This configuration can be traced in part to geography and the administrative legacy of the warlord era. Ringed by mountains and accessed only through a handful of narrow corridors, the Sichuan Basin was well suited to a mesh of garrison towns and stockades placed at passes, bridges, and river crossings, enabling the projection of authority and the securing of movement at relatively low cost.[66] Rather than dismantle this militarized infrastructure after the conquest of Sichuan, the Song state—confronted

[64]Wu Songdi 吳松弟, *Zhongguo renkou shi: Liao Song Jin Yuan shiqi* 中國人口史: 遼宋金元時期 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 122–37.

[65]An anonymous reader's observations on an earlier draft offered crucial insights for this analysis.

[66]For an example of garrison town and stockade distribution in two Sichuan Basin prefectures during the late Tang, see Hino Kaisaburō, "Tō I Kunsei hi no ōkan shochinsai setsukyū ni tsuite no ichi kōsatsu" 唐韋君靖碑の應管諸鎮寨節級に就いての一考察, in *Wada Hakushi koki kinen Tōyō shi ronsō* 和田博士古稀記念東洋史論叢, edited by Wada Hakushi Koki Kinen Tōyōshi Ronsō Hensan Iinkai 和田博士古稀記念東洋史論叢編纂委員會 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1961), 769–80.

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with the Wang Xiaobo–Li Shun uprising of the late tenth century and the perceived continuation of social instability in its aftermath—chose to preserve it as a means of safeguarding political control and social order.[67]

Functions of administrative towns with imperial officials

We now 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.

Urban control and extraction

Unlike in Ming–Qing China, the Song state differentiated households into urban (*fangguo hu* 坊郭戶) and rural (*xiangcun hu* 鄉村戶) categories based on their residence, and these households were administered differently. Urban households were taxed on their real estate, rather than agricultural land, and were largely exempt from corvée labor; they bore a disproportionate share of the financial burdens imposed by the state's monopolies on liquor, salt, and tea.[68] Importantly, residents of towns, like those in prefectural and county seats, were classified as urban households.[69]

Furthermore, as an integral part of the governing hierarchy, towns played a crucial role in managing state monopolies, which primarily targeted the urban sector. Towns facilitated the production and sale of monopoly goods and addressed issues such as smuggling.[70] For the liquor monopoly, town officials, like officials in the county seats, were responsible for administering the monopoly within the restricted zone, which was defined as the area within ten *li* 里 from the boundaries of the town or county seat.[71] 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 officials was evaluated based on the volume of salt or tea sold in their jurisdictions.[72]

Fire regulation

Historically, fire prevention and control constituted an essential component of urban management, and indeed, it stood as one of the foremost responsibilities of the Song town. An imperial ordinance (*ling* 令)[73] on urban fire regulations explicitly stipulated that town

[67]Yu Wei 余蔚 and Ren Haiping 任海平, "Beisong Chuanxia silu de zhengzhi teshuxing fenxi" 北宋川峽四路的政治特殊性分析, *Lishi dili* 歷史地理 17 (2001), 153–66; Song Chen, "Managing the Territories from Afar: The Imperial State and Elites in Sichuan, 755–1279" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011), 114–20.

[68]For urban taxes and other burdens, see Wang Zengyu 王曾瑜, *Songchao jieji jiegou* 宋朝階級結構 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 487–97; Peter Golas, "The Sung Fiscal Administration," in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, pt. 2: 175–76.

[69]*SHY*, "Bing" 兵, 15:24.21, 9121; *QYTF*, 48.667. See also Wang, *Songchao jieji jiegou*, 418.

[70]Golas, "The Sung Fiscal Administration," 188.

[71]*QYTF*, 28.395.

[72]*CB*, 11:280.6869–70; *SHY*, "Zhiguan," 8:59.18, 4651; *SHY*, "Shihuo," 11:32.7, 6700.

[73]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*, edited by Brian McKnight (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 111–31.

