

## Examination Essays: Timely and Indispensable Readings for Students in the Sung (Draft)

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The widespread use of printing technology in Sung had made books more accessible to students. Thus, it contributed to the popularization of education and the spread of literacy. And the adoption of the civil service examination system seemed to open a path to officialdom for students, which further expanded the book market: Apart from Classics which they had to study carefully, students also needed all kinds of study aids, which were considered to offer a shortcut for preparation of the exams.

While reading textbooks is certainly important for examinees, they still needed to be familiar with the examination style in order to pass. To them, one of the best ways to follow is to read the study aids collected from those exam works by those who had been successful in the exams. Book printers surely know the profits from this kind of imprint; they collected those successful works and circulated them. Another way is to read study aids compiled from textbooks by scholars who knew how to pass the exams. Printers could also derived profits from selling them. In other words, both kinds of imprints had large markets. This paper examines commercial printing of study aids in the Sung, with an emphasis on the development of examination essays.

### **I. The Use of *Shih-wen***

The type of study aids obviously changed with the contents of examinations. In early Sung the content of examinations focused more on poetry (*shih* 詩 and *fu* 賦), so

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examinees had to understand correct use of rhyme, without which many talented students failed. To help students, Sung government published a book, *A Concise Rhyming Directory by Ministry of Rites* (*li-pu yun-lueh* 禮部韻略), as a study guide. Apart from this official version, there were some other versions compiled by scholars.<sup>1</sup> As the content and form of examinations changed, especially after the education reform in 1071 of Wang An-shih 王安石(1021-86), which placed more emphasis on understanding the Classics, the type of study aids also changed. Students had to specialize one of the Five Classics and took the *ching-i* 經義 (classical essays) examination, in which they were not only supposed to understand Classics thoroughly, but also follow a specific style. Anyone who could not satisfy both requirements would fail the examinations. Policy questions, *ts'e* 策, were also a part of the examinations.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, study aids for classical essays and policy questions started to appear in the market.

It is difficult to say when study aids for policy questions (*ts'e-kua* 策括, or collections of policy essays) first appeared. However, in 1071 the famous essayist and poet Su Shih 蘇軾 (1037-1101) mentioned such collections in one of his memorials, complaining that some scholars collected some important paragraphs from Classics and Histories, as well as of essays on current affairs and compiled them into individual volumes and circulated them. During the examinations, students simply “plagiarize”

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<sup>1</sup> See Ning Hui-ju 甯慧如, *Pei-sung chin-shih-k'o k'ao-shih nei-jung chih yan-pian* 北宋進士科考試內容之演變 (Taipei: Chih-shu-fang, 1996), 97-99. Also see Chao Yen-wei 趙彥衛, *Yun-lu man-ch'ao* 雲麓漫鈔, 2 vols. (reprint, Taipei: Hsin-wen-feng ch'u-pan kung-ssu, 1984), v. 1, chuan 5, 144-145.

<sup>2</sup> Ning Hui-ju., 104-108, 124-135.

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(copy) parts from them. “even the examiners cannot tell [that those examinees cheat].”<sup>3</sup>

Su memorial reflects how useful such study aids were to students and therefore how popular those imprints were in his time. Later on, study aids for classical essay questions were also commercially printed. Just how popular were those study aids? The following citation is an example from the Norther Sung.

Li Hsieh 李偕. . . was sent to the capital to take the metropolitan examination.

After the examination, he dreamed he visited one of his classmates, Ch'en Yuan-she 陳元舍. When they greeted to each other, however, Ch'en still held a yellow-cover book in his hand, which looked like the *shih-wen* 時文 [literarily “current style of essays,” meaning examination essays, i.e., study aids] sold in bookstores, and continued to read it, without exchanging conversation with Li. The latter was angry with not being well received. . . and grabbed the book, saying: “How can you ignore me? I am leaving!” Yuan-she then slowly gave his book to Li, replying: “Don’t be mad at me. Look, these are exam essays that were placed in the first place in the metropolitan examination this year.” Li took a look at it and found they were his own essays, including those of the three sessions. On the first page the words “Li Hsieh: the first place in the metropolitan examination” were printed. As he was just about to turn to the second page, he woke up and heard somebody knocking the door. It was a messenger [to tell him that he took the

