

‘RU’ VERSUS ‘LI’:

THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN

THE GENERALIST AND THE SPECIALIST

IN THE NORTHERN SONG

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The idea that officials can be divided into two kinds, one valued for their cultural virtuosity, the other confined to quotidian tasks, is not a Northern Song invention. Since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) at the latest, this idea had already formed in response to the institutionalization of Confucianism. The state’s official endorsement set off a series of changes: the canonization of the so-called Confucian classics, the rise of *ru* 儒 (roughly translated as “Confucian scholars” during this time)¹ as a new political force, and the growth of their self-awareness, one that drove them to seek not only political perpetuation but also representation of their ideology in government. These scholars staged a contrast between themselves and *li* 吏 (conventionally translated as “administrators”): another kind of bureaucrat cultivated in the previous Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). The image of a *li* was of someone intellectually obedient, empirically knowledgeable, and efficient in day-to-day administration.²

1. The meaning of the term *ru* constantly changes due to cultural, political, and social vicissitudes, and hence corresponds to different translations in different time periods. At the most general level, this term refers to the ruling cultural-political elite since the Han dynasty. I use “Confucian scholars” to refer to the *ru* who had newly risen to political prominence and distinguished themselves from other bureaucrats without a comparable “scholarly” background in the Han, and “literati” to address the *ru* who identified themselves with a meritocratic examination degree and/or official holding in the Song dynasty. At more specific levels, as this article will show, *ru* represents a much more defined image of literati, and thus can be translated more idiosyncratically as “the generalist.”

2. For a very detailed discussion of the emergence of this dichotomy in the Qin and Han periods, see Yan Buke 閻步克, *Shidafu zhengzhi yansheng shigao* 士大夫政治衍生史稿 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1996). A central theme in this work is to correlate the dichotomy of

Calling someone a *ru* or a *li* was essentially a labeling practice. In the ages subsequent to the Han, people picked up the practice for reasons specific to various historical contexts.³ The dichotomy of *ru* and *li* in the Northern Song is one among many other variants. Although novelty was not its remarkable feature, it had grown into a massive discursive phenomenon in the Song. Literati from all over the empire used this dichotomy in their writings, and the range of genres ran from personal musings to public memorials. The examples cited in the next section exemplify a vast body of writing.

The most immediate goal of this study is to seek a translation of this dichotomy which more accurately captures its historical propositions in the Northern Song. The new translation I propose is “the generalist” versus “the specialist.” My choice of terms has a distant echo in Max Weber and his early judgments on the nature of the officialdom.⁴ But a generalization of institutional reality is not my concern. This article is a study of ideas and remains firmly grounded in historical voices.

The Problem and Terminology

My selection of examples focuses on the early to mid-Northern Song, especially the first half of the eleventh century. It was an age of reforms and revolutionary ideas. The newly founded dynasty had enforced civil service examinations, a meritocratic mechanism to recruit talented men who would serve in the government in place of the bygone aristocracy. Eager to envisage more effective forms of government, these examination-generated literati

ru (also known as *rushing* 儒生) and *li* (*wenli* 文吏) with the ideological contestations between Confucianism and Legalism. Yan argues that as the two ideologies eventually coalesced into what he called “scholar-official politics” (*shidafu zhengzhi* 士大夫政治), the dichotomy of *ru* and *li* disappeared, leading to the rise of a new type of official who shouldered both cultural and administrative responsibilities. This article demonstrates that this dichotomy did not vanish in subsequent ages. In the Northern Song, it bespoke neither an ideological confrontation nor an institutional division; instead, it represented a search for intellectual orientations within literati themselves.

3. For its appearance in the Tang and Five Dynasties, see Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南, *Zuzong zhifa: Bei Song qianqi zhengzhi shulue* 祖宗之法: 北宋前期政治述略 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2006), 123–129.

4. Max Weber famously claims that Confucianism rejected “the professional expert,” leading to the “the absence of rational specialization” in the officialdom. See Max Weber, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. & ed. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 159–160.

propounded myriad reform ideas and implemented a number of them. The key figures in this study, such as Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and Li Gou 李覲 (1009–1059), were among the major advocates of the Qingli 慶曆 Reform (1043–45) initiated by Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052). This movement, though short-lived, gave birth to an enduring legacy of reform.⁵ Other featured figures, such as Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), perpetuated this legacy. Literati in the Northern Song had a reputation for enthusiastically instilling cultural visions into political solutions.⁶ None of the aforementioned historical figures shared a strong consensus with one another in their specific political philosophies; some of them even engaged in long-term mutual antagonism. Yet the dichotomy between *ru* and *li*, as I will show in the following sections, connected them in ways that transcended the notorious factional rivalries.

In 1066, the third year of the Zhiping 治平 reign (1064–1067), Ouyang Xiu submitted two memorials in a row to suggest amendments to the current recruitment policy of the Imperial Libraries.⁷ A main problem, in his view, was that the recruiting authority “prioritizes competence and neglects *ru* learning” (先材能而後儒學), and “values undertakings of *li* and discounts literary composition.” (貴吏事而賤文章).⁸ By juxtaposing the two contrasts Ouyang staged a distinction, one that differentiated officials primarily identified with *ru* learning and literary talent from those competent in *li* type of tasks. Deeply concerned, Ouyang elaborated his definitions of the two types.

5. For an account of this reform, see James T. C. Liu, “An Early Sung Reformer: Fan Chung-yen,” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 105–131. For Ouyang Xiu’s participation, see James T. C. Liu, *Ou-yang Hsiu: An Eleventh-Century Neo-Confucianist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 40–51. Li Gou never managed to obtain an appropriate appointment in the officialdom through examinations, but he lent consistent support to Fan in the role of an influential school instructor. For his interactions with Fan Zhongyan, see Jiang Guozhu 姜國柱, *Li Gou pingzhuan* 李覲評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1996), 35–39.

6. This is a rather widely accepted observation among scholars. For instance, Yü Ying-shih’s 余英時 coinage of the term “political culture” (*zhengzhi wenhua* 政治文化) primarily intends to highlight this activist spirit, which started in the Northern Song, and, in his opinion, extended through the Southern Song. See Yü, *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie: Songdai shidafu zhengzhi wenhua de yanjiu* 朱熹的歷史世界：宋代士大夫政治文化的研究 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2004).

7. Ouyang Xiu, *Ouyang Xiu quanji* 歐陽修全集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 114.1727–1728.

8. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1727.

He called the first group “ministers of *ru* learning” (*ru xue zhi chen* 儒學之臣), and described them as follows:

[He] has unclouded knowledge of humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music, in addition to an understanding of order and disorder in the past and the present. [His talents in producing] literary works and critical analysis [make him a desirable candidate] with whom to discuss with all affairs under the heaven. He who is able to dispel controversies and to determine policies, and who considers the management of the state from the perspective of morality, is known as a minister of *ru* learning.⁹

He then defined the second type, an “official of competence” (*caineng zhi shi* 材能之士), that is, a *li*, as follows:

[He] understands affairs concerning money and grains and comprehends the proceedings of punishment; he is familiar with municipal affairs, competent in administration, and he makes contributions by accomplishing tasks in a diligent and efficient manner.¹⁰

Given their distinctive functions, Ouyang Xiu further argued that these two types of officials should be placed accordingly and differently:

Therefore, [the emperor should] deploy officials of competence within and without the court, appoint them to positions of all capacities, and assign them to their respective jobs. [The emperor] should have the ministers of *ru* learning close to himself. [He should] discuss [policies] with them day and night so as to identify the essentials and carry them out. [The emperor] should select the outstanding ones from schools, install them at the imperial court, and entrust them with policy-making power. [The emperor] should assign them to lead all officials and to supervise [all procedures of] promotion, demotion, reward, and punishment.¹¹

It was due to this distinction that the current recruitment policy was inappropriate. The Imperial Libraries served as the cradle of grand councilors and other policy makers. Incumbents in certain positions therein constituted the de facto candidate pool of the top echelon.¹² To Ouyang Xiu, policy makers,

9. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726

10. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726

11. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726–1727.

12. For the significance of the appointments in the Imperial Libraries, see Li Geng 李更, *Song dai guangde jiaokan yanjiu* 宋代館閣校勘研究 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2006), 58–60.

including their candidates, should be those with the qualities of a minister of *ru* learning. He further invoked history to support this petition:

Therefore, scholars of *ru* learning are obviously valuable. How can they be rated under officials of competence? None of the sagacious rulers in the past did not exalt this type of scholars or promulgate their learning. Eight or nine out of ten eminent ministers [in history] were scholars of *ru* learning.¹³

Ouyang Xiu's memorials provide a classical definition of the dichotomy in question. Moreover, his presentation showcases a typical phenomenon which often characterizes the articulation of the problem: while the divide is clear-cut, the terms assigned to identify the two sides are flexible and inconsistent. For instance, Ouyang lumped terms such as "ministers of *ru* learning" and the production of "literary works" to represent one side, and "competent officials" and "affairs of *li*" to refer to the other. Judging from the syntactic arrangement, he treated the two terms on each side as equal and undistinguished.

In many other contexts, the literal translations of these terms are not necessarily synonyms. For instance, as we can see from Ouyang's own definition in this very quotation, talent in literary composition (*wen*) was but one among other qualities of a minister of *ru* learning. In a broad sense, literati during this and later periods would have little problem using *wen* as a synecdoche for "*ru* learning" (or simply "learning"). The Ancient Prose Movement, in which Ouyang played a significant part, had enlarged the term *wen* to include such meanings as the textual tradition based on the Classics, the social and cultural values associated with antiquity, and, eventually, practical implications in government design.¹⁴ *Wen* thus can be more loosely translated as "cultural." But it can still be used in more specific senses, such as merely "literary composition." In other contexts, Ouyang Xiu did not hesitate to apply this narrow definition and distinguish it from "learning."¹⁵ When thus identified, *wen* may even become an intellectual antonym of "learning," depending on the context, for it may conjure up a shallow attachment to belles-lettres, a vogue associated with the bygone Tang dynasty and made obsolete during the Ancient Prose Movement.

13. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1727.

14. Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge & London: The Harvard University Asia Center & Harvard University Press, 2008), 49–52.

15. For instance, Ouyang Xiu discussed *wen* and *xue* as two distinctive qualities of a literatus friend of his. See Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 72.1045.

But in this case these nuanced distinctions clearly did not concern Ouyang; the undifferentiated use of terms shows that his attention focused on a different set of issues. His arguments can be condensed as follows: one group of literati should be distinguished from the other due to certain cultural achievements and because they functioned beyond concrete day-to-day undertakings. According to this line of thinking, a literatus's cultural achievements should be taken as a whole and then evaluated in the context of the bureaucracy in action. The debate was not over what qualities a literatus par excellence should have, but rather over what he could accomplish when serving as a civil servant. It was an issue that straddled knowledge and action.