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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* 甲], 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 firefighting equipment. The officials should ensure the upkeep of the equipment, and repair or replenish it when damaged or lost.[74]

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

> If a fire breaks out in the prefecture seat, the director-general [*dujian* 都監] must immediately organize the firefighting, while the vice prefect supervises. Failure to comply renders them both punishable with eighty strokes by the heavy stick … In subordinate jurisdictions of the prefecture, the vice magistrate and sheriff (if the fire occurs in rural markets outside the prefectural seat or in counties, including metropolitan counties adjacent to the prefectural seat), and town or stockade officials (if the fire occurs in a town or a stockade) are to be held accountable under the same rules as the director-general.[75]

Law enforcement

Under Song statutes, first-tier town supervisors commissioned with "routine local administrative affairs" were authorized to adjudicate lawsuits.[76] A case in 1114 saw the fiscal commissioner of Liangzhe 兩浙 Circuit suggesting that the town administrator of Meixi 梅溪 in Huzhou be given this commission to address the high crime rate in the town.[77] In 1082, the same commission was conferred to the administrator of the newly established Xiangshan 香山 Town in Guangzhou 廣州, so local residents could seek litigation without traveling far.[78] 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.[79] 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.

[74] *QYTF*, 80. 913–14.
[75] *QYTF*, 80.913.
[76] *LBTF*, in *Yongle dadian*, 14620.24b.
[77] *SHY*, "Zhiguan," 7:48.93, 4372.
[78] *CB*, 13:331.7970.
[79] *SHY*, "Zhiguan," 7:48.88–89, 4370; *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, edited by Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 et al., 8345 *juan* in 360 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe and Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 232:5180.351.

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Officials in 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* 格), and specifications (*shi* 式) 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.[80]

The recommendation is substantiated by a case recorded in *The Enlightened Judgements* (*Qingming ji* 清明集). In the town of Ruikou 汭口 of Xinzhou 信州 during the Southern Song, a boat race led to a deadly altercation with thirteen casualties.[81] Song laws had prohibited some types of boat racing due to gambling concerns, and violators could face up to one year of penal servitude.[82] 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 out as punishment, highlighting that law enforcement as well as the management of civil affairs were part of the town administrator's job scope.

Official communications

We conclude this section with an incident recounted by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101). In 1091, while serving as the prefect of Yingzhou 潁州, Su Shi lodged a complaint with the imperial court, highlighting the actions of various officials in the neighboring circuit of West Huainan 淮南西 that were causing delays in rice shipments to his prefecture. Su Shi mentioned reaching out to the judicial and fiscal commissioners of Huainan Circuit, Guangzhou 光州, Gushi 固始 County, and Zhugao 朱皐 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.[83]

Su Shi's account brings two pertinent points to the fore. Firstly, 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 administrative 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.

[80] *SHY*, "Zhiguan," 6:15.28, 3422.

[81] For a translation and detailed analysis 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.

[82] *QYTF*, 80.924.

[83] Su Shi, *Su Shi wenji* 蘇軾文集, edited by Kong Fanli 孔凡禮, 73 *juan* in 6 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), v. 3, 33.946–47.

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Two case studies in the Southern Song: Ganshui 澉水 and Shijing 石井

We now delve into two case studies, Ganshui and Shijing. Both were administrative towns during the Song dynasty that lost this status by the Ming. We trace how administrative presence shaped their irrigation management and town defense, respectively.

The first case study examines Ganshui, notable for being the only town with an extant Song gazetteer. Situated at the mouth of Hangzhou Bay (Figure 4), Ganshui originated as a garrison town during the Tang dynasty and was repurposed as an administrative town at the start of the Song dynasty.[84] While previous studies have emphasized its role in urbanization or elite culture,[85] we focus on its administration functions, particularly the management of its irrigation system by drawing on gazetteers from both the Song and Ming dynasties.

The irrigation system of Ganshui was uniquely shaped by its topography, characterized by elevated terrain along the coast compared to the hinterland, which necessitated irrigation to connect the coastal town with inland areas. During the Song era, local communities excavated an artificial lake and river channels to supply water to the town and to link it to its hinterland.[86]

Nevertheless, this system faced constant threats from individuals attempting to divert water away from the lake. During a drought in 1249, some residents erected a dam to

Figure 4. Ganshui Town.

[84]Gu Zuyu 顧祖禹, *Dushi fangyu jiyao* 讀史方輿紀要, edited by He Cijun 賀次君 and Shi Hejin 施和金, 130 *juan* in 12 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), v. 8, 91.4182–83.

[85]See, for example, McDermott and Shiba, "Economic Change in China," 424–25; Tsong-han Lee, "We Are the Literati Here: The Chang Family and the Compilation of the 1258 'Ganshui Gazetteer,'" *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 48 (2019), 207–33.