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<sup>3</sup> See Su Shih, *Su Tung-p'o ch'uan-chi* 蘇東坡全集, 2 vols. (reprint, Shanghai: Chung-kuo shu-tien, 1986), “tsou-i chuan 奏議卷,” chuan 1, 399. Also see Chao I 趙翼, *Kai-yü ts'ung-k'ao* 陔餘叢考, chuan 29 “t'ieh-kua ts'e-kua 帖括策括,” 613.

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*chin-shih* degree]. Later, when examination essays were circulated, the content of the volume was exactly the same with what he saw in his dream.<sup>4</sup>

For our purposes, the authenticity of the dream is less important than some of its details. Nevertheless, there are a few things worth noting. First, it reveals that students could purchase *shih-wen* in bookstores, suggesting that such works had become indispensable readings for them. Second, the content of *shih-wen* sold includes three sessions of the examination, i.e., classical essays, policy questions, and poetry (*shih* and *fu*). Third, after the list of new *chin-shih* was released, essays written in the examination by those who were in the first few places would be circulated. To students who are still preparing for the examinations, these *shih-wen* are models to follow. So there is always a market for them.

Another example from Southern Sung can give us an idea how important *shih-wen* became in the examinations. When Hsin Ch'i-chi 辛棄疾 (1140-1207), a famous poet and scholar-official, defected to the Southern Sung court from Jurchen, he was told that he needed to pass the civil service examinations and served in government. He replied: "How hard can that be? I simply need to spend three hundred coins to buy a copy of *shih-wen* [and read it]." After he passed the metropolitan examination and received an imperial audience, Emperor Hsiao-tsung 孝宗 (1163-89) made fun of him, saying: his is the man who spent three hundred coins to buy my position."<sup>5</sup> It seems that *shih-wen* is

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<sup>4</sup> Ho Wei 何蘧, *Ch'un-chu chi-wen* 春渚記聞(reprint, Shanghai: Shang-hai shu-tien, 1990), chuan 1, 4a-b. I first saw it in Li Ao 李敖, "Sung chin k'o-ch'ang-shu: k'ao-shih ta-ch' n i-lei ti shu tsai sung-tai shi ch'a-chin ti" 宋禁科場書:考試大全一類的書在宋代是被禁的, in his *Li Ao ch'uan-chi* 李敖全集, 6 vols. (Taipei: Ssu-chi ch'u-pan-she, 1980), 351.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Yun 王惲, *Yü-t'ang chia-hua* 玉堂佳話, in *Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng ch'u-pien* 叢書集成初編, v. 326 (Beijing: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1985), chuan 2 "Hsin Tien-chuan hsiao-chuan" 辛殿撰小傳, 19. I first saw it in Li Ao, "Sung chin k'o-ch'ang-shu," 351-352.

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very helpful for students to pass the examinations. Hsin Ch'i-chi's case shows that *shih-wen*, rather than the Classics, were the most important reading for students who wanted to take the examinations.

### II. Government's Attitude

If successful preparing for the examinations meant placing more emphasis on reading *shih-wen* than the Classics, then such approach obviously conflicted with the moral purposes of reading the latter, which was, after all, a major point of including classical essays in the examinations.<sup>6</sup> Under such circumstances, Sung court would definitely want to ban on those study aids. In *Sung Hui-yao* 宋會要 we see such injunction:

[In 1103. . .] to have students study classics as hard as those in Yuan-feng 元豐 period [1078-85], there is no better way than to destroy the printing blocks of *shih-wen*. From now on, only those essays placed first in the metropolitan examination, the entrance examination of Imperial College, and special examinations may be circulated. Other than these imprints, none is allowed for sale. Administrators of each prefect and county and the Directorate of Education are responsible for supervising the circulation of such imprints.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, this edict did not prevent commercial printers from selling *shih-wen*. In 1108 a local administrator urged the court to ban on *shih-wen* again. In the memorial he complained:

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<sup>6</sup> See Thomas H. C. Lee, *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985), 231260; John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*, new edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 69-73.