Postulating such a distinction was not Ouyang Xiu's idiosyncrasy. During the Northern Song, this dichotomy in its variant forms permeated evaluative discourses among officials; even emperors endorsed this concept to express their expectations. Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 976–997) once issued an edict seeking recommendations for officials who thoroughly understand the “way of a *li*” (*lidao* 吏道) and the “way of a *ru*” (*ruxing* 儒行).¹⁶ Zhao Pu 趙普 (922–992), one of longest-serving grand councilors in the early Song, practiced mostly *li* type tasks in his early life, and was thus weak in “learning” (*xueshu* 學術).¹⁷ After being admonished by the emperor, he became an avid reader of the Classics and history, and eventually surpassed many “erudite scholars and experienced *ru*” (*shuoxue laoru* 碩學老儒).¹⁸ A similar type of evaluative language enjoyed enormous popularity in the eleventh century and beyond. Zeng Gong 曾鞏 (1019–1083) once described a peer, Shen Zhou 沈周 (978–1051), as one who was well-known for being a *li*. In the same passage, he distinguished Shen Zhou's two sons as known respectively for “competence of a *li*” (*licai* 吏材) and “literary talent” (*wencai* 文材).¹⁹

The more frequent reference to this binary concept in the eleventh century reflected its increasing flexibility rather than dogmatization. Not only could *wen* and *li* stand for two types of officials, two types of talents, but also for two qualities that could be found in different life stages of an individual. Wang

16. Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848) comp., *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1976), 27.5

17. Tuotuo (Toktoghan) 脫脫 (1315–1355), *Song shi* 宋史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 256.8940.

18. Li You 李攸 (ca. 12 c.), *Songchao shishi* 宋朝事實, *Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編 edition (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1936), 3.45–46.

19. Zeng Gong, *Zeng Gong ji* 曾鞏集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 45.611–612.

Anshi often paid attention to such transitions and applauded the convertibility as a merit. For instance, he praised Chao Zhongchuo 晁仲綽 (*jinshi* 1040s) and Zheng Sui 鄭隨 (fl. 1040s–50s) as those “who started their careers with distinction in literary proficiency (*wenyi* 文藝) and yet became a capable *li* with competence.”²⁰ Sima Guang once praised the then governor of Kai Feng, Jia An 賈黯 (1022–1065), as one who “started his career known for his literary proficiency (*wenyi*) but did not neglect the learning of a *li*.”²¹

Let's take stock of the terms and translations involved in this dichotomy. One kind of official was referred to as *ru* or *shi*. He possessed “literary/cultural talent” (*wencai*), “the way of a *ru*” (*ruxing*), literary/cultural proficiency (*wenyi*), and talent in literary composition (*wenzhang*). The other type of official was often identified by the term *li*. Literally an “administrator,” a *li*, in Ouyang Xiu's definition, was one familiar with fiscal and legal affairs while also proficient in facilitating general administrative processes (within or outside any of the fields above). This official was thus also known as “a *li* of legal and fiscal affairs” (*xingming qiangu zhi li* 刑名錢穀之吏) and for such qualifications as “competence of a *li*” (*licai*) or “the way of a *li*” (*lida*).

A few issues deserve clarification. In the first place, a *li* was a literatus, too. Although *ru* in most other cases designated the ruling cultural-political elite in the Song (literati) in general, the distinction of *li* from *ru* was not about the ruling elite discriminating against others. As this article will explain, *ru* and *li* were set apart due to different epistemological stances among literati themselves. Socially and politically speaking, they can be imagined as two subgroups in one community, or, more precisely (due to their nature as constructed images), as two faces that a literatus could don.

Specifically, *li* does not refer to clerks, who constituted a social group distinct from literati. The potential confusion arises from the fact that the official designation of a clerk was *xuli* 胥吏, or *li* for short. A clerk was not a literatus. He served outside rather than inside the formal officialdom. A typical clerk was placed in his position not for his achievement in the examination compound, but for his affiliation with a certain lineage. Most clerks never had the opportunity to receive a formal education. The lack of examination education and/or

20. Wang Anshi, *Linchuan xiansheng wenji* 臨川先生文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 50.528.

21. Sima Guang, *Sima wenzheng gong chuanjia ji* 司馬文正公傳家集, *Guoxue jiben congshu* 國學基本叢書 edition (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1937), 26.368.

office holding denied them membership in the literati group.²² From the beginning of the dynasty, the Song state drew a rigorous demarcation between ranked officials and clerks. In theory, clerks were prohibited from promotion into the officialdom, save for very few exceptions.²³ It was practically impossible for a *li* who started outside the ranked bureaucracy to rise into the top echelon. Given this background, it is highly unlikely that incumbents in the high ranks (such as the ministers in Ouyang Xiu's comment) were ever clerks.

In a similar vein, there was no explicit sign that the use of *li* applied to any other groups which had little or dubious association with the literati. The military service officials constitute one example.²⁴ They shared with the civil servants (quintessential literati) membership in officialdom and sometimes similar career paths, but were different—or rather, lacking—in cultural credentials. The military service examinations tested candidates on such skills as archery and horsemanship as well as knowledge of military classics and stratagems. Literary and classical training claimed no mandatory status in this curriculum.²⁵ In addition, although many bureaucrats of military background

22. For the definition of literati, or *shi*, in the Northern Song, see Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 48–58.

23. For discussions on the distinction between officials and clerks, see James T. C. Liu, “The Sung Views on the Control of Government Clerks,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 10 (1967): 317–344, and Winston W. Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 23–24. According to John Chaffee, merely 0.9% of the incumbents of the officialdom were promoted from clerks in 1213. See John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 25. For a summary of the policies for making these exceptions, see Miao Shumei 苗書梅, *Song dai guanyuan xuanren he guanli zhidu 宋代官員選任和管理制度* (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 1996), 92–97.

24. By “military service officials,” I refer to “*wuxuanguan* 武選官,” a group institutionally separate from “military officials” (*junzhi* 軍職). Strictly speaking, this group of people were bureaucrats, not members on active duty in the armed forces. The major difference between a military service official and a civil servant was that the former received a military titular rank (*guan* 官) and the latter a civil titular rank. But they could both serve on substantive appointments (*chaiqian* 差遣) in civil, rather than military, service. For a detailed study of this category, see Zhao Dongmei 趙冬梅, *Wen wu zhijian: Bei Song wuxuanguan yanjiu 文武之間: 北宋武選官研究* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010).

25. For a brief introduction to the curriculum, see Miao, *Songdai guanyuan*, 23–24. Taking the examination was not the only way to gain this membership. Many candidates were recipients of *yin* protection privilege; some were originally civil servants who had had a transfer. But these other options do not provide substantial evidence to challenge the general idea that civil service

were indeed appointed to supervise typical *li* business such as local finance,²⁶ no empirical evidence shows that this group of people dominated the label *li*.

Even among the literati themselves, no standard based on educational credentials fixed the distinction between *ru* and *li*. One of the conventional translations of *ru* is “Confucian,” and yet no sub-group of the literati in terms of curricular exposure could dominate this “Confucianness.” A highly loaded term, “Confucian” implies an array of possible cultural qualities depending on the time period. In the middle part of the Northern Song, the label may be substantiated by a familiarity with the Classics. No sub-set of literati, however, could lay exclusive claim to this knowledge. No matter if a *jinsshi* 進士 (advanced scholars), a *zhuke* 諸科 (various degrees) degree holder, or a *yin* protection recipient, the education that an official received in the Northern Song hinged (to different extents) on the Confucian Classics.²⁷ Thus no clear-cut curricular criterion determined who was “Confucian” and who was less so.

Due to their dominance in the cultural-political scene in most of the Northern Song, the *jinsshi* degree holders may be an intuitive choice as a quintessential *ru*. But empirical evidence—specifically, that extracted from the previous examples—suggests otherwise. For instance, Shen Zhou, the man appraised by Zeng Gong as a *li*, passed the examination and received his *jinsshi* degree in 1015.²⁸ In fact, almost all figures mentioned in previous examples, identified either as *ru* or *li*, were *jinsshi* degree holders.²⁹ This selection is certainly not the result of comprehensive sampling, and it by no means indicates that the *jinsshi* people were particularly *li*- instead of *ru*-oriented. But it suffices to convey one clear message: a *jinsshi* can be labeled as *li*, so this dichotomy was not a discursive instrument to distinguish *jinsshi* from others.

Moreover, the dichotomy finds no fixed ground in the officialdom along

examinees possessed superior cultural credentials. For an introduction to the various ways of becoming a military official, see Zhao, *Wen wu zhijian*, 5–6.

26. One mandatory appointment for a military service official was *jiandang* 監當 (State Monopoly Agent). The military service officials thus had a salient presence in local finance, in addition to local security management. See Zhao, *Wen wu zhijian*, 6, 10.

27. For an introduction to the different degrees, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 23–24. For a brief introduction to the development of the examination curriculum from the start to the mid Northern Song, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 69–70.

28. Wang Anshi, *Linchuan*, 98.1013.

29. Except for the early example of Zhao Pu, who lived in an era prior to the great expansion of the examination system.

functional lines. The division is unclear if we read *li* in its conventional translation, “administrative.” No distinct functional criterion determined who exclusively assumed administrative responsibilities and who did not. All Song officials, to different extents, had to handle administrative processes wherever they were placed. And, as will be discussed later in this article, all officials would find fiscal and legal affairs—the defining subjects of *li*—relevant to their jobs, in certain senses, at some point in their careers. Thus no official could stay purely *ru* without involving some *li* business.

In sum, the dichotomy of *ru* and *li* was not perfectly in line with many better-known distinctions in a social, political, cultural, or functional sense. To take this dichotomy literally can be misleading in a number of ways. It is especially inaccurate to view it as a description of social/institutional reality. A Song person could claim that “Mr. X is a *ru* while Mr. Y is a *li*” in a tone as “matter-of-fact” as can be; his intention, however, was most likely more complicated than mere reporting, and such a statement is essentially different from “Mr. X is a scholar while Mr. Y is a butcher.” This is the type of complexity that historians should grapple with.

This study argues that the binary discursive labels serve to tease out two different orientations among literati. In addition, due to aforementioned controversies, it is clear that such literal translations as “Confucian scholars” and “administrators” are not accurate for characterizing these orientations. Hence, I propose a new translation of the dichotomy of *ru* and *li*: the generalist and the specialist.

Methodological Foothold

Before continuing with further analysis of the dichotomy itself, some methodological discussion is in order mainly to clarify where this study stands. To start with, it is a study of ideas rather than of behaviors or institutions. The subject matter is a discursive practice intended to classify intellectual orientations. Such classification was not an “objective” description of the ways people were; rather, it was a deliberate labeling practice imbued with various purposes other than reporting.

