

The Politics of Higher Education: The Imperial University in Northern Song China. By Chu Ming-kin. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2020. Pp. xv + 264. \$77.00.

Chu Ming-kin's meticulous study of the Imperial University in Northern Song China adopts the approach of "new political history" (pp. 4–5) to dissect a dizzying array of people and policies concerned with the Song state's central problem of recruiting, training, and selecting government officials. Chu further proposes to offer a "dynamic" institutional history that moves beyond previous "static" institutional histories (p. 3) by focusing on the evolving nature and roles of the Imperial University in response to rapidly changing political conditions. Displaying the training and influence of his mentor, Richard L. Davis, a distinguished political historian of the Song, the author deftly guides us through the maze of court politics that determined educational policies and shaped the Imperial University and other schools. In his attention to questions of political theory and comparative politics, as well as prosopographical analysis, the author also reflects experience gained from his participation in a research project led by Hilde De Weerd. More than a study of the "politics of education" in relation to the Imperial University, this book provides an insightful and informative view of the innermost workings of the Northern Song state, as emperors and scholar-officials jockeyed with one another to determine (the author paraphrasing Harold Lasswell) "who got what, when, and how?" The author defines his key question as: how did the emperor, policy-making agents such as the Council of State, and the literati elite teaching or studying at the Imperial University interact and ultimately shape that educational institution (p. 3)? Not surprisingly, the theme that runs throughout this book is that of reform and its counterpart, anti-reform, as the key players sought to carry out their visions of how best to recruit, train, and select men to hold positions in the imperial government and what role the Imperial University (and other metropolitan schools) should have. As this study also makes clear, however, idealistic visions were often refracted through personal power struggles and subject always to the nature and degree of imperial support, as well as its unpredictability.

At the outset the author addresses the perennial question of autocracy (pp. 8–10): the degree to which the Song emperors did or did not exercise an increasing amount of autocratic power. This question has occupied historians of the Song since the early twentieth-century theories of Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866–1934) were first widely circulated, and we now have a far more nuanced (a word the author likes to use) understanding of the complex and changing ways in which emperors exerted their power as well as how their authority could be challenged and circumscribed. Chu skilfully models this perspective through his treatment of successive waves of

reform and anti-reform during the reigns of Northern Song emperors, particularly those of Shenzong 神宗 (r. 1067–1085) and Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126), as the reforms related to education and the Imperial University. Drawing on the work of “new” political historians in other fields, along with recent studies in Song history such as Sukhee Lee’s *Negotiated Power: The State, Elites, and Local Governance in Twelfth- to Fourteenth-Century China* (2014), the author highlights his study of the transformation of the Imperial University in the Northern Song as “a process of contestation and negotiation among different political agents whose interests often differed” (p. 6). Chu pays close attention to factional politics among scholar-officials as these affected policy decisions at the Imperial University, but he also goes further to parse out the complex networks of personal relationships that lay behind these alliances and often complicated them. Given that education was a basic function of government, Chu’s work, in fact, deepens our understanding of factional politics by showing how factions operated in the realm of educational policy. As the ideological and the political were frequently not perfectly aligned, so factional politics did not always operate in a predictable or “rational” way according to a strategic plan. That said, scholar-officials with differing ideological views and political objectives were eager to exert influence on education, and particularly on the Imperial University in its evolving role as the premier educational institution. Other important groups with ideological and political stakes in negotiations over policies at the Imperial University also receive attention from the author: teachers and students, both of whom at times contested policies imposed on them there. Through a detailed analysis of the often subtle give-and-take of negotiations over policy between the emperor and officials, and among officials themselves at both the individual and collective levels, as well as the acceptance or contestation of policy decisions on the part of teachers and students, the author offers a rich chronological narrative of the history of the Imperial University in the Northern Song, highlighting the contingent nature of its evolution as a product of negotiation and contestation within an institutional framework. His narrative is peopled with a full cast of characters from emperors to students and takes place primarily in the capital, Kaifeng 開封, and frequently at court. Some of the characters, such as Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072) or Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047–1126), for example, are very familiar, but others are not, and one of the contributions of this book is to tell us more about the careers and impact of lesser-known individuals like Sun Shi 孫奭 (962–1033), Sun Fu 孫復 (992–1057), and Shi Jie 石介 (1005–1045), whose intellectual and pedagogical influences were significant. The author builds on the English-language scholarship of Thomas H. C. Lee 李弘祺, John Chaffee, and Hilde De Weerd, as well as plentiful scholarship on these topics in Chinese and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Japanese, to frame his own work. He makes extensive use of an impressive array of primary sources that range widely from standard historical works, such as Li Tao’s 李燾 *Xu Zizhi*

tongjian changbian 續資治通鑑長編, to anecdotal, biographical, and (as the author terms them) “epitaphic” collections.