<sup>7</sup> Hsü Sung 徐松, comp. *Sung Hui-yao chi-kao* 宋會要輯稿, 6 vols (reprint, Taipei: Hsin-wen-feng, 1976), v. 5, "hsuan-chü" 選舉, 4:3, 4278. (Hereafter cited as SHY)

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Nowadays, largely because essays are written in a short time [in the examinations], scholars' successful *shih-wen* may still have unorthodox ideas. But because printers simply seek to make profits, they make claims about the excellence and freshness of their *shih-wen* and circulate them throughout the country. Young students become susceptible to popularity of *shih-wen* prevailing and try to buy [a copy] and memorize them, in the hope that they will be successful in the examinations. They no longer study deep meanings of the Classics. . . I hereby beseech Your Majesty that if there is any [*shih-wen*] that can be followed by students, please instruct the Directorate of Education and teaching officials of each circuit to circulate them. As for the rest, they should be strictly prohibited. None of them should be sold or kept by people.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently, because of the competitiveness in the examinations meant that in addition to studying Classics, students wanted clear examples for passing the thorny gate. A thorough knowledge of the successful essays greatly enhanced their chances of success. It became absolutely necessary to read those successful *shih-wen* after each examination was held. And inevitably, printers took advantage of the market for such imprints.<sup>9</sup> *Shih-wen* were thus circulated in the country. On the other hand, the government had to make these criteria public; otherwise, students would not have any model to follow. Once those successful works were released, they would naturally be imitated. The government, however, do not consider all successful works can be model *shih-wen*. It is possible that sometimes even none of the successful works meets official criteria in an examination. Moreover, students were supposed to study the Classics hard, rather than reading *shih-*

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<sup>8</sup> SHY, "hsing-fa" 刑法 2:48, 6505.

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*wen*. Releasing those *shih-wen* ranked first in the examinations was therefore a result of compromise between the government high standards and students' urgent need for criteria accepted in the examinations.

### III. The Booming Needs

Since the market was so huge, apparently, “official” *shih-wen* could not satisfy such demand. In 1147 an official reported that printers in some circuits even privately printed *shih-wen* whose format was not in accord with officially specified one and sold them to students.<sup>10</sup> Actually, the court had time and again decreed that all drafts should be reviewed by local government, especially by teaching officials, before they were put into print.<sup>11</sup> It was something far easier to say than to do. From the previous case we can see that local government hardly had any control over printing. As the population increased in Sung, the demand for *shih-wen* grew rapidly.<sup>12</sup>

Small prints, usually called *hsiao-ts'e* 小冊, *hsiao-pen* 小本, or *chia-tai-ts'e* 夾袋策, were another product of examination culture. In 1057 in his memorial on cheating in the examinations, Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修 pointed out that many students cheated in the examinations by carrying “pocket books” to the examination hall. However, at that time these pocket books were hand-written in “small characters” (*hsiao-tzu hsi-shu* 小字細書). Students could find persons to do such work, as long as they were able to afford the

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<sup>9</sup> See Ibid., “hsing-fa” 2:64, 6515.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., “hsing-fa” 2:151, 6557.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Also see Chu Ch'uan-yü 朱傳譽, *Sung-tai hsin-wen-shih* 宋代新聞史 (Taipei: Chung-kuo hs h-shu chu-tso chiang-chu wei-yuan-hui, 1967), chap. 5.

<sup>12</sup> For the growth of the number of students, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 35-41.