[86]Chang Tang 常棠, *Ganshui zhi* 澉水志 (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), 3.6a–7a; Dong Gu 董穀, *Xu Ganshui zhi* 續澉水志 (1936 edition), 9 *juan*, in vol. 20 of of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng xiangzhen zhi zhuanji*, 1.3b–4a.

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hoard water for their own use, blocking the town's only waterway to the hinterland. In response to public outcry, a town official initiated the dismantling of the private dam.[87] This effort appeared successful. The Song Ganshui gazetteer records that the irrigation system continued to function reliably, ensuring a steady water supply for drinking and agriculture and serving as a cornerstone of Ganshui's prosperity.

In the post-Song era, Ganshui lost its status as an administrative center and, like other towns in China, was no longer governed by an imperial official. During the Ming period, the irrigation system deteriorated as the lake frequently dried out.[88] Between the late fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, the local population submitted at least seven requests to the state to refurbish the irrigation system by dredging the lake and the river system, and to penalize individuals who built private dams upstream.[89] Although each request was approved by the imperial court or provincial officials, little action was taken.

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.[90]

Thirteen years later, local village heads and elders initiated a request to restart the 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 海鹽 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.[91]

In the 1530s, Dong Yun 董澐 (1457–1533), a notable Ganshui literati and the father of the Ming Ganshui gazetteer's compiler, attributed the persistent irrigation issues to the state's failure to curb individuals illegally diverting water. He noted that this problem was exacerbated by Ganshui's geographical remoteness from the prefectural and county seats.[92] His observation suggests that the loss of administrative status was one of the culprits behind Ganshui's irrigation crisis and broader economic decline.

To be sure, Ganshui hosted a significant naval force during the Southern Song and a military battalion in the Ming.[93] In both periods, the military presence may have influenced the state's activities in the town in ways that complicate our analysis. We therefore turn to our second case study, Shijing, a town under Quanzhou 泉州 in present-day Fujian (Figure 5). Established in 1130 to administer two local markets engaged in overseas trade, Shijing was a first-tier town whose administrator held penal authority to maintain peace and order.[94] Among its earliest administrators was Zhu Song 朱松

[87]Chang Tang, *Ganshui zhi*, 3.7a.

[88]Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 1.3b–4a, 8.39b–40a.

[89]Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 8.34a–39b, 9.61a–62b.

[90]Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 8.34b–37a.

[91]Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 8.36a–39a.

[92]Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 9.61a–62b.

[93]Gu Hongyi 顧宏義, "Nan Song Liangzhe yanhai de shuijun" 南宋兩浙沿海的水軍, in *Songshi yanjiu lunwenji* 宋史研究論文集, edited by Zhu Ruixi 朱瑞熙 et al. (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2006), 163–68; Dong Gu, *Xu Ganshui zhi*, 3.12a.

[94]Anon., *Anhai zhi* 安海志, 9 *juan* in vol. 26 of *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng xiangzhen zhi zhuanji*, 2.11a.

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Figure 5. Shijing Town.

(1097–1143), the father of the philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).[95] In 1156 the town supervisor built a fortress to shield the residents from pirate attacks.[96]

During the Ming dynasty, Shijing, like Ganshui, lost its formal administrative standing. Subsequently, the town was administered as a rural entity under the jurisdiction of Jinjiang 晉江 County and was renamed Anping 安平 or Anhai 安海, both translating to "Peace and Tranquility." When piracy threats escalated in the mid-sixteenth century, the county magistrate—hampered by the town's distance from the county seat—was compelled to depend on local leaders to organize communal self-defense.[97] In 1558, the prefect of Quanzhou tasked the magistrate of Jinjiang with the reconstruction of the Song fortress, but the magistrate did not complete the project due to ongoing piracy. Ultimately, the fortress was rebuilt under the leadership of a local literatus, Ke Shiqing 柯實卿.[98] From 1606 onward, a vice prefect was assigned to oversee the town's maritime defense, but his visits to the town were sporadic at best.[99] By the end of the Ming dynasty, Anhai town had become one of the principal bases for Zheng Zhilong 鄭芝龍 (1604–1661), a famed maritime smuggler and father of the Ming loyalist Koxinga (1624–1662).

Historical accounts suggest that, during the Song dynasty, town administrators played a central role in managing overseas trade and overseeing the construction of the first fortress. In contrast, in the Ming dynasty, defense against piracy depended heavily on

[95]He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠, *Min shu* 閩書 (Ming Chongzhen edition), 154 *juan* in vols. 204–7 of *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu shibu* 四庫全書存目叢書 · 史部, 204:33.19a.