Ru and *li* are not factual profiling of people for two reasons. For one, the practice was extrapolative in nature. Ouyang Xiu’s definition of the “minister of *ru* learning,” for instance, featured a number of propositions—erudition, eloquence, and sound judgment—abstracted from individuals’ qualities and

yet intended to transcend them. For another, such abstraction was exhortative and propagandistic in nature. Again, in Ouyang Xiu's case (and in other examples to be discussed later), he submitted the memorial with an ulterior motive: to get his lot of people into the candidate pool of policy makers. His proposal can thus be read as follows: ministers of *ru* learning—essentially the *ideal type* abstracted from “our” lot—who presumably have erudition, eloquence, and sound judgment among their personal merits, make the best candidates for policy making, and the state *ought to* promote these people over others.

Such fictionality, however, by no means extenuates the historicity of the issue itself. Strictly speaking, no classification scheme is a transcription of reality, for any taxonomical effort has a purpose beyond description, and any classified object is in fact autonomous of any labeling scheme. On the other hand, however distant a label is from reality, it exerts a discursive influence which substantiates a kind of historical significance. When the objects of classification are people, the process is specifically interactive and reflexive. In Ouyang Xiu's example, the definition he proposed is not a factual profile, and yet it is not of his own making either. No one—not even someone as influential as Ouyang—can invent a cultural type out of whole cloth, as he does not live in social vacuum. At the same time, as categories are articulated, people appear ready to fit them, “each egging the other on.”³⁰ In fact, the evolution of Song literati's identity rested on two reflexive processes: the articulation of new identities (often the work of a personage such as Ouyang) and spontaneous fitting into such new types (often the action of literati in groups). The discursive influence of such labels as *ru* and *li* among literati in general is not the focus of this study, and yet it remains an indelible factor in the background.

The second challenge arises from the aforementioned inconsistency of the nomenclature. Namely, the dichotomy does not have an invariable connection with any specific pairs of words, nor does it permanently bond with a binary set of concepts. A concept is a word in the site in which it is used.³¹ The current task is thus more than just a study of two specific semantic units, and the complexity is two-fold.

30. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 100. The discussion of a reflexive relationship between classifications and the classified is inspired by Ian Hacking's “dynamic nominalism.” See Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 99–114.

31. Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 35.

In the first place, participants in this labeling practice sometimes used different words to express the same concept. For instance, Ouyang Xiu rendered the dichotomy liberally as either *wen* versus *li*, or *ru* versus *li*. In such a case, the two words, *wen* in its broad sense and *ru*, can be used interchangeably to designate the same person—the literatus known for his learning. Similarly, “official of competence” is just another expression of *li*.

Secondly, due to the fact that people liberally referenced this dichotomy in various contexts (sites), they sometimes invoked different concepts (not just words) to reify the binary. In Ouyang Xiu’s quotation, he chose a broader *ru/wen*—cultural achievement in general—to contrast with the *li*. Wang in his praise of Chao and Zheng, however, spoke in smaller terms and treated “literary virtuosity”—merely a facet of a broadly defined *wen*—as the opposite of *li*. As previously discussed, literary competence (the narrower *wen*) and general cultural merit (the broader *wen*, the equivalent with *ru* and learning) can either converge or diverge, depending on the interlocutor and his context. Either way, it is clear that Ouyang and Wang, among other participants, felt comfortable choosing from a range of possible concepts to define this dichotomy.

This brings us to the third concern. On what grounds does this study determine that the various discursive episodes are indeed associated with the same labeling practice? The most telling evidence is the relative stability of *li*. Save for rare cases, the word *li* consistently represents one of the two sides, with a relatively focused meaning. The *li* was a group of officials known for their action—skills in financial, legal, and administrative management—and such action did not assert an intellectual association. Since the Han dynasty, the *li* image has been divorced from the various mainstream cultural claims: most often “Confucianism” in its different stages of evolution.

The stability of *li*—in both a conceptual and terminological sense—is also circumstantially evidenced by the flexibility the Song figures demonstrated in defining its opponent, *ru*. Such leniency is noteworthy, for in many other contexts, as has been extensively studied by intellectual historians in past decades, the contestation between various criteria in defining *ru* asserts itself as the center of attention.³² Among the discursive episodes this study cites, however, the tension between *li* and *ru*—rather than that within the *ru*—occupies the

32. A central topic in the study of Song intellectual history since last century, scholarship on the (shifts in) defining qualities of literati is tremendously voluminous. Such qualities normally consisted in the dominant cultural pursuits literati endorsed in their own age. For an exemplary

focal status. The spotlight has shifted; hence the relative indifference towards an otherwise highly contested area of debate.

The constancy of *li* further alludes to a stabilizing force on the *ru* side, a factor that transcends terminological and contextual diversity. Otherwise put, *ru* must have some sort of unity, which is a natural consequence of the long-term resistance of *li*. This unity may be more general in nature, because it arises from the collection of different ideas which come together owing to their common distinction from the *li*. Behind this unity lies a sense of superiority—that “culture prevails.” The sense of entitlement held by the more educated was especially prominent in the Song, as I shall demonstrate later.

In this light, what *ru* pursues is something more than bare action, or what I call knowledge-based action. This knowledge draws particularly on the contemporaneous mainstream cultural enterprise, and its propositional content varies from one period to another. This article will demonstrate that in the Song this knowledge is more than mere ideology. It can be rendered as “ideology” if the ensuing action was essentially political; and yet in the more technical cases the knowledge often translated into an epistemological stance, a vision, and a way of handling things. I would argue that often it could be ideology-free. In addition, in an age so bitterly fraught with factional struggles, both sides, *ru* or *li*, as they were labeled, could be equally ideological (just on different paths).

This unity finds firm ground in the Song literati’s volition. A newly emerged elite group, the literati were the products of the civil examinations. In principle, they received political appointments because they were able to write beautiful prose, make insightful commentaries on the Classics, and respond to policy questions eloquently. To perpetuate the received privileges, they saw an imminent obligation to promulgate the superiority of their cultural merits. The supremacy ascribed to culture to a certain extent served as the foundation of the political legitimacy of the Song literati, hence their diligent pursuit of a capability to convert cultural virtuosity into action.

I conclude this section with the fourth and final methodological concern: if this is not a study of specific words or concepts, how can it be anchored in history? Or, how do we ascertain the historicity of this dichotomy, and what exactly is it? To answer this question I propose a spatial metaphor: it

attempt, see Peter K. Bol’s tackling of the transition from belles-lettres to learning. Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, 108–147.

is a riverbed. This dichotomy provides a structure and a ground by which individual literati navigated their self-searching journeys. It is not, however, a rigorous framework or a static tradition. A historical study acknowledges no such a priori tradition.³³ But the specific discursive episodes—waters, to complete this metaphor—have fallen into a range rather than dispersing in all directions.³⁴ This riverbed is the contour of the collective existence of all waters. The contour and the flow of stream conspire to emerge hand in hand.

The Song riverbed owed its existence to the past as well as the present. The literati drew on its previous existence for lexical precedents (the use of *wen*, *li*, *ru*, among other words) and significance (specifically the sense of superiority ascribed to culture). The new waters keep flowing through contemporaneous conditions and continue to sustain the contour.

The riverbed contains the waters; such containment is a weak type of control which provides references and suggests directionality. It does not, in any strong sense, determine the specific meanings of every related historical dialogue and has no control over how individuals intend to use it. Therefore, in every example—Ouyang Xiu and others—users of the dichotomy almost always had a specific purpose for engaging the labeling practice beyond fitting in or affirming this conceptual binary. Ouyang's case exemplified a typical motive: to promote his own bloc. Such an agenda resurges in many other Song examples.

The dichotomy held a general appeal to people with self-promotional purposes because it provided an apt framework for distinguishing the quali-

33. In determining the meaning of an utterance, a central question that has provoked prolonged debates among philosophers is which side—individuals or social influences—has more agency. This article endorses Mark Bevir's opinion that historical meanings are always meanings for specific individuals. "Social influences," or, otherwise put, the historical occasions of an utterance, may find their reflections in ideas individuals make, but the surroundings do not play a deterministic role which deprives individuals of their agency. There is thus no such a thing as a tradition, a social convention, or, in general, an ideal type, which fixes meanings and leaves no room for individuals' innovation. The discussion of a "weak control" in the next pages also draws on inspirations from Bevir. For a summary of the debate and explications of his own idea, see Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31–77.

34. The riverbed-waters metaphor is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), section 96–97, 15.

ties of a *litteratus par excellence*. The most cultured and most useful *ru* was an open-ended contract. To fulfill this role one should translate culture into action. A contrast with bare action (*li*) would throw a translation agenda into sharp relief. Also, possible translations could come in a variety of forms, thus contestations among different agendas sometimes flared up against this structure as well.

The dichotomy thus can be spelled out in various specific ways in accordance with correspondent contexts; its abstract nature antecedes such flexibility. But the diversity of authorial intentions accentuates rather than dilutes such a common horizon. Each particular signification draws on the lexical precedents (*wen*, *ru*, *li*) and conceptual precedents in the form of general propositions ("culture prevails") for efficacy and legitimacy. It is true that a user of a word must come to know its meaning through a private process of matching the lexical unit with a certain signification. At the same time, it is hard to argue that one can use a word in a radically innovative way, that is, completely independent from precedents as well as the community which has fostered them. Acknowledgement of individual agency does not undermine collective continuity (in a weak sense, in the background). Just like the waters, historical agents along with their intentions, agendas, and contexts are in constant flux. And yet the surging waters are contained within the banks rather than running unchecked.

More importantly, the vicissitudes of the waters are by no means equivalent to a shift in the riverbed. The two sets of dynamics nestle at different depths in the intellectual world. Accordingly, they function as explanations at different levels when employed in historical analysis. In Ouyang Xiu's example, at a greater depth in the background, a conceptual precedent (non-exclusively) correlated with lexical precedents *ru* and *li* provided directionality: "culture-based action has superiority;" closer to the surface was Ouyang's own interpretation of such action and his explicit agenda for seeking promotion. His specific political reckoning does not in any sense discredit the existence or explanatory power of the structure in the background. They cohere in one narrative and yet maintain a spatial distinction. This characteristic applies to almost all examples in the rest of this study.

In the next sections I will examine the propositions of the generalist and the specialist through the voices of Ouyang Xiu and his contemporaries.

Li: *Becoming a Specialist*

The relative consistency of *li* makes it a good point of departure for this study. The propositions Song literati designated for *li* converge into a better-focused image: a *li* was an official known for his competence and efficiency in the day-to-day operations of the state. Competence in statecraft in the Song became specifically associated with finance, laws, and general administration. The three fields will stand out in the examples cited later.

