

# Revisiting Skinner: Counting Counties in Song China

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## Abstract

We revisit a long-held consensus that the number of county-level units in imperial China had 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 town (*zhen*), which administered urban households. By our estimate, of the more than 1,860 administrative towns in 1084, about 30% were staffed by centrally-appointed bureaucrats who collected taxes, provided basic public services, interacted with the population daily, and were directly accountable to the prefect. Overlooking the existence of these administrative towns means underestimating not only the scale of the Song field administration, but also its sophistication. Unlike later dynasties, the Song administration differentiated between urban and rural settlements, 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.

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# Synopsis

Over the past decades, there has been a growing scholarly recognition that China was a world leader in building a modern bureaucracy (Rosenthal and Wong, 2011; Fukuyama, 2014). According to Fukuyama (2014), 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, an impressive eighteen centuries before modern states emerged in Europe. A salient feature of Qin’s bureaucratic government was its county system, which divided the empire into thousands of contiguous administrative districts known as the *xian*, each administered by a centrally appointed official (Creel, 1964). The system was basically preserved for two millennia. The *xian*, usually translated as county, remained the central basic field administration unit until the fall of imperial China in 1912 (Feuerwerker, 1976; Dardess, 2010).

In a much-cited quote, G.W. Skinner (1977, p. 19) 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 age of the Punic Wars to the eve of World War I:<sup>1</sup>

[...] 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].

Using the number of county-level units as a bellwether of the breadth and reach of the state, Skinner argued that his observation highlighted the presence of persistent and fundamental forces preventing the imperial Chinese state from expanding its administrative apparatus. As new counties were set up, existing ones were routinely abolished, so that the aggregate number of counties remained effectively unchanged. This, he argued, had profound implications for China’s political and developmental trajectories. Since the country’s population steadily grew from 60 million in 180 to 425 million in 1850, an unchanging number of county-level units represents “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” (p. 19).

Skinner’s observation has been widely accepted and immensely influential in historical studies to this day.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Shiba (2001, p. 17) sees it as an “unsolved mystery” that

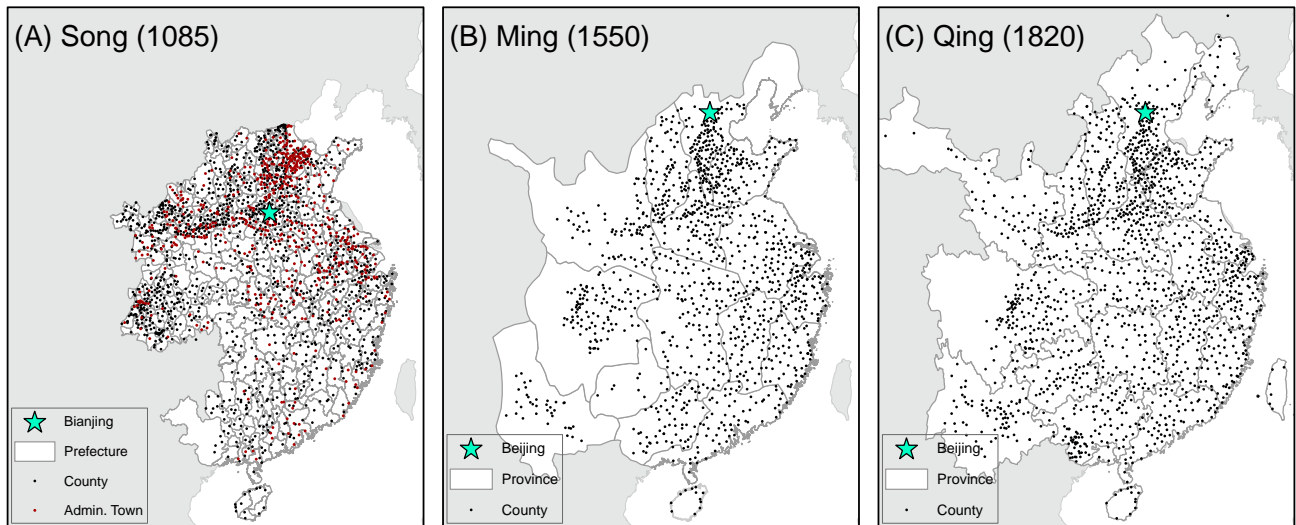
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<sup>1</sup>Text in parenthesis added by the authors.

<sup>2</sup>By contrast, Skinner’s paradigmatic Hierarchical Regional Space model, also fleshed out in *The City in Late Imperial China*, has been under increasing scrutiny in recent years (Cartier, 2002; De Weerd, 2015).

the number of counties from the Song to the Qing dynasties remained fixed at 1200–1300. Bol (2008, p. 20)’s sweeping and authoritative account of the rise and endurance of Neo-Confucianism in China evokes 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 because its number of counties did not respond to population growth and the proliferation of market towns.

We seek to revise this idea that an invisible ceiling capped the number of county-level units through imperial China. We show that if we set aside statutory status and interpret—as Skinner did—a county as a basic-level field administration unit, the actual number of county-level units of at least one of the major dynasties—the Northern Song (960–1127)—was substantially higher than the range of 1,180–1,385 that Skinner proposed.<sup>3</sup> By our conservative estimate, there were more than 1,800 basic-level administrative units in Song China, despite the fact that Song was territorially the smallest among the major Chinese dynasties (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Basic field administration in Song, Ming, and Qing (Panels B–C adapted from CHGIS 2007).