[96]He Qiaoyuan, *Min shu*, 33.23b.

[97]Fu 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), 4.6a–7b.

[98]Huaiyinbu 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 fuxian zhi ji* 中國地方志集成 · 福建府縣志輯 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2000), 22:11.16a–b.

[99]He Qiaoyuan, *Min shu*, 33.24a.

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communal self-organization and the leadership of local elites. While a thorough assessment of this shift requires further study, it is evident that the presence of administrative oversight was crucial in shaping local outcomes, as also seen in the case of Ganshui.

The evolution and decline of administrative towns

In her study of Song prefectures and counties, Ruth Mostern notes that, whereas most imperial dynasties concentrated adjustments to administrative units in their early years, the Song state continued this process throughout much of its history.[100] In the case of Song towns, changes to their status generally took three forms: (1) abolition—the complete removal of administrative status; (2) conversion to or from other administrative units such as counties, stockades, fortifications, or production centers; and (3) the creation of new towns from previously non-administrative settlements, such as market settlements (shi 市).

In the early Northern Song, the state abolished many garrison towns it inherited from the late Tang and Five Dynasties. The remaining towns, converted into civil administrative units, seem to have continued declining in number. Huzhou provides a telling example: according to its gazetteer, the prefecture initially had twenty-four towns, which fell to sixteen by 1004 and to six by the time of the *Yuanfeng Treatise* in 1085.[101] This pattern suggests that the number of towns in the dynasty's first decades was considerably higher than in 1085.

The other two forms of change—conversion and new creation—are better documented in the surviving historical record. Figure 6A shows that the conversion of towns to or from other units was concentrated in the New Policies era (1068–1085) and the subsequent Yuanyou regency (1086–1094), reflecting the ebb and flow of reform. This pattern raises an important question: since the *Yuanfeng Treatise* was compiled in 1085, the final year of Shenzong's reign and the close of the New Policies era, do the towns it

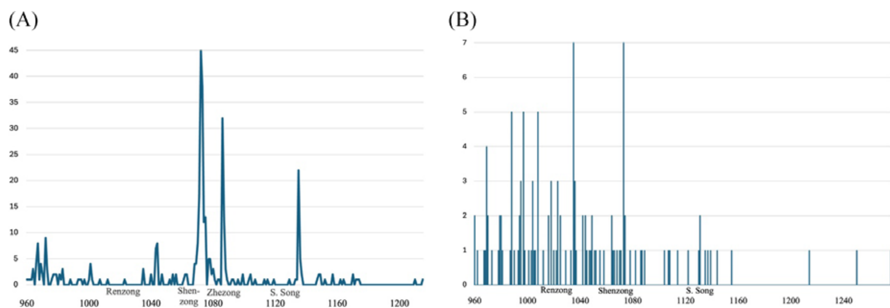

Figure 6. (A) Number of towns converted to and from other administrative units. (B) Number of towns newly established from non-administrative settlements. Data compiled by the authors, available at https://tinyurl.com/TownsConversion and https://tinyurl.com/TownsCreated.

[100] Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*, 12, 30–34.

[101] Tan Yao 談鑰, *Jiatai Wuxing zhi* 嘉泰吳興志 (1914 edition), 20 *juan*, in vol. 5 of *Songyuan fangzhi congkan*, 10.1a. The author also notes the towns of Wucheng 烏程 County: "From the Tang to Wuyue (吳越), there were many garrison towns in the county. By the Jingde 景德 reign (1004–1007) of our Song dynasty, the county had only two towns." *Jiatai Wuxing zhi*, 10.2a.

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records provide a reliable snapshot of the mid-to-late Northern Song, or was the figure inflated by reformist activism?

Closer examination suggests the former. During the New Policies era, 101 counties[102] and six stockades or fortifications were converted into towns, while 12 new towns were created, yielding 119 in total. Although this is a significant number, it remains small compared with the 1,891 towns at the time of the *Yuanfeng Treatise*. Moreover, 83 of these 119 survived the Yuanyou retification, pointing to stability rather than inflation.