Although in the previous examples *li* was often denigratingly contrasted with a superior *ru*, this image did have a robust positive aspect, which was associated with a call for specialization widely shared among Song literati. Even Ouyang Xiu did not deny the utility of specialists: he saw them as being particularly instrumental for boosting efficiency. In an ideal world he envisioned, these officials should be appointed to “positions of all capacities” in accordance with their specialized skills.³⁵ Ouyang once cited Fang Zhongyan and exclaimed:

If everyone were appointed in accordance with his [special] talent and all official positions were thus appropriately filled, even the times of Yao and Shun (ancient sages) cannot surpass this.³⁶

The attention paid to specialization was resonant with the spirit of the Qingli reform, in which Fan Zhongyan was determined to combat the inefficient and wasteful bureaucracy. By the 1040s, the Song officialdom had already grown conspicuously bloated.³⁷ From a functional point of view, to encourage specialization was a convenient way to downsize the officialdom, for a proper division of labor would help eliminate sinecures and streamline the structure. Although at this point Fan Zhongyan’s reform had already been called off, like-minded ministers such as Ouyang Xiu carried on the cause.³⁸ Viewed against this background, the specialist should be regarded as a role model for the majority of bureaucrats.

The interest in specialization was by no means a partisan phenomenon.

35. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726

36. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 21.333.

37. For statistics and analysis of the problem, see Zhang Xiqing 張希清, “Lun Songdai keju qushi zhi duo yu rongguan wenti,” 論宋代科舉取士之多與冗官問題, *Beijing daxue xuebao* 北京大學學報 5 (1981): 105–123.

38. Ouyang Xiu was even more aggressive than Fan in combating bureaucratic inefficiency and eliminating unqualified officials. See James T.C. Liu, *Ou-Yang Hsiu*, 45–46.

It overflowed the reform agenda to reach even the opponents of Fan. Sima Guang, a critic of many other facets of the Qingli reform, produced an even more systematic statement advocating specialization. To fortify his stance, Sima argued that the significance of labor division was already represented in classical precedents. He named eight ancient sages who epitomized the utmost expertise and enumerated their specialties. Ji 稷 supervised farming, and Yi 益 guarded forests. Chui 垂 led the community of craftsmen, and Long 龍 served as the ruler's advisor. Qi 契 was responsible for implementing moral injunctions, and Gaotao 皋陶 was in charge of instituting penal laws. Boyi 伯夷 and Houkui 後夔 were supervisors of ritual and music, respectively. All of them "spent their entire life times on their appointments without ever a change."³⁹ This, according to Sima, was the key to their successes in becoming the exemplary models of these skills.

Sima Guang then delineated an array of "talents," which constituted the structure of specialization he envisioned in the current government. The "talents" included moral virtues (*dexing* 德行), classical literacy (*xueshu* 學術), government skills (*zhengshi* 政事), military valiance (*yonglue* 勇略), competence in fiscal affairs (*qiangu* 錢穀), and literary talent (*wenci* 文辭). He suggested that people with these talents be appointed to positions matching with their specialties.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he urged the emperor to "ignore the departure point [of one's career] and his seniority" and privilege specialization as the recruitment criterion, so that "men of moral virtues would be in charge of moral teachings; men of literary/cultural virtuosity, advisors; men with government skills, chief administrators; men of valor, generals; men with knowledge of ritual proceedings and legal institutions, experts of rituals and laws."⁴¹

Sima then proceeded to define the specialized skills. Instead of giving normative definitions, he suggested exemplary figures in each field as cues. All role models Sima selected were from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE). For instance, military governors should follow the examples of Wei Qing 衛青 (?–106 BCE) and Huo Qubing 霍去病 (140–117 BCE), two renowned military geniuses who warded off the Xiongnu's aggressions on the northwestern border. Governors of the metropolitan area of the capital

39. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 20.297.

40. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 21.315.

41. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 20.298.

should emulate Zhang Chang 張敞 (fl. 1st c.) and Zhao Guanghan 趙廣漢 (fl. 1st c.), who served as governors of the Han capital. Kong Jin 孔僅 (fl. 2nd c.) and Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (152–80 BCE) were two Han fiscal officials well-known for achievements in state finance.⁴²

Undoubtedly not every “specialty” in this system was equal in significance. Among them, expertise in fiscal and legal areas was most commonly associated with the typical image of a *li*, as attested in the designation “a *li* of legal and fiscal affairs” (*xingming qiangu zhi li*). Viewed against the general background of the Northern Song, the military was a separate institutional category and battlefield skills were less relevant in the context of civil service.⁴³ Moral virtues, classical erudition, and literary talent, as seen in Ouyang Xiu’s definition, were qualities that distinguished ministers of *ru* learning (what I call the generalists) from the remainder of the officialdom. For people like Ouyang and Sima who identified themselves with the generalists, such qualities, as I will explain later with examples, enabled one to transcend day-to-day undertakings and the limited vision of a specialist.

How were contemporaneous officials supposed to obtain the specialized skills and emulate the role models? Sima Guang argued that the only way to accomplish this goal was to stay on the job for a sufficiently long tenure. He cited a more recent example, Chen Shu 陳恕 (fl. late 10th c.), who led the Department of State Finance for more than a decade. Chen, according to Sima, stood out as the most competent fiscal expert of his times. But “is Chen really uniquely talented?” Sima Guang’s answer was explicitly no.⁴⁴ The cause of Chen’s success was that “he was able to serve in the fiscal field for a long time.”⁴⁵

Therefore Sima proposed a new system for training fiscal officials in his own times. In this new program, a literatus would pursue an uninterrupted career in the fiscal sector: starting in a low-ranking fiscal position, advancing to the position of “Probationary Acting Administrative Assistant in the State Finance Commission” (*quan faqian sansi panguan* 權發遣三司判官), if performing well, then proceeding to the position of “Probationary Administrative Assistant in the State Finance Commission” (*quan sansi panguan* 權三司判

42. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 25.355.

43. The Northern Song monarchs were particularly concerned with drawing a strict line of demarcation between the military and civil systems. See Deng, *Zuzong zhi fa*, 174–183.

44. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 25.356.

45. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 25.356.

官), and eventually reaching “Administrative Assistant in the State Finance Commission” (*zheng sansi panguan* 正三司判官). If, at any point, this official’s performance failed to meet requirements, he would no longer be able to stay on this special track and would have to return to the system of regular promotion and placement. In an ideal scenario, a competent, experienced fiscal expert would emerge from the twelve-year training he received along the way.⁴⁶

In addition to Fan Zhongyan, Ouyang Xiu, and Sima Guang, many ministers in mid Northern Song explicitly advocated labor division and specialization. Supporters included, for instance, Sima’s most adamant political foe, Wang Anshi. Disagreeing with Sima on almost everything else, Wang stated his affirmative stance on this issue rather clearly: “a person’s talent would be well manifested through specialization, but destroyed because of scattered responsibilities.”⁴⁷ Another minister, Zhang Fangping 張方平 (1007–1091), a fervent critic of Wang and his policies, held the same opinion on specialization and proposed a system similar to Sima Guang’s.⁴⁸

In the previous examples, almost everyone opposed everyone else’s political opinions, and yet their support of the division of labor was unanimous. The foundation of such consensus lay in the plain utility of specialization and the commonly acknowledged problem of a bloated bureaucracy. This constituted a general “rationale.” Undoubtedly, more specific “motives” would appear as we probe further into details. The particular intention which drove a historical figure into endorsing the rationale could vary from case to case.

During the age of factional struggles, any apparently neutral proposal could come with an elaborate political agenda. For instance, Wang Anshi’s enthusiastic approval of labor division prefaced his aggressive recruitment of “disciples and dependent *li*” (*mensheng shuli* 門生屬吏) into his reform cadre.⁴⁹ These specialists assisted in efficiently implementing Wang’s policies. More importantly, they were an ideologically docile (“dependent”) lot who followed Wang’s grand design without putting up a challenge. On

46. For the details of the program, see Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 356–357.

47. Wang Anshi, *Linchuan*, 39.414.

48. Zhang Fangping, *Zhang Fangping ji* 張方平集 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2000), 9.118.

49. Zhao Ruyi 趙汝愚 (1140–1196), *Song chao zhu chen zouyi* 宋朝諸臣奏議, ed. Beijing daxue Zhongguo zhonggu shi yanjiu zhongxin 北京大學中國中古史研究中心, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 110.1193.

the opposite side, the resentment towards Wang's reform had prompted attacks on this group. Dissidents lambasted Wang's followers as "greedy and base *li*" (*tanbi zhi li* 貪鄙之吏) despite their support of specialization in a more neutral context.⁵⁰ Sima Guang called Sang Hongyang—the epitome of a fiscal official in his previous praise—a liar during a debate with Wang Anshi.⁵¹ Clearly the discourse had shifted direction and all arguments were caught up in the heat of partisan fights, but I would not argue that Sima would henceforth drop his endorsement of labor division. It was a shift of the waters. Deeper in the background, the positive image of a specialist, a potential booster of bureaucratic efficiency, remained an open source for tactical use.

However, the image of a specialist was clearly a forward-looking proposition. The proposed specialization system was far removed from the actual circumstances of this time. In theory the officialdom⁵² would allow no one to take such a long and unbroken career trajectory in a certain field, and thus no one could become a perfect, full-fledged specialist as Sima Guang imagined.

The system of placement and promotion was a centralized, independent mechanism.⁵³ The authority to make placement decisions resided with the

50. *Song chao zhu chen zouyi*, vol. 2, 109.1185.

51. Sima Guang, *Chuan jia ji*, 42.545.

52. The officialdom (that is, the main structure and institutional designs) addressed in this article is mainly associated with the period from the end of the tenth century through 1080, that is, after the beginning of the Zhenzong 真宗 reign (998–1022) and before the launch of the Yuanfeng 元豐 institutional reform (1080). The Zhenzong reign was the formative years of a number of important policies that defined the outlook of the officialdom, and the Yuanfeng reform set off drastic changes ushering in the next phase of development. Gong Yanming 龔延明 divides the history of the Northern Song officialdom into two periods with the Yuanfeng reform as the cut-off point. My discussion approximately corresponds to the first period in his definition. See Gong Yanming, *Songdai guanzhi cidian* 宋代官職辭典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 5–8.