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price.<sup>13</sup> Due to the availability of printing technology and rising needs for such pocket books, small prints began to appear in the market. In 1112 an official reported that small prints of Wang An-shih's *New Commentaries on Three Classics* (*san-ching hsin-i* 三經新義), together with *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* could be bought from book dealers. Those imprints were so small that they could be put in one palm and carried into the examination hall for cheating. After the examination, those small prints were left all over on the floor.<sup>14</sup> Selling small prints were obviously a profitable business. Such imprints were so welcomed that they were called "handkerchief-box editions" (*chin-hsiang-pen* 巾箱本) by printers in Southern Sung. According to Yeh Te-hui 葉德輝, the imprints he once examined were finely carved and each stroke of the characters was as thin as an hair.<sup>15</sup> If Classics in small prints had huge market, then there certainly would be a need for successful *shih-wen* in small print. In 1224 a preceptor of the Directorate of Education reported that bookstores in Lin-an 臨安 (capital of Southern Sung) had small prints of *shih-wen* for sale, called *chia-tai-ts'e* 夾袋冊. Because those imprints were convenient for cheating and were welcomed by students, among whom they sold for good price. "With these small prints, students did not even need to study at all."<sup>16</sup> Although the government wanted to prohibited bookstores from sale of these imprints, there was hardly any way to ban on them.

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<sup>13</sup> Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修, *Ou-yang Hsiu ch'uan-chi* 歐陽修全集, 2 vols. (Taipei: Shih-chieh shu-chü, 1961), v. 2, "tsou-i chi" 奏議集, chuan 15, "t'iao-yueh chü-jen huai-chia wen-tzu cha-tzu" 條約舉人懷挾文字劄子, 872.

<sup>14</sup> SHY, "hsuan-chü" 4:7, 6:27, 4280, 4329.

<sup>15</sup> Yeh Te-hui, *Shu-lin ch'ing-hua* 書林清話 (1920, reprint, Taipei: Wen-shih-che ch'u-pan-she, 1988), chuan 2, 82; chuan 9, 479.

<sup>16</sup> SHY, "hsuan-chü" 6:49-50, 4340.

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As mentioned previously, because of its overwhelming influence over examinees' writing, the commercial printing of *shih-wen* was a great concern of the government and some scholar-officials as well. The government tried to uphold its high standard by circulating *shih-wen* which had been reviewed by teaching officials and were considered "good." But it is not hard to imagine why students did not value official *shih-wen* as much as the government. After all, there are so many successful *shih-wen* out there. And since they simply wanted to take the degree, rather than placing first in the examinations, why should they follow only *shih-wen* that placed first?<sup>17</sup> The examiners had similar thought too. In his famous "Personal Proposals for School and Official Recruitment" (*hsueh-hsiao kung-chü ssu-i* 學校貢舉私議) written 1195, Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130-1200) argued how the civil service examinations influenced students' way of study.

In recent years the habits of scholars have become imprudent and reckless, and students have no focus or goal [in their studies]. Those who purport to deal with the classics no longer bother to read the original texts themselves or the commentaries of earlier scholars. They merely read and imitate essays that have been successful in the examinations in recent years. Then they compose practice essays on a theme selected from the classics and deliberately bend the original meaning of the text to suit their erroneous views. Although they know they distort the meaning of the classics, they only care about the flow of their prose, not the meaning of the texts. . . The examiners not only did not think [such *shih-wen*]

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<sup>17</sup> In SHY there is a memorial pointing out: "Due to some pedantic scholars passed the examinations by a fluke, their *shih-wen* were thus imitated." See *ibid.*, "hsuan-chü" 5:10-11, 4303-04.

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improper, but consider them outstanding and put them in the first few places.

Therefore, such practice became prevalent. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Here, Chu Hsi pointed out that examiners should also be responsible for the “bad habits” of students in their studies. The court also acknowledged the problem and instructed examiners to be cautious and prudent in grading *shih-wen*; otherwise, they would be demoted.<sup>19</sup> In government documents this problem was actually seen as “not meeting the criteria” (*pu-chung-tu* 不中度 or *pu-chung ch'eng-shih* 不中程式).

To deal with such circumstances, the government, again, resorted to officially selected *shih-wen*. In 1171 the government selected those *shih-wen* that “met the criteria” in the entrance examination of Imperial College and circulated them, in the hope that students would imitate those *shih-wen*.<sup>20</sup> Similar measures probably were taken several times in Southern Sung. However, Sung government still could not do anything about students' preference of commercial printing of *shih-wen* to official editions. To make officially selected *shih-wen* more authoritative, in 1205 Sung government published a collection of *shih-wen*, which were selected from those whose writers served in the government and those *shih-wen* were considered “elegant.”<sup>21</sup> The government hoped that, with the reputation of the writers, the official collection would have influenced over students.