As Figure 6B shows, the creation of twelve entirely new towns under Shenzong was not exceptional compared to earlier periods. The pattern suggests that throughout the Northern Song the state consistently sought to extend its reach in response to demographic growth and urban development. Some towns emerged from expanding populations and the fiscal opportunities they generated, such as Hanchengcun 韓城村 (location unknown) and Yansi 巖寺 in Huizhou 徽州, both linked to revenues from the liquor monopoly. Others were established to fill a governance vacuum in areas remote from administrative centers, as in Xiangshan 香山 of Guangzhou, Masha 麻沙 of Jianzhou 建州, and the previously noted Shijing of Quanzhou. New towns also served to consolidate state presence in peripheral regions, exemplified by the seven towns founded in Minzhou 岷州 during Shenzong's westward campaign. These towns proved relatively stable: of the 126 new towns created from non-administrative settlements between 960 and 1276, only nineteen, or 15 percent, were later abolished, while four were promoted to counties. This durability underscores the overall stability of the town system.

Another notable pattern in Figure 6B is the sharp decline in the number of new towns created in the Southern Song compared with the Northern Song: of the 126 new towns founded across the two dynasties, 115 were created in the Northern Song and only eleven in the Southern Song. Loss of northern China to the Jurchens cannot alone account for the collapse: even after accounting for the Southern Song's reduced territory, town creation fell more than territory contracted. Moreover, the number of towns in southern China likely declined during the Southern Song, driven in particular by a significant wave of abolitions in Sichuan.[103] In Southeast China, the number of towns also stagnated, if not declined, despite sustained commercial expansion and the growth of rural markets from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century.[104]

Several factors might have contributed to this development. A popular explanation is 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.[105]

Another, less discussed factor was a top-down transformation in the Song structure, marked by the creation of four superprovincial directorates-general (*zongling suo* 總領所) in

[102]A total of 123 counties were converted to towns, but 22 had been reinstated as counties by the time the *Yuanfeng Treatise* was compiled.

[103]Yu Yuezu, "Guanyu Songdai jianzhi zhen de jige lishi dili wenti," 110–11.

[104]For example, the number of towns in Huzhou decreased from six in 1085 to five in the 1200s. See Tan Yao, *Jiatai Wuxing zhi*, 10.1a–3a. For the increase in markets, see McDermott and Shiba, "Economic Change in China," 422.

[105]This is a significant topic that falls beyond the scope of this paper. For general discussions, see Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*; Robert Hymes, "Sung Society and Social Change," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, pt. 2:526–664; Song Chen, "The State, the Gentry, and Local Institutions: The Song Dynasty and Long-Term Trends from Tang to Qing," *Journal of Chinese History* 1.1 (2017), 141–82.

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response to persistent military tensions with the Jurchens.[106] Exercising executive control over multiple circuits, these directorates-generals anticipated the emergence of a new administrative entity—the province—during the Yuan dynasty. Meanwhile, the prefecture saw its authority increasingly assumed by the circuit and the directorate-general, diminishing its status to that of a subordinate unit. This consolidation of power at higher levels of administration likely reduced the incentive to establish new towns in response to evolving local demands and circumstances.

These arguments, however, should not be overstated. Evidence from the *Qingyuan tiaofa* and *The Enlightened Judgements*, together with the case studies discussed earlier, indicates that administrative towns in the Southern Song remained active and important in grassroots governance. In Sichuan, where third-tier towns were especially numerous, the decline in the number of towns was arguably part of a longer-term trend that began in the early Northern Song, when the state gradually absorbed and consolidated the thousands of towns it had inherited from the late Tang and Five Dynasties into its territorial hierarchy. Unlike other regions, where reorganization was already in full swing during the Northern Song, in Sichuan this process gained momentum only in the Southern Song. The decline, therefore, reflected not the irrelevance of towns but a continuation of a broader reorganization on a delayed timeline.

Fiscal evidence lends some support to this interpretation. It is well established that during the Southern Song, commercial tax revenues in the prefectures and counties of the Lower Yangtze grew substantially over the 1077 Northern Song quotas.[107] As Table 2 shows, towns in these areas followed the same trend. Although part of this increase reflects price inflation, it nevertheless points to commercial growth and effective fiscal extraction. This suggests that the slowdown in new town creation may have been offset by greater administrative intensity in those that remained.

Taken together, these findings call for caution in interpreting the Northern-to-Southern Song transition. The prevailing narrative portrays the Northern Song as uniquely proactive in extending state power and the Southern Song as retreating from day-to-day administration. Viewed through the lens of towns, the contrast appears less clear-cut. Administrative towns retained their identity and functions throughout the Southern Song and only disappeared after the Mongol conquest. The "full circle"—in which the imperial state first expanded beyond walled cities and then reverted to them—was not completed until after 1279. The likely decline in southern China's town numbers during the Southern Song may thus reflect consolidation and intensification rather than simple retreat, complicating the sharp dichotomy that often frames the history of the two dynasties.