Inheriting the legacy of the Tang examination system, the Song founder confronted the challenge of recruitment and selection of officials to administer the newly unified empire through the entwined institutional mechanisms of education and the examination system. The shifting relationship between education and the examination system framed the parameters of recruitment and selection, setting the stage for the Song Emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (r. 960–976) and his successors to seek an appropriate balance between schools as recruiting and training grounds for talent and examinations as the means of selection. Chapter 1 focuses on the first ninety years of the Song, following the reigns of the founder, Emperor Taizu, through his immediate successors, ending with the Qingli 慶曆 (1041–1048) reform era under Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (r. 1022–1063). The Song government during these early years faced dual challenges in the educational realm: encouraging attendance at the Imperial University by descendants of official families who were reluctant to participate in government education; and meeting the expectations of rising commoner students seeking to attend the Imperial University in order to advance their prospects for official careers. The struggles to get students to attend classes at the Imperial University have all too familiar a ring to them, despite vastly differing circumstances between then and now! These challenges were to some extent a legacy of the Tang in the reluctance of those of means and elite birth to undergo the rigours of the examination system in order to gain office; scions of officials in the early Northern Song tended to reject efforts to require them to attend school in order to qualify for the examinations, in part because of the lack of congruence between what was taught in the schools (Confucian Classics) and what was tested on the examinations (literary composition). How these two elements (Imperial University education and the examinations) were brought into alignment is part of the story that Chu tells in this chapter, addressing both social change (the rise of commoners seeking office) and intellectual change (to oversimplify: knowledge of the Classics vs. literary skills). Reforms at the metropolitan schools (mainly the Imperial University and the Directorate School) in the 1040s during the reign of Renzong were part of Fan Zhongyan’s 范仲淹 (989–1052) ambitious reform programme, which made educational reform a key element of overall reform because of the essential role that educational institutions played in the recruitment and selection of government officials, seen as the foundation of good government by Fan and his fellow reformers. Fan’s proposals made studying at the Imperial University a prerequisite for participation in the civil service examinations; Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and others were sceptical about the use of government schools to recruit talented officials, believing that the emperor should oversee selection. These differences of opinion

reflect the essence of debates about the proper balance between education and the examination system: in other words, how should recruitment and selection be carried out to achieve the goal of seeking good men to appoint to government office? Chapter 2 deals with the thirty years sandwiched between the ultimately abortive Qingli reforms of the 1040s and the impact of the New Laws of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) on educational institutions in the 1070s, when a variety of teachers and ideas flourished at the Imperial University, among them Hu Yuan 胡瑗 (993–1059) and Sun Fu, as well as Ouyang Xiu. Chu attributes the “high-handed tactics” of Wang Anshi later to the efforts of Ouyang Xiu during this time to exert ideological control by banning the Imperial University writing style (*Taixue ti* 太學體) from use on the departmental examination (*shengshi* 省試).

Chapter 3 turns to the most important institutional innovation of the Northern Song in the educational realm: the implementation of the Three Halls system in the 1070s. As part of the New Laws of Wang Anshi, the Three Halls system was designed to give schools—including the Imperial University—a bigger role in recruiting and selecting men for office. As the author makes clear, the Three Halls system, which established school promotion through a series of “Three Halls” (Outer, Inner, Upper), enabled Wang Anshi and his reformist colleagues to create a mechanism of control that politicized the Imperial University, despite the fact that Wang Anshi was concerned more with the ruler’s control of recruitment and selection rather than with promoting schools, which gave that authority to university teachers (pp. 90–91). Nonetheless, under the New Laws, the Imperial University became “a private academy for Wang Anshi’s learning” (p. 93). Somewhat ironically—as his imperial sponsor, Shenzong, made possible the implementation of Wang Anshi’s New Laws—the assertion of ideological control over education alerted Shenzong to the threat to imperial authority, so he withdrew his support and reasserted his own authority by removing Wang’s followers from their teaching positions (where Wang had installed them to carry out his agenda) and by creating a new regulatory framework for administration at the Imperial University and other metropolitan schools. Chapter 4 takes up the anti-reformist reaction to Wang Anshi’s reforms following the death of Shenzong in 1085. Under the regency of Dowager Empress Gao 高太后 (1032–1093), the mother of Shenzong and grandmother of the heir to the throne, the anti-reformers held sway, managing to convince her to rescind many, if not most, of the New Laws. In the realm of education, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and his anti-reformist colleagues attempted to detach official recruitment from schools in direct opposition to the earlier reforms. But following the young Emperor Zhezong’s 哲宗 (r. 1085–1100) ascent to the throne, he reasserted his father Shenzong’s support for reform, bringing to a close the era of anti-reform, the Yuanyou 元祐 (1086–1094) reign period, and reinstating Shenzong’s policies at the Imperial University. As the author points out, the rapid changes in educational policies at the Imperial University

and other metropolitan schools wreaked havoc on the ambitions of students as well as on the careers of teachers and related government officials.