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<sup>18</sup> Chu Hsi, “Hsueh-hsiao kung-chü ssu-i,” in Hsiung Ch'eng-ti 熊承滌 and Ch'iu Han-sheng 邱漢聲, eds. *Nan-sung chiao-yü lun-chu hsuan* 南宋教育論著選 (Beijing: Jen-min chiao-yü ch'u-pan-she, 1992), 129. The translation is Wm. Theodore de Bary's with minor revision. See Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, revised edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming), chap. 21.

<sup>19</sup> SHY, “hsuan-chü” 5:23, 4310.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., “hsuan-chü” 5:40-41, 4296-97.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., “hsuan-chü” 5:31, 4314.

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Although whether *shih-wen* collections from Imperial College could achieve the expected goal is doubtful, they must be very welcomed in the market. A case in *Sung Hui-yao* sheds some light on their popularity. In 1198 a commercial printer in Ma-sha 麻沙, Fukien circulated a collection of *shih-wen*, called *New General Essays of Imperial College* (*t'ai-hsueh tsung hsin-wen-t'i* 太學總新文體). Among selected essays three were written by a student called Kuo Ming-ch'ing 郭明卿. In this collection Kuo was said to place first in the entrance examination of Imperial College in spring 1197. However, after checking with Imperial College, the Directorate of Education discovered that Kuo eventually was not admitted to the College, nor did he even write those essays. In other words, the printer faked Kuo's *shih-wen*. And, to attract more buyers, he even further faked comments of Director of College on the faked essays.<sup>22</sup> There was also a case that commercial printers in Chien-ning 建寧, Fukien and other areas had scholars faked famous scholar-officials' *shih-wen* and circulated.<sup>23</sup> These cases show that profits out of selling commercial printing of *shih-wen* is very enormous and that was why some printers even faked them. By Southern Sung *shih-wen* eventually became indispensable readings for students.

## IV. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of the civil service examinations is to recruit eligible men into bureaucracy through examination of their understanding of the Classics. But, ironically, as time passed by, instead of intensely studying just the Classics, students took those

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., "hsing-fa" 2:129, 6546. For the printing industry in Fukien during the Sung and Yuan, see Lucille Chia, "The Development of the Jianyang Book Trade, Song-Yuan," *Late Imperial China* 17:1 (June 1996), 10-48.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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successful *shih-wen* as the models to imitate. In effect, what the examination system tested was how well students read *shih-wen*. Many, probably most, *shih-wen* the students read were not in agreement with government high standard. But no matter how “inappropriate” examinees’ *shih-wen* were, examiners had to selected among them. When those “inappropriate” but successful *shih-wen* were circulated by commercial publishers, students would imitate them. This cycle went on and on in Sung despite the government frequent and ineffective ban on such commercial printing. The Sung government’s other method to influence students’ writing was to published official collection of *shih-wen*. This measure seemed to be welcomed by students, but its effect was limited. The government simply had no control over commercial printing of *shih-wen*. Nor was it able to exert influence over students’ studies.

There is one question worth studying further. Not only *shih-wen* were usually cheaply and badly printed, but even for scholars themselves, writing *shih-wen* was merely a step stone to official position rather than a demonstration of their erudition. Among Sung men’s collected works, no *shih-wen* were included. At least nine prefaces for *shih-wen* collection, however, were written by Yuan scholars, of which six were for personal *shih-wen* collection.<sup>24</sup> This implies that Yuan men’s attitude toward *shih-wen* differed from that of their predecessors. But when did it occur? Not until Yuan, or the change had began in Southern Sung? What does the change mean?

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<sup>24</sup> See *Yuan-jen wen-chi p’ian-mu fen-lei so-yin* 元人文集篇目分類索引 (Taipei: Wen-shih-che ch’u-pan-she, 1984), 528.

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These are only a few questions important for understanding the examination culture in the Sung. Through research on the questions raised above, we may learn more about how the examination system influenced scholars.