53. The Song officialdom was an unusually complex system. It contained three major vertical hierarchies, namely, *guan* (titular ranks), *zhi* 職 (honorific titles of academic achievement), and *chaiqian* (substantive appointments). *Guan* was the system of salary ranks. *Zhi* was a set of honorific titles which signified and rewarded outstanding intellectual talents (*wenxue gaoxuan* 文學高選). *Chaiqian* was the system of the actual offices of regular appointees, although the designation literally means "temporary ordinances." Within each hierarchy there was a separate mechanism of placement and promotion. Given the purpose of this article, I focus on the mechanism in the system of substantive appointments. For an overview of the three hierarchies and associated mechanisms of promotion, see Deng Xiaonan, *Song dai wenguan xuanren zhu cengmian* 宋代文官選任諸層面 (Zhengzhou: Henan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993).

emperor, the Secretariat-Chancellery (*zhongshu menxia* 中書門下), and the Department of Personnel (*libu* 吏部). The grand councilors and other policy makers who constituted the top echelon were appointed directly by the emperor himself. The Secretariat-Chancellery was responsible for placing officials from rank three through five. The majority of bureaucrats, that is, the sixth grade and below, were registered at the Department of Personnel for promotion and placement.⁵⁴

Except for the emperor, who in theory possessed near-absolute power in enabling any promotion, both the Secretariat-Chancellery and the Department of Personnel, to certain degrees, had to comply with a rigid system to arrange for placement and promotion.⁵⁵ This system laid out a fixed sequence of appointments. The placement mechanism lodged at the Department of Personnel was known as the system of “regular promotion and placement” (*changdiao* 常調), which determined the career trajectories of the mass of Song officials following the sequence:

jiandang 監當 (State Monopoly Agent) → *zhixian* 知縣 (District Magistrate) → *tongpan* 通判 (Controller General or Vice Prefect) → *zhizhou* 知州 (Prefect)⁵⁶

Some who performed well at the level of Prefects would receive further pro-

54. For an introduction to the three-level design, see Deng Xiaonan, *Song dai wenguan*, 30–45.

55. In theory, the higher the rank, the more flexible the compliance. Thus the Secretariat-Chancellery had more power to override the conventions, but exceptions were always made within the confines of the framework. This is attested by the fact that historians have gleaned numerous cases of exception from records of individual experience but have not observed any drastic institutional alterations.

56. This is a summary made by Zhang Fangping in the first half of the eleventh century. Zhang Fangping, *Zhang Fangping ji*, 18.226. To be more precise, this sequence was a broad-stroke map rather than an appointment-by-appointment delineation of actual trajectories. Known as “*zixu* 資序” (Credentials and Grades), it provided a framework for the calculation and assessment of accumulated credentials in the system of substantive appointments (*chaiqian*). Each item in the sequence was a graded category of appointments rather than a specific post. Some terms, such as *qinmin* and *jiandang*, were category labels; others, such as *tongpan* and *zhizhou*, were representative office titles standing in as category designations. The considerable flexibility this system enjoyed in practice further enhanced its complexity. It takes a substantial book-length study such as Deng Xiaonan’s *Song dai wenguan* to fully unpack the complications (specifically, see 101–112). Speaking of its utility in historical studies, it provides a direction, a basic pattern of bureaucratic promotions rather than a step-by-step description of placement. This article draws on this information to discuss the design philosophy of the placement system rather than particular assignments. A broad-stroke structure, therefore, suffices for my purpose.

motions beyond the pool of regular promotion and placement. And the next few steps were stipulated as follows:

[Prefects →] *tixing* 提刑 (Judicial Commissioner) → *zhuanyunshi* 轉運使 (Fiscal Commissioner)⁵⁷

Further scrutiny of the nature of these categories reveals that labor division played almost no role in determining the sequence. This trajectory ran across different departments and overrode distinctions between one office and another. To start with the beginning level, for instance, a state monopoly agent was an official in charge of the state monopolized trades such as salt, liquor, and tea. It was a fiscal position with specialized duties. But in the following post, a county magistrate supervised affairs of all kinds. A judicial commissioner would presumably concentrate on the legal field, but once further promoted he would be switched to the trade of finance. The system required an individual to move among positions which demanded highly disparate skills.

Following this sequence, an official was expected to traverse different fields of expertise, and he was allowed to stay on a particular job for no more than four years (two terms).⁵⁸ The system thus made bureaucrats move at a hasty pace: it allowed merely two (one term) to four years (two terms) for one to learn relevant skills on the job, and it also dimmed, if not extinguished, the prospect of continuing to develop these skills on the next appointment(s). Both characteristics turned the placement system into a deterrent to the cultivation of specialized skills.

The primary reason for the stifling of specialization lay in the dominant role seniority assumed in governing the system. In principle, the life of a bureaucrat was evenly punctuated by a set of hierarchically ranked appointments. Each appointment was designated with a certain grade of seniority.⁵⁹ The bureaucrat became eligible for the next scheduled promotion/placement

57. This is from a memorial submitted by Wen Yanbo 文彥博 (1006–1097). See Li Tao 李燾 (1115–1184), *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 404.9832–9833.

58. Zhang Fangping, *Zhang Fangping ji*, 18.226.

59. Strictly speaking, one's seniority in the Song officialdom was determined by two sets of variables: *zi* 資, seniority credits in the system of titular rank, and *zixu*, seniority in the system of substantive appointments. For a detailed introduction to these mechanisms, see Deng Xiaonan, *Songdai wenguan*, 88–120.

only when he had accumulated sufficient credits to complete his current grade of seniority and had secured recommendations from a required number of references (whose official ranks were also rigorously designated). For a mid- and low-ranking official, expertise on the current job was a minor issue which most likely would not affect his next appointment. The possession of certain specialized skills may have aided a higher-ranking official in landing a promotion, because higher-ranking hires, handled by the Secretariat-Chancellery or the emperor himself, were more likely to be based on the recruiters' personal knowledge of candidates. However, although high-ranking officials had better odds of being placed in a position that fit their expertise, their cases were not representative of the dominant majority in the officialdom.

The concern with the division of labor had been translated into institutional terms to a limited extent, but the role it played was in no position to eclipse that of seniority. A special, open-ranked entrance examination was established to recruit new blood for the legal departments.⁶⁰ Within the fiscal bureaus, some policies were instituted to ensure a higher average rate of promotion.⁶¹ These institutional exceptions provided merit-based opportunities for officials who were prepared for these specialized fields, but officials who were not, that is, the majority of the bureaucracy, would gain no particular benefit. Neither the examination education nor the officialdom provided systematic training for beginners in these fields.⁶² And advanced practitioners (who trained themselves through contingent opportunities) found little promise of

60. For a detailed history of the examination, see Miao Shumei, *Song dai guanyuan xuanren*, 230–237.

61. For an introduction to this practice, see Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China*, 59–60.

62. This is due to the fact that the examination education, especially the *jinshi* kind, was a “liberal arts” type in essence and did not provide hands-on training for any specialized field. Some officials came into the officialdom with an “expert in law” (*mingfa* 明法) degree, but these officials constituted merely a very small faction and normally followed a career path much more constricted than that of *jinshi* degree holders. Few of them reached higher ranks and asserted a presence in historical records. In addition, law was but one sub-category which was lumped together with rites, history, and others in “various degrees.” According to John Chaffee’s statistics, in most of the years (for which we have data) from the 1040s through 1060s, the total number of “various degrees” was less than that of the *jinshi* degree holders. See Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning*, 193. It is thus safe to assume that the number of law degrees was considerably smaller than that of the *jinshi*. These law experts were lesser both in status and number. Therefore, their presence barely evidences a true tendency of specialization.

sustainable development for a career path.⁶³ Specialization was a good idea awaiting implementation.

Empirical observations made in the mid-eleventh century lend testimony to this situation. In Sima Guang's lament, the system obliterated the possibility of receiving consistent on-the-job training. "One official is appointed to take eight different appointments in a sequence."⁶⁴ The tenure of each appointment was brief. "The long one extends through three years, whereas the short one lasts only a couple of months."⁶⁵ Sima thus asserted that it was impossible for an individual to obtain any substantial achievements in this system.⁶⁶ This criticism was echoed by many of his peers. In a memorial Wang Anshi made a sympathetic comment regarding this difficult situation for officials of his time:

One who enters the officialdom with literary/cultural achievements is first placed to deal with finance, and later transferred to take care of legal affairs; as he has taken the legal position, he is again assigned to supervise state rituals. . . . So on and so forth, an individual is made to do jobs of all kinds. How difficult it is to be a competent official!⁶⁷

Wang's criticism is simple and yet poignant: the high frequency of changing posts posed a universal challenge to all officials, as no one could easily adjust to an utterly different job every two years. Wang exclaimed: "if one changes

63. Robert Hartwell suggests the existence of "customary sequences of promotion," which had evolved in the fiscal sector and enabled bureaucrats to follow a fast track. He is right in pointing out that many top-ranking fiscal officials, such as those in his examples, due to various opportunities, were able to get on the express track. In fact, the average promotion rate in the Northern Song officialdom was so low that it was impossible for any official not on the fast track to reach the zenith. It is not surprising that historians are able to extract certain patterns from studying this selected pool. However, the existence of these privileged trajectories did not challenge the dominant concern with seniority in any decisive manner. Most of the lucky few received fast promotions owing to ad hoc opportunities rather than institutionalized rules. If we gather a greater sample of officials to assess Hartwell's argument, we will see that vast numbers of low- and mid-ranking officials stepped in and out of the fiscal sector during their careers. The concern with consistency and stability, after all, was not coded into the placement philosophy of the entire system. See Robert Hartwell "Financial Expertise, Examinations, and the Formulation of Economic Policy in Northern China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 30 (1971): 281–314. For an analysis of the causes of the low promotion rate in the Song officialdom, see Miao Shumei, *Songdaig guan'yuan xuanren*, 390–413, especially 406–407.

64. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 20.297.

65. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 20.297.

66. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 20.297.

67. Wang Anshi, *Linchuan*, 39.419.

his job every two years, does it mean that one turns into a different person every two years? If that is the case, even cattle and horses can be hired [as officials] if they stay long enough!"⁶⁸

The image of "the specialist" was as complex as people made it. On the one hand, it is clearly not descriptive reporting. Not only is it a discursive label, but also, in content, an anticipatory proposition whose distance from institutional reality is enormous. On the discursive level, "the specialist" undoubtedly attested to the specialization ideal, and yet very few Northern Song officials managed to follow a career which fit that model.

On the other hand, a considerable number of officials were undoubtedly adept in managing fiscal and legal affairs despite the absence of institutional support. Compared to other aspects of their careers, these officials demonstrated and were recognized for merits in such technical fields. When identified and self-identified, they were the recipients of the label.

The tension inherent in defining "the specialist" makes it worth asking the question one more time: to people involving in the labeling practice (labeling and self-labeling), what made a specialist a specialist? Specifically, when paired with *ru*, what made a specialist the dichotomous contrast with a *ru*? It may be intuitive to argue that someone's devotion or skillfulness in technical fields would mark them for the title. But these standards were no more than soft rhetoric given that the Song officialdom provided hardly any institutional support for an effective method of assessment. As previously discussed, all officials, regardless of initial background and final rank, would be assigned fiscal, legal, or general administrative responsibilities as they pursued their career paths. And almost all of them received the same standard education. What would be a criterion that does not solely rely on case-to-case observations?

The answer I propose is "intellectual orientation." To clarify the two different orientations, let's tackle the other side—the more vocal *ru*—before returning to "the specialist stance" in the last section.

Ru: *Generalists and Their Stance*

The construction site of *ru* was a busy one. Participants were abundant and their propositions varied. This study can by no means contain a comprehensive survey. Instead, it features one focal figure—Ouyang Xiu—and his

68. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 22.239.

extrapolation of the image of *ru*. It is hard to argue that Ouyang's idea was not representative. For one, he and his idea received privileged attention in his own times, and the radiance of influence he enjoyed was among the greatest. For another, Ouyang was truly interested in this issue and laid out repeated, thorough discussions across his writings. His attempt in defining the *ru* was systematic, and the result comprehensive.