Our Song estimate differs from Skinner’s because Skinner (1977) used 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” (p. 19) in imperial China. The premise is sound for the Ming (1366–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1912) when *xian* and other *xian*-level units were indeed the only basic-level field administration units. But during the Song dynasty, the picture is murkier. Alongside the *xian*, the Song state established a variety of

<sup>3</sup>We pay particular attention to the Northern Song to keep in line with Skinner’s focus on “unified” dynasties. However, due to limited historical records of the Northern Song and the institutional continuity between the Northern and Southern Song (1127–1279), we draw from the historical materials of the Southern Song too. It is important to note that the seeds of some of the key institutional differences between the Northern Song and Ming–Qing China were likely sowed during the Southern Song or even the late Northern Song (Hymes and Schirokauer, 1993; Hymes, 2015; Bol, 2008). We will elaborate on this point in the full paper.

other field administration units, including towns (*zhen*), stockages (*zhai*), fortifications (*bao*), castles (*cheng*), (land passes) (*guan*), fords (*jin*), production centers (*chang*), and so on. These territorial units were below the *xian* in administrative rank. But a closer examination of the historical record shows that a subset of them were (1) territorial jurisdictions with demarcated boundaries and registered households, (2) staffed by one or more centrally-appointed officials, (3) responsible for collecting taxes from and providing essential public services to the residents, and (4) were directly accountable to the prefecture (*zhou*). In other words, like the *xian*, this subset of jurisdictions performed basic-level administrative central functions and was directly supervised by the prefect. They were *de facto* counties. We need to bring them in to form a more complete and accurate picture of field administration in Song China.

In this paper, we focus on the administrative towns, which administered urban households and could be found in almost every corner of Song China.<sup>4</sup> We will present detailed evidence from primary sources, including the *Song Government Manuscript Compendium* (*Song huiyao*), to show that not all administrative towns met criteria (1)–(4) above. But some did. Of the approximately 1,860 administrative towns recorded in the Song official geographical treatise *The Yuanfeng Treatise of the Nine Regions*, over 30% fulfilled the four criteria. In Figure 1, we depict this subset of administrative towns as red dots.

Our research highlights the sophistication of the Song field administrative system. Urban management studies in Ming-Qing China commonly observed that formal administration did not penetrate deep into the cities. More than 95% of towns and cities did not have a permanent bureaucratic presence (Zelin, 2004). Furthermore, administratively, no distinctions were made between urban and rural areas. Unlike Tokugawa Japan, where urban magistrates (*machi-bugyō*) administered towns and cities and rural magistrates (*daikan*) took charge in the countryside, the Chinese county was predominantly rural in outlook and provided urban services only to town dwellers in the county seat, if such services were provided at all (Fei, 2009, 13–20). It is also instructive that the term *zhen* was commonly used in Ming-Qing to describe a market town with usually no bureaucratic presence. As Faure (1990, 24) puts it, the Ming-Qing *zhen* was “commercially a town, but politically a *xiang*” (rural canton). However, it was not always like that. In Song China, the *zhen* was a state-administered town. Its existence demonstrates that the Chinese experience in field administration is far richer and more complex than a snapshot from 1500 or 1800 would suggest.

To the best of our knowledge, there has yet to be a systematic investigation of subprefecture administrative units in Song China in the English literature. To date, the most comprehensive work on the Song field administration system is Mostern (2011), who focuses on the prefecture,

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<sup>4</sup>In contrast, the stockages, fortifications, and castles served military purposes and were concentrated mainly in the frontier while the land passes, fords, and production centers were restricted to locations endowed with specific topographic features or natural resources.

the primary field administration unit during the Song dynasty. [Hartwell \(1982\)](#) notes that the prefecture was eclipsed by the post-Song emergence of large, regional-sized provinces. In the paper, we argue that the rise and fall of the administrative town were intrinsically associated with the status of the prefecture as the anchor of Song territorial administration. Furthermore, in line with [Mokyr \(2016\)](#); [Scheidel \(2019\)](#) and others who argue that political fragmentation was critical to an intellectually and institutionally innovative early modern Europe, we trace the rise of the administrative town to the polycentric nature of pre-Song politics.

Our paper also connects with a large and prominent body of work documenting the precocity of Song China’s development. [Elvin \(1973\)](#) famously discussed the advent of “medieval economic revolution” in Song China. Similarly, [Fairbank \(1992\)](#) 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. Central to these developments was the emergence of a national market made possible by increasing regional specialization and the development of transport and communications ([Shiba, 1970](#); [Kelly, 1997](#)). Others have highlighted the state’s role in the economic effervescence of Song China. [Deng and Zheng \(2015\)](#) see the Song state’s eagerness to increase revenue and money supply as the engine that propelled Song’s economic transformation. [Liu \(2015\)](#) argues 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 by establishing a national network of thousands of tax stations. 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. We show that the Song tax stations did not exist in isolation. Instead, they were embedded in an extensive network of field administration nodes—the seats of the prefectures and the counties, the administrative towns and other subprefectures—that provided security, fire protection, dispute resolution, and other basic public goods in return for the taxes paid, without which the Song high tax regime would not have been sustainable.

Finally, our paper also 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 ([Miyakawa, 1955](#); [Fogel, 1984](#); [Wang, 2022](#)). Other researchers have argued or alluded that lumping Song and its successor dynasties together as China’s modern period (*kinsei*) obfuscates the considerable institutional differences between the Song and the Ming-Qing (1368–1912) dynasties ([Bol, 1992, 2008](#); [Hymes and Schirokauer, 1993](#); [Smith and von Glahn, 2003](#); [von Glahn, 2019](#)). We contribute to both perspectives by documenting how the Song administrative town was borne out of the fierce political and military competition that profoundly shaped the Tang-Song transition on the one hand, yet singling out the realm of field administration as an epitome of the subtle but salient institutional differences between

Song and Ming-Qing on the other.

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