[106]Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations," 397–98; Wang Shengduo 汪聖鐸, *Liangsong caizheng shi* 兩宋財政史, 2 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 1:131–36; Christian Lamouroux, "Fragmentation and Financial Recentralization: The Emergence of the Four General Commands (1127–1165)," in *Political Communication in Chinese and European History, 800–1600*, edited by Hilde De Weerdt and Franz-Julius Morche (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 105–41.

[107]Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 266; Liang Gengyao, *Songdai shehui jingji shi lunji*, 1:483–84; *SHY*, "Shihuo," 11:16.8, 6325. Bao Weimin 包偉民 observes that, unlike the rise in the Lower Yangtze, Shezhou 歙州 (renamed Huizhou 徽州 in 1121) experienced a decline in commercial tax revenues in 1152 relative to the Northern Song quota, indicating spatial variation in tax collection. Bao Weimin, *Songdai difang caizhengshi yanjiu* 宋代地方財政史研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 303.

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Table 2. Commercial tax revenues in Lower Yangtze towns

Administrative Town	Prefecture (Southern Song in parenthesis)	Commercial tax quota (string) in 1077	Commercial tax revenue during the Southern Song		Percentage change
			Revenue (string)	Year	
Jiangzhang qiao 江漲橋	Hangzhou 杭州 (Lin'an 臨安府)	2,806	45,018	1265–1274	1604%
Qingcheng 青城	Changzhou 常州	197	4,759	1265–1274	2416%
Wansui 萬歲	Changzhou	161	6,840	1265–1274	4248%
Zhangzhu 張渚	Changzhou	2,216	1,440	1265–1274	65%
Hufu 湖洑	Changzhou	2,814	10,800	1265–1274	384%
Licheng 利城	Changzhou (Jiangyin jun 江陰軍)	2,421	3,363	1228–1233	139%
Cao-e 曹娥	Yuezhou 越州 (Shaoxing 紹興府)	4,936	6,286	1201–1204	127%
Sanjie 三界	Yuezhou	907	1,544	1201–1204	170%
Yupu 漁浦	Yuezhou	3,240	4,919	1201–1204	152%

Sources: Qian Yueyou 潛説友, *Xianchun Lin'an zhi* 咸淳臨安志 (1830 edition), 100 *juan* in vol. 4 of *Song Yuan fangzhi congkan*, 59.17a; Shi Nengzhi 史能之, *Xianchun Piling zhi* 咸淳毗陵志, 30 *juan* in vol. 3 of *Song Yuan fangzhi congkan*, 24.8b–9a; Zhu Yu 朱昱, *Chongxiu Piling zhi* 重修毗陵志 (1484 edition), *Zhongguo fangzhi congshu Huazhong difang* 中國方志叢書·華中地方 (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1983), vol. 423, 7.25a; Shi Su 施宿 et al., *Jiatai Kuaiji zhi* 嘉泰會稽志 (1808 edition), 20 *juan* in vol. 7 of *Song Yuan fangzhi congkan*, 5.17b–18b.

Conclusion

During the first half of the Tang dynasty's three-century rule, the state heavily regulated trade and commerce within administrative centers. Over time, however, driven by population growth and sociopolitical changes, this rigid, state-controlled system began to crumble during the Tang–Song transition, as freer markets proliferated beyond the prefecture and county seats.[108]

Influenced by Skinner's observation that the number of county-level units in China remained relatively stable over time, a considerable body of literature contends that the Chinese state could neither forestall these changes nor expand beyond the traditional administrative centers to keep pace with such developments. Consequently, from the Song dynasty onward, there was an overall retreat of state influence in day-to-day life.[109]

[108]Sogabe Shizuo, "Tō sō jidai no sōshi;" Twitchett, "The T'ang Market System," 202–48; McDermott and Shiba, "Economic Change in China," 379–85.

[109]Skinner, "Introduction," 23–26; Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 20–26; Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 44–45. Some scholars, while not explicitly arguring for a decline in state influence, note a tendency for grassroots economic activities to expand beyond the reach of state intervention from the Song onward. See Albert Feuerwerker, "The State and the Economy in Late Imperial China," *Theory and Society* 13.3 (1984), 304; Zurndorfer, "Cities and the Urban Economy," 522–23.