In Ouyang Xiu's definition the *ru* had two salient characteristics: he was a literatus who actively applied his cultural insights to statecraft, and his strength consisted in a vision that transcended particular, specialized skills. The generalist orientation was a complex stance rather than a single, dogmatic position. In Ouyang Xiu's example it comprised four components: a commitment to the application of learning, a cultural vision with an emphasis on fundamentality, an inclusive membership that all serious followers of learning were entitled to, and a methodology meant to identify precedent models.

A comparison with the modern "generalist" is necessary before taking a plunge into the historical example. The Northern Song generalist would find both resonance and difference in his modern counterpart.⁶⁹ Both aim at transcending the compartmentalization of knowledge and evincing an integrated perspective. Also, both generalist perspectives are especially appreciated at the higher reaches of the bureaucracy, while specialists, Song or modern, are meant to occupy entry-level positions. But one notable difference exists. In the Song, the generalist, instead of the specialist, was considered to be a scholar with systematic training, that is, *ru* learning. Unlike a modern specialist (e.g., an engineer), the Song specialist, as previously discussed, was not the product of academic or institutional specialization: he did not acquire his skills from systematic schooling; nor was he guaranteed a career path on which he enjoyed consistent on-the-job training. The Song generalist was instead a scholar who embodied the authority endowed by an academic discipline. Contrary to a modern "dilettante-generalist," he played a carefully wrought role and exercised a deliberate endeavor to reject boundaries of dispersed knowledge. The Song literati would also strongly disagree with Max Weber's reading of this

69. The generalist and the specialist are a pair of concepts often discussed in the study of public administration. For a discussion devoted to the definition of the generalist in the modern context, see Michael Cohen, "The Generalist and Organizational Mobility," *Public Administration Review* 30.5 (1970): 544–552. For a recent review of this dichotomy, see Joe C. N. Raadschelders, "Government and Public Administration: Challenges to and Need for Connecting Knowledge," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 27.4 (2005): 602–627, especially 617–618.

“generalist” stance, which depicts generalists as amateurs whose presence were mostly political or cultural rather than professional. Ouyang Xiu presented a thesis that was precisely the opposite: the generalist stance enhanced rather than diluted the utility of literati in statecraft because generalists drew on their cultural achievements to develop a methodology superior to specialist skills.

Let’s explore the parameters Ouyang had set for *ru* starting with his definition of “ministers of *ru* learning”:

[The generalist] has unclouded knowledge of humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music, as well as an understanding of order and disorder in the past and the present. [His talents in producing] literary works and critical analysis [make him a desirable candidate] with whom to discuss with all affairs under the heaven. He who is able to dispel controversies and to determine policies, and who considers the management of the state from the perspective of morality, is known as a minister of *ru* learning.⁷⁰

The image concocted by Ouyang indeed portrayed a “generalist” in the most literal sense of the word, for he was capable of understanding “all things under the heaven” (that is, everything in the world). Clearly the expectation for him went beyond any single, specific field of expertise.

The first parameter is already evident in the designation. By referring to a “minister of *ru* learning,” Ouyang indicated the root of this image: it was the product of learning. Thus, as a man of his era, this “minister” must have spent much time musing on the Classics, literature, and history. If he entered the officialdom with a *jìnshì* degree, which was becoming the most popular choice among his peers, he would not only have solid textual knowledge, on the basis of which he could write about “humaneness, rightness, rituals, and music” in a refined style, but he could also discuss “order and disorder in the past and present” in his eloquent responses to policy questions.⁷¹ In a nutshell, this man was committed to learning, and he was ready to put learning to use.

This brings us to the second characteristic: what gave the generalist his versatility? The short answer is his vision. In Ouyang Xiu’s definition, this

70. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726

71. Ouyang Xiu, in the 1040s and 1050s (with interruptions in-between), facilitated a number of changes in the curriculum, adding “policy questions” to the *jìnshì* tests and emphasizing its priority over belles-lettres. See Liu Tzu-Chien 劉子健 (James T. C. Liu), *Ouyang Xiu de zhixue yu congzheng* 歐陽修的治學與從政 (Hong Kong: The New Asia Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies, 1963), 173–174, 229–231.

vision was based on “humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music,” or what they eventually cohered into—the ancient *dao*.⁷² In other words, the pursuit of *dao* enabled one to see this world as a specific order and carry out his actions accordingly. In his famous essay “On Root” (*ben lun* 本論), Ouyang stated that “humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music” developed over time to form a coherent social order, known as the *dao*. He put this argument in a “historical” perspective and developed a narrative as follows. In the initial stage of human society, the first priority was food supply. Thus all people were assigned “to exert full energy at working in the fields.”⁷³ As people began to engage in productive activities beyond the most basic kinds, they created regulatory rituals and laid down the basic patterns. These rituals included those of hunting and marriage, among others. Ouyang pointed out that rituals were not just regulatory mechanisms which “forestall chaos,” but also pedagogical instruments which imparted a sense of order.⁷⁴ People who followed rituals would acquire an embodied understanding of the orders such as those of “the superior and inferior” and “the elderly and the young,” or, in general, the “basic ethics of humans.”⁷⁵ Once authorities saw this educational message muddled, they instituted schools to clarify and reinforce it. Up to this point, the ideal society, the embodiment of the *dao*, had finally come to its consummation. In Ouyang Xiu’s summary:

Thus the life of a person is either spent exerting energy at fields, or conducting activities within the patterns established by ritual and music, either within his family, or at schools. What [he] hears and sees every day is nothing but humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music, which prompt him [to live this worthy life] tirelessly.⁷⁶

The vision based on this coherent order was unique because of its basic assumption: a society which nurtured its members was not simply the sum of productive activities and institutions. It drew its productivity from good

72. Learning, as a comprehensive intellectual enterprise, enabled a literatus to acquire multiple talents and skills. In each era the term took on disparate meanings and thus suggested different foci on skills. Since the Ancient Prose Movement, the focus of learning had switched to the pursuit of the *dao* of sages, or the *dao* of antiquity. For an account of this historical transformation, see Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, 15–18. For Ouyang Xiu’s thinking on the *dao*, see Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, 179–180. A few exceptions exist. For instance, Sima Guang was not as keen as most on seeking the *dao* in antiquity. But this difference did not, as will be demonstrated later, divert him from a common concern with fundamentality and precedents, and thus did not contradict his endorsement of the generalist stance.

73. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.289

74. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.289

75. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.289

76. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.289

organization as a whole, thus the patterns in which concrete activities were regulated were crucial. These patterns, which coalesced into one ultimate order—the *dao*—were supposed to transcend any particular undertakings. Only one with a solid knowledge of “humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music” could develop such a vision, and only with such a vision was one able to grasp the ultimate coherence.

The central message that this vision conveys is the significance of discerning and pursuing fundamentality. The word “root” Ouyang used in the title of the essay is an arboreal metaphor of fundamentality, and it ties the argument to the contrast between “root” (*ben* 本) and “branch” (*mo* 末). In this essay, Ouyang Xiu repeatedly emphasized that “all things under the heaven” could be divided into two categories, “root” and “branch,” and it was crucial for rulers to have a clear understanding of this difference. “Root,” as he asserted, was “ritual and rightness” (a short equivalent of the aforementioned four-word phrase),⁷⁷ the grand patterns which grounded various human activities. According to the formula he proposed, a grip of the root would lead one to understand the coherent order of the entire world, the *dao*. Everything else—farming, fishing, schooling, and their concrete planning—was lower on the scale of fundamentality and thus should claim less attention from the ruler. In other words, having the vision helped one to set the priorities right.

To give more historical depth to Ouyang’s use of the root-branch dichotomy, it is necessary to dip into the discursive context. This binary concept enjoyed great prevalence in the Northern Song discourses on statecraft. There was good reason for its popularity: since it was practically impossible for anyone to heed to everything all at once, one, especially the emperor or a policy maker, should have a clear sense of priorities. Sima Guang spelt out the message for the imperial monarch in clearer terms:

Among the tasks of ruling the state, there are the roots, and there are the branches. Among the affairs in ruling the state, there are the small ones, and there are the big ones. One holds up the frame of a trawl, ten thousand mesh holes will follow to open up. One seizes the collar [of a fur coat], all hair [on the coat] will drop straight. Your subordinate wishes that your majesty start with the roots and follow with the branches, prioritize the big and defer the intricate, and then, select appropriate personnel and appoint them [accordingly]. This is the most fundamental method in ruling a state.⁷⁸

77. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.290.

78. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 32.427.

Sima distinguished between a “root” policy and a “branch” policy, as well as a “big” task and an “intricate” (*xi* 細) task. He then specified these categories in the context of labor division in the officialdom. The “big” type, as he explained, included advisory and deliberative positions held by people with “moral virtues and cultural vision” (*daode qishi* 道德器識).⁷⁹ “Moral virtues” and “vision” in his definition were undoubtedly associated with Ouyang’s “ritual and rightness.”⁸⁰ The consensus was clear. On the next lower level Sima placed administrative offices (in prefectures and counties) held by incumbents known for their “observantness and fairness” (*mingcha huihe* 明察惠和).⁸¹ Military offices came next, and, towards the low end of the hierarchy, posts of provisions and services were filled by people with expertise in fiscal and legal affairs. Sima Guang emphatically pointed out that the last category, “fiscal and legal,” was “small.”⁸²

In sum, according to Sima and Ouyang, the fundamental tasks in statecraft were fundamental because they set the basic patterns of human activities right. The fundamentality is well explained through Sima’s metaphors. A trawl, once appropriately held up, would function well with all mesh holes automatically opening up. The hairs on a fur coat would smooth out as soon as the coat is grabbed by the collars (and well shaken). No more energy needs to be spent in spreading holes one by one, or in separating one hair from another. Appropriate handling of the fundamentals would ensure smooth transactions of subordinate procedures and conserve energy spent in tackling particular processes. Once the patterns are rightly set, piecemeal tasks can be conveniently streamlined.

On the other side of the dichotomy, the significance of administrative, military, legal, and fiscal responsibilities was not as great because they were specific, and served immediate interests only. According to Ouyang Xiu’s “historical” narrative, concrete achievements in these areas did not necessarily constitute a coherent improvement. An integrated perspective transcended the sum of specifics. The contrast between the fundamental (long-term) and the

79. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 32.427.

80. Most scholars during this time, including Sima Guang, used “humaneness and rightness” (*renyi* 仁義) as a synecdoche of morality. Among many other examples, Sima once remarked: “Humaneness and rightness are the virtues endowed by heaven.” Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 72.885.

81. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 32.427.

82. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 32.427.

particular (short-term) interest is aptly captured in a metaphor Sima Guang employed:

One who gazes his eyelashes is unable to see far into the distance of 100 steps, whereas one who looks into 100 steps is unable to see his eyelashes.⁸³

While Sima politely juxtaposed the two kinds of officials to imply a complementary relationship, it is clear from the context that those who reached a greater distance ought to be placed in the higher echelon of the officialdom.