Emperor Huizong, in turn, not only continued the reform policies associated with his grandfather, Shenzong, and his father, Zhezong, but also intensified them, with the aid of his chief councillor, Cai Jing. Chapter 5 focuses on the 1102 extension of the Three Halls system of recruitment and selection to the entire empire, including the abolition of the civil service examinations, to be replaced by the Three Halls system. The elaborate mechanism of recruitment and selection through the Three Halls system was extended throughout the empire, even though the abolition of the examinations was never fully carried out and the effort was eventually abandoned. For all his notoriety as the last ruler of the Northern Song, Huizong paid more attention to educational reform than perhaps any ruler had before him, putting state effort and resources into building schools throughout the empire and making them the focus of recruitment and selection. Huizong, like his grandfather before him, eventually was alerted to his reformist minister's power as a threat to his own imperial authority and attempted to reclaim it, ultimately abolishing the Three Halls system in 1121 in response to abuses of power by officials as well as the usurpation of imperial authority by Cai Jing. Finally, Chapter 6 addresses the political and ideological control exerted by Cai Jing at government schools through a prosopographical study of teachers and students at the Imperial University. Through this survey, Chu demonstrates that a degree of ideological independence, and thus diversity, characterized the teaching environment at the Imperial University, where teachers sometimes resisted requirements to report and censure students who did not fall into line ideologically and actually criticized the government. He concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the well-known student demonstrations against the government at the end of the Northern Song led by the student Chen Dong 陳東(1086–1127).

Chu states that his primary focus is on the Imperial University, as the book title indicates, and to a lesser extent on the Directorate School (*Guozhi xue* 國子學) and the School of the Four Gates (*Simen xue* 四門學), and not at all on the other more technical institutions. In fact, he necessarily pays quite a lot of attention to the Directorate School, as often the policies directed toward the Imperial University also had an impact on the Directorate School, and vice versa; it would be more accurate to make clear that the Directorate School in relation to the Imperial University is actually an important part of the study. I was surprised that the author did not address the "Eight Virtues of Conduct" as a policy directly in the text, relegating it to a footnote (perhaps because he has published an article about it already?). Still, it seems important enough in relation to the criteria for recruitment to merit direct attention in the main text. Simplistic as it may seem, it would also have been very useful to have an administrative chart as a guide to the relationships among different agencies concerned with higher education in the central government, even if these

relationships were altered by changing policies and, thus, cannot necessarily be accurately presented in a completely static format. It is at times unclear, to this reader at least, how the functions of the Imperial University and the Directorate School are distinguished from each other, how they may overlap, and how they are changing. Even though the author provides a comprehensive narrative account, it would help to have charts depicting the roles and relationship of these two educational institutions at key junctures (e.g., the Qingli reform era and under the New Laws). Moreover, as the author frequently presents arguments related to what he terms “prosopographical” studies of the individuals and groups who populate this work (e.g., p. 46), it is not absolutely clear what he means by “prosopographical.” It may refer here simply to the narrative use of extensive biographical information presented throughout the book to illuminate the individual and collective motivations and perspectives that drove the politics of higher education. But the term “prosopographical” implies at least some degree of quantification, even to the modest extent of providing tables of the data compiled or some kind of guide to the data that could be accessible elsewhere (on a related website?). This would be a welcome resource for the reader, helping to track better the numerous individuals discussed in the book. There are also a number of grammatical errors (e.g., p. 16, bottom, run-on sentence) missed by editors in an otherwise polished text. These are relatively minor criticisms in a work that displays an impressive depth and breadth of research and careful attention to detail that helps us see far more clearly the complicated politics of the Northern Song state in the realm of higher education, which lay at the very heart of governing.

Given recent scandals over college admissions in the United States and elsewhere, it is impossible to avoid seeing contemporary reflections of Northern Song attempts to create open competition in institutions of higher education stumbling on the roadblocks of inherited wealth and related status. This is not to say that Northern Song rulers and officials necessarily sought equity or fairness, but they did seek, at least in principle, the best and the brightest to hold office in the imperial government. The realization of this goal, however, was always conditioned by social, economic, and intellectual, as well as political, forces. The tangled history of these efforts is masterfully illuminated in this book. Chu’s work provides an excellent foundation for understanding both the politics and the “dynamic” institutional history of the Imperial University and higher education in the Northern Song, as well as a thorough examination of the various agents—individual and collective—who represented differing interests and objectives related to the core tasks of recruitment, training, and selection of government officials.

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