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This study presents a more complex process. During the Tang–Song transition, administrative towns emerged, extending the formal institutions of the state beyond the traditional walled administrative centers. 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 responsively to rapid socioeconomic changes than earlier accounts have recognized.

This reinterpretation calls for closer scrutiny of Skinner's use of county counts as a proxy for state penetration. While this measure provides an analytically useful starting point, our evidence reveals two ways in which it can be misleading in the Song context. First, apparent stability in county numbers can conceal the proliferation of other sub-prefectural units—most notably administrative towns during the Northern Song. Second, limited extensive growth (in the number of administrative units) can obscure intensive growth, as in the Southern Song, when commercial tax revenues per town in the Lower Yangtze rose substantially.

We present evidence that approximately 560 of the 1,891 towns in the late eleventh century were overseen by imperial officials tasked with meeting court-mandated tax quotas, administering justice, maintaining local order, and performing other civil functions typically associated with county administration in the Chinese historical context. These towns, therefore, should be considered basic-level administrative units, comparable in function—if not in formal status—to *xian* and *xian*-level units. This finding suggests that Song China maintained at least 1,800 basic-level administrative units, significantly higher than the average of around 1,250 *de jure* county-level units among unified dynasties in imperial China. This indicates a larger state and a greater capacity for direct local control during the Song.

Our estimate of 1,800 is a conservative one, as it focuses exclusively on towns and omits other sub-prefectural entities unique to the Song dynasty, particularly stockades (*zhai*). Historical records indicate that some stockades were also administered by imperial officials tasked with civil administrative functions, i.e., *qinmin* officials.[110] In addition, recent research has identified walled settlements (*cheng*) as another integral element of Northern Song territorial administration.[111] A more comprehensive assessment that includes these and other sub-prefectural units would likely raise the total well beyond 1,800.

Recent scholarship suggests that Ming–Qing China's territorial administration was more expansive than previously considered, primarily because subordinate county officials (*zuoza* 佐雜), such as patrolling inspectors, were often deployed in market towns and cantons to maintain public order.[112] If this criterion—the presence of officials responsible for public order—is applied to the Song dynasty, a significant upward revision of the estimated number of basic-level administrative units would be warranted. At a minimum, the 1,331 lowest-tier towns overseen by garrison commanders would satisfy this standard. In addition, patrolling inspectors and county sheriffs who were deployed beyond the prefectural and county seats, particularly during the Southern Song period, would also need to be included.[113] While such adjustments would undoubtedly raise our estimate, their

[110]Zhao Sheng, *Chaoye leiyao*, 46; *QYTF*, 73.745, 80.913–14.

[111]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.

[112]See, for instance, Hu Heng 胡恒, *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), passim.

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

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broader significance may be limited, as these subordinate officials functioned primarily as county outposts and exercised a restricted range of administrative responsibilities.

On a final note, the findings of this paper do not imply that the Song dynasty's extension of formal administration beyond prefectural and county seats—particularly through the appointment of imperial officials with legal authority in towns—necessarily resulted in a superior governance system compared to the Ming and Qing dynasties. While the Song emphasized direct administration and formal governance, the Ming and Qing relied more heavily on informal mechanisms, such as self-governing bodies and the co-option of local elites to address collective issues. This informal approach may have given the local population, or at least certain groups within it, greater bargaining power with the state.[114]

Formal and informal governance systems are characterized by different strengths and weaknesses, and their relative effectiveness depends on the specific challenges and historical contexts each era presents.[115] We hope future scholarship will continue to explore how these different approaches to governance evolved and operated, thereby enriching our understanding of the broader trajectory of imperial governance in China.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

[114]See, for instance, R. Bin Wong, "Formal and Informal Mechanisms of Rule and Economic Development: the Qing Empire in Comparative Perspective." *Journal of Early Modern History* 5.4 (2001), 387–408; R. Bin Wong, "Coping with Poverty and Famine: Material Welfare, Public Goods, and Chinese Approaches to Governance," in *Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe*, edited by Masayuki Tanimoto and R. Bin Wong (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 130–44.

[115]Avner Greif, "Institutions and International Trade: Lessons from the Commercial Revolution," *American Economic Review* 82.2 (1992), 128–33; Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *American Economic Review* 100.3 (2010), 641–72.

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