The distinction between “root” and “branch” (or “big” and “small”), when translated into institutional terms, finds precedence as early as in the Han dynasty. The famous legal expert Bing Ji 丙吉 (?–55) in the Western Han made an explicit statement:

Grand councilors do not manage small things.⁸⁴

A widely circulated saying, this quotation has provoked varied interpretations over time. The big-small division mentioned above is one of them. The degree of significance was determined according to a structural assessment of the different types of jobs involved in running a state. Grand councilors, thus, did not have to tend to fiscal and legal affairs which only had influences limited to certain compartments of the government. In addition, within their own offices, grand councilors should not squander time on tasks that distracted them from the essential responsibilities. These tasks were often administrative, concerning the supervision and implementation of concrete processes.

Ouyang Xiu clearly gave a full-throated endorsement to this idea. He once submitted a memorial titled “A Note on the Idea that Ministers Do Not Manage Small Things” (“lun dachen buke qin xiaoshi zhazi” 論大臣不可親小事劄子). With explicitly similar diction, Ouyang extended this line of argument beyond grand councilors to dignitaries in general. An observation prompted him into writing the memorial: the leadership in the Ministry of Military Affairs was compelled to deal with day-to-day management work in this bureau because of poor deployment of personnel. He then suggested:

[We should] let ministers focus on deliberation and let subordinate officials divide the [daily] responsibilities.⁸⁵

83. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 32.427.

84. Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 74.3147.

85. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 103.1576.

In sum, policy makers, high ministers, and any official who had a creative, “controlling” aspect to his job should avoid wasting time on procedural work.

In this regard, two types of technical tasks—the administrative and the academically specialized kinds—coalesce in the “smallness” contrasted with the generalist stance. This distinction recalls Sima Guang’s system of labor division, where he differentiated the generalists from administrators and experts. The rationale is consistent: the administrative details of operating a bureau corresponded to the fiscal and legal facilities in running a state; they were both mechanical parts that ensured the appropriate functioning of the machinery and yet remained subordinate to the controlling framework designed by the generalists.

All this discussion addressed what the generalist vision was and why it was important. A *ru* focused on fundamentality. He found it in ritual norms, moral virtues, and, ultimately, in the ancient *dao*. Once the most fundamental framework was appropriately set up, all specific, technical problems of statecraft would be solved with minimum effort. This concern of fundamentality, if translated into institutional terms, required freeing the generalists from the specific, technical type of work normally assigned to the specialists. Such an appeal found precedence in the earlier, almost stereotypical description of the duties of high ministers, that they “do not manage small things.” In the Northern Song, it was further substantiated along with the development of the generalist image.

One further issue: could a high minister ignore state finance? Posing this question may be a violation of the fine nuances Ouyang Xiu intended in his argument. But as relevant and imminent as it was, this query demanded an answer. Sima Guang provided a response, and it was a firm no. He emphatically pointed out that it was a mistake for grand councilors not to heed to fiscal affairs. He argued that it had been a tradition “from antiquity to the present that fiscal affairs are part of the responsibilities of grand councilors.”⁸⁶ The current fiscal crisis was precisely due to contemporary councilors’ ignorance of this tradition.

Hence a dilemma: with both fundamentality and exigency in his job description, should a minister heed to “small things” or not? Since Sima Guang’s answer was yes, a plausible explanation would be that a minister should tend to state finance, just not in a “specialist” way.

86. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 25,362.

This was precisely Ouyang Xiu's answer. In "On Root," he argued that the imminent need to meet basic requirements of human survival was antecedent to the establishment of rituals, and the enforcement of ritual norms was intended to further improve humans' living conditions. Rituals served as the larger framework for the concrete processes in fiscal, legal, and general administration. Amelioration of morality was supposed to produce concrete effects including a better-ordered society and a well-fed population. When the generalists tackled ritual norms, they saw themselves addressing people's welfare in their own, generalist way.

A resolution of the quandary is possible for readers detached from an officialdom rigidly divided along lines of "subject matters"; after all, it was an imagined entity in the first place. Although it did serve as a convenient heuristic tool for someone like Sima Guang to lay out his argument on priorities, it did not suggest, even for Sima himself, that the generalists were segregated from the specialists along institutional lines. In reality, a generalist was not supposed to be and could not be excluded from business stereotypically assigned to the specialists. And, by the same reasoning, an incumbent in a low-ranking fiscal position did not necessarily hold a specialist stance. He could be a generalist.

Such non-exclusivity arises from the third characteristic of the generalist image: it was an orientation acquired from learning, and thus it had an inclusive membership that all serious practitioners of learning were entitled to. It was a cultural pride shared among many, and an intellectual asset sought by many. Despite Ouyang's self-promotional agenda, this stance did not have a fixed relationship with the policy-making echelon. His aggressive pursuit of representation actually evidenced its lacking. This was a point that Ouyang presented with action rather than words.

A number of conditions in reality should have pressured Ouyang to make the *ru* image both privileged and open. Contrary to his imagination, those he defined as specialists were not just limited to the subordinate administration; in fact they were widely present even in the policy making organs, hence his plea for privilege for the generalists. On the other hand, logically speaking, all policy makers have to start on an entry-level job of some kind, and it is sensible to assume that a cultural stance takes time to form. In Ouyang's times, the process presumably began when a young schoolboy first devoted serious attention to "humaneness, rightness, ritual, and music" discussed in his textbooks. An intellectual grasp of this stance was in principle attainable to anyone who engaged learning. And in reality, too, some low-ranking bureaucrats managed

to stand out in a generalist fashion. The most straightforward examples are local administrators who, due to their comprehensive responsibilities, placed a noticeable emphasis on moral teachings and ritual proceedings in their own localities. Their contributions in this area often became a laudable subject in evaluations. For instance, Chen Shu 陳樞 (fl. mid 11 c.), Prefect of Quanzhou, according to his epitaph composed by Zeng Gong, always assigned the top priority to “education and transformation” (*jiàohuà* 教化) wherever he took up an appointment, and thus had significantly contributed to enforcing the schooling system.⁸⁷ “Education and transformation” was a highly ideological term, exclusively referring to education based on the Classics and Confucian values. Low-ranking officials with such an exemplary perspective were not at all rare. With all intentions to promote the *ru*, Ouyang Xiu had little reason to discourage participation.

If the generalists were supposed to heed to such affairs as finance and laws, what could distinguish them from the specialists? One plausible answer would be that it was not about what they did, but rather how they did it. Ouyang Xiu had indeed demonstrated a distinctive generalist methodology, which constituted the fourth characteristic of the *ru* stance. With the clarification of this last point we can now further resolve the defining quadrant.

In a nutshell, this methodology was systematist in nature and adhered to precedent models. Two concepts are essential to the understanding of it—precedents and fundamentals—and the two are interlocked. The generalist drew precedents from texts of authority, mostly the Classics, and occasionally histories. The attachment to precedents is manifest in the almost uniform reliance on classical/historical references when seeking proof for an argument.

The kind of precedents they sought were not particular details, but the “essentials” (*yao*)⁸⁸—a word Ouyang Xiu frequently invoked to refer to fundamentals. The fundamentality of these precedent models is often associated with generality of one kind or another. For instance, one of the basic principles embodied in ritual, as Ouyang Xiu pointed out, is that of “the superior and inferior.”⁸⁹ This is a pattern that can be applied across different contexts, including characterizing the relationship of ruler and minister, or that of father and son. Strictly speaking, generality of the extrapolative kind is not an equivalent of fundamentality, for the “essentials” do not always have a perfect

87. Zeng Gong, *Zeng Gong ji*, 42.568.

88. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 114.1726.

89. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 17.289

general-specific relation with particular cases. But generality in a broad sense, that is, the extent to which an idea applies to more than one specific case, sets the tone for the generalist method.

In Ouyang Xiu's eyes, there was good reason to pursue precedents of a general rather than a concrete kind. He lived through the antiquarian movement in the eleventh century, and was one of the stoutest leaders of this initiative. Scholars held dear the notion of ancient precedents, and yet concrete details were difficult to restore due to scarcity of information. Ouyang Xiu decided that duplicating antiquity in a piecemeal manner was wanting in practical significance. Instead, he recommended exploring general principles:

The writings from [the times of] Yao and Shun are laconic. All [rulers] of subsequent ages have learned from the methods of the [rulers of] Three Dynasties in governing the world, and [this was done through] understanding their priorities and lesser concerns through inductions based on [what the sage kings conceived as] roots and branches. To govern, the Three [Sage] Kings evened out the world with regular patterns, ordered enfeoffed units with ranks and land holdings, governed subjects with the well-field system, and appointed officials according to responsibilities. Definite regular patterns were set in the world, definite institutions established in enfeoffed units, definite professions attributed to subjects, and definite responsibilities assigned to officials.⁹⁰

The "laconic" nature of the sages' writings bespeaks the unavailability of details. Therefore, Ouyang Xiu extrapolated a number of general principles, such as to "set definite patterns," in the most general sense, across the entire country, to "establish definite institutions" in local administration, and to ensure the welfare of the population with equalized land (the well-field system) and stable jobs.

Ouyang Xiu's treatment of the well-field system further illustrates his deliberate detachment from concrete details. The well field is an ancient system of equal distribution of land, first proposed by Mengzi 孟子 (385–312 BCE). Mengzi envisioned a square piece of land evenly divided into nine blocks in the shape of a three-by-three grid. The eight outside blocks were cultivated by eight tenant families and the central block worked by them all, collectively, as the "public land."⁹¹ During this time, one thorny issue that concerned the

90. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanjì*, 60.860.

91. For a brief introduction to the physical layout of the well field, see Mark Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 248–249.

Song state was the concentration of large tracts of land in the hands of great landowners. Small peasants, the basis of taxation and labor services, were therefore gradually losing their properties and autonomy.⁹² Literati who worried about the situation thus particularly valued the spirit of equal distribution embodied in the well-field system, hence a trend that “all literati under the heaven strive to restore the well-field system.”⁹³ But to “restore” in the sense of “to duplicate” was certainly no easy task. Su Xun, a fellow literatus in Ouyang Xiu’s times, once asserted that “even a three-*chi*—tall (less than a meter) child knows that [the well field] cannot be duplicated.”⁹⁴

In a policy question he crafted, Ouyang Xiu invited candidates to ponder the application of this system without clinging to the original design. He explicitly pointed out that Mengzi’s design had been rarely “used in the subsequent ages;” when used, “the population were specifically agonized and troubled by its inconvenience.”⁹⁵ Ouyang Xiu thus asked: “Mengzi called [this] a humane policy. How is it so?”⁹⁶ He further induced:

Mengzi is the model that [all subsequent] ages have followed. How is it possible that [his idea] is inhibited to antiquity and not applicable in later times?⁹⁷

If an ancient idea is not to be limited to its original context, it has to take on specific new forms in order to be applicable again. The more general an idea is, the more liberated its applications would be. Presumably, any examinee who insisted on continuing the exact original practice of Mengzi would disappoint Ouyang Xiu.

To Ouyang, generality came in different degrees while applying this methodology. The pivot of his thinking, the ancient *dao*, held the utmost generality. Patterns embodied in ritual, such as “the superior versus inferior,” marked lower on the scale. This methodological predilection, in its own right, may legitimately go beyond any specifically designated content and extend into even the most “specialist” context. Therefore, the emphasis on generality does not mean that the generalists would avoid grappling with empirical details all the way through accomplishing a task, but that they would take the point

92. For an analysis of the Song’s agricultural economy and the problem of land distribution, see Peter J. Golas, “Rural China in the Sung,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, 2 (1980): 300–310.

93. Su Xun 蘇洵 (1009–1066), *Jiyou ji jianzhu* 嘉祐集箋註 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 5.136.

94. Su Xun, *Jiyou ji*, 5.128.

95. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.679.

96. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.679.

97. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.679.

of departure from general principles and approach details with a judgment cast in accordance with the principles.

Ouyang Xiu's contemplation on hydraulics, for instance, provides an example in a most concrete context. Hydraulics posed rather specific, "specialist" challenges, but Ouyang Xiu clearly intended his thought on this topic to differ from that of a specialist.

The first evidence arises from the genre. The two texts in which he wrote about this problem are a policy question and a set of memorials, respectively. A policy question, according to his own definition, was a device to direct examinees' attention to "order and disorder" (statecraft), as antithetical to belles-lettres. Their responses were supposed to be "rooted" (*gen* 根) in "classical expertise" (*jingshu* 經術) and "originated" (*ben* 本) in "principles" (*daoli* 道理).⁹⁸ The general instruction that Ouyang laid out for a qualified response already demonstrated the emphases on precedents ("classical expertise") and generality ("principles").

Let's probe deeper to see how he carried through these two emphases. The question invited examinees to offer new insights into hydraulic engineering; the source of their ideas should be the ancient sages' attempts to manage the Yellow River, as recorded in the Classics. Ouyang established an unambiguous point of departure consisting in a fixation with precedents. To reinforce the message, he set out to reiterate the significance of one focal ancient precedent. Yao 堯 and Yu 禹, two sages in high antiquity, were said to have subdued the flooding Yellow River. Ouyang emphasized that the severity of the disaster was "unprecedented," and thus the sages' wisdom was proved "ultimate" by their success.⁹⁹ The incident is recorded in "Tribute of Yu" ("Yu Gong" 禹貢), a passage in the *Classic of Documents*.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Ouyang urged contemporary readers to seek lessons from this source, an "ultimate guide" which crystallized the ancient wisdom.¹⁰¹

Ouyang then posed a series of questions in order to set examinees' answers on track:

98. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 104.1590.

99. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

100. Up to this point, the sage Yu and his handling of the Yellow River had already become a classical trope of hydraulic success. Ouyang Xiu's choice of this reference is not an accident. For a comprehensive study of the image of Yu, see Liu Heping, "Picturing Yu Controlling the Flood: Technology, Ecology, and Emperorship in Northern Song China," in *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History*, ed. Dagmar Schafer (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 91–126.

101. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

The nine districts arranged by Yao, which ones were at a higher elevation, and which ones at a lower elevation? When Yu was combating the flood, what were his priorities and what were not?¹⁰²

To follow, he offered some opinions of his own, pointing out that Yao's reorganization of the mainstream and tributaries, with a focus on the former, was the decisive cause of his success:

What [I] have learned from examining [Yao's] deeds is that [he] regulated the mainstream by following the direction from its source to end. [He] re-channeled some of the tributaries to conflate with the mainstream. He dammed up other tributaries and turned them into reservoirs. Therefore, all waterways had been appropriately arranged.¹⁰³

Ouyang then summarized:

To concentrate on the mainstream so that tributaries would naturally follow, isn't it the method that Yao employed?¹⁰⁴

In Ouyang's interpretation, Yao resolved the issue once and for all through rearranging the mainstream (cutting down the number of tributaries within its drainage area). This solution also saved him the trouble of tackling specific problems associated with tributaries one by one. The philosophy behind it, as Ouyang implied, was to focus on what is identified as the center of the problem and to build a coherent solution on the basis of it. This was an "essential" that Ouyang extrapolated from Yao's work (not coincidentally, the content of this "essential" is also essential-seeking). Thereupon he asked examinees to exercise the same extrapolative effort and extracted their own "essentials":

One must grasp the essentials of the method that Yu employed to control the water. Please comprehensively present [your insights] with no reservation.¹⁰⁵

Beyond this policy question, Ouyang Xiu repeatedly wrote about hydraulics and elaborated on other "essentials" in memorials. Such a concern arose from the grand and yet capricious Yellow River, which did not have a permanent riverbed and posed constant threats. In 1048, the river, once again, broke its dikes, abandoned its old course, and threw out a new branch to the north. Known as the "north branch," the new torrent broke away from the old riverbed in a county called Shanghu in modern Henan Province. The court immediately decided

102. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

104. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

103. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

105. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

to obstruct the new course and to bring the river back to its original bed. But it seems to have been an ill-considered decision, for the new course was lower in elevation than the old, which made the task a tremendous challenge.¹⁰⁶

Deeply in disagreement with the court's decision, Ouyang Xiu submitted three memorials in a row upbraiding the project. The fundamental flaw, as he argued, was that it violated an "essential" principle which guided the sage Yu in his work. In the first memorial, Ouyang summarized the essential as follows:

[Yu] understood water's natural tendency to move down, so that he cleared the impediments out of the natural course [of the river] and thereby averted the calamity.¹⁰⁷

In other words, it is essential to understand that water flows downhill instead of up. By forcefully re-channeling the river into the old course, people of Ouyang's day were battling against the natural flow of water and this was "something that even Yu could not accomplish."¹⁰⁸

The first memorial caused the emperor a moment of hesitation, but he soon decided to adhere to the old plan but with a partial modification. The amendment was to connect the new branch with a smaller waterway called the Liuta River, via which the waters would be channeled back to the old course.¹⁰⁹ This, to Ouyang Xiu, still failed to touch the core of the problem, for the old course was uncompromisingly higher in elevation, and the capacity of the Liuta River was too limited.

Therefore, Ouyang submitted a second memorial later in the same year and reiterated the significance of this fundamental principle. The Yellow River was known for its heavy loess. As the river moved from the west to east, the silt swept along and gradually sank to the bottom. Over time, the current became sluggish and the riverbed rose above the surroundings in the region of the central plains, where the Song capital was seated. In Ouyang's opinion, it was natural for the river to break its dikes due to the elevation of the riverbed. It was thus a mistake to force it back into the old course.¹¹⁰ The court again

106. For a more contextualized study of Ouyang Xiu's memorials and the hydraulic debates, see Wang Jun 王軍, "Bei Song he yi yanjiu" 北宋河議研究 (MA thesis, Dongbei Normal University, 2011), 7–11. For an analysis of the 1048 flood and the general condition of the Yellow River in the Northern Song, see Ling Zhang, "Changing with the Yellow River: An Environmental History of Hebei, 1048–1128," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 69.1 (2009): 1–36.

107. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 109.1643.

108. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 48.677.

109. Wang Jun, "Bei Song he yi yanjiu," 8.

110. Ouyang Xiu, *Quanji*, 109. 1646–1647.

dismissed Ouyang's proposal along with many from other officials. The project was carried out the next year (1056), and the overwhelmed Liuta River broke its dikes on the very night the project was announced finished. The disaster incurred thousands of deaths.¹¹¹

Readers may ask why this "essential" is special, and, for that matter, different from a word of common sense. What is truly different is its epistemological origin. In accordance with how Ouyang Xiu presented and validated it, this "essential" is not an experientially extracted principle, one that we extrapolate from repeated observations of water's movement. The validity of this claim is, officially, based on the authority of the sages, with its resonance with empirical facts as an unstated factor on the side. Ouyang did not invoke empirical repeatability in place of the sages' authority as proof, although it was no doubt a contingent part of the justification. It was his choice of the means of justifying this knowledge that rendered it specifically "generalist."

In seeking fundamentality/generality Ouyang Xiu was not alone. This line of pursuit was also salient in the work of many famous peer scholars despite their differences in other regards. For instance, Wang Anshi, well known for his devotion to the study of the *Rituals of Zhou*, suggested that scholars should focus on uncovering the "conceptions" (*yi* 意) of the sages.¹¹² Wang's definition of *yi* was rather similar to what Ouyang Xiu called an "essential," which he raised in response to a similar situation. Neither of them deemed a piecemeal reconstruction of antiquity a possible mission, despite the consensus that antiquity was the best source of sound government. Wang thus suggested the same philosophy:

The changes and the circumstances [with which we are confronted] are no longer the same [with antiquity]; the methods to apply are different, too. However, the conceptions in organizing the world and the state, and [differentiation] of root and branch, are not necessarily different.¹¹³

The "conceptions" of the sages, according to this quotation, were supposed to be able to transcend the specific, concrete conditions across different time periods. And it certainly can be rendered to suit the contemporaneous situation. Again, they were connected in the differentiation of "root" and "branch," and especially associated with the fundamental "root."

111. Wang Jun, "Bei Song he yi yanjiu," 11.

112. For an analysis of the "conceptions," see Bol, *Neo-Confucianism*, 67.

113. Wang Anshi, *Linchuan*, 39.410

Contemporaries also expressed ideas of a similar nature. In Su Shi's 蘇軾 (1026–1101) imagination, the history of the human world was a stream originating in fundamentality and unraveling into specificity; a man should tap the source, seek the fundamental, before he carries out concrete creative work in his own times.¹¹⁴ Sima Guang frequently used such terms as “fundamentals” (*gangmu* 綱目) and “generals” (*dalu* 大略) in his writings.¹¹⁵ Although he was less keen on invoking classical authority, the “fundamentals” he extracted from history were equally liberated general principles. The pursuit of generality, in the eyes of many, accounted for the superiority of learning compared to concrete specialized knowledge. It is safe to assume that during this time the majority of scholars who contemplated “learning” would be preoccupied with generality in one form or another.

If I may be allowed to further generalize, the pursuit of fundamentality served as the background of many more specific trends and undertakings within a longer historical framework. The predilection to pursue general models continued to induce future developments beyond the Northern Song. For instance, the frequent and yet rather jumbled references to the concept *li* 理, “pattern,” had eventually culminated in systematization and a new translation, “coherence.” In Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) hands, it had become the “one” which governed “the many” across the universe.¹¹⁶ This was an exemplary attempt which elevated generality to a metaphysical height and extended it to a universal scope. Deep in the background, the vibrant harmony of Song thought was tuned to be generalist, rather than specialist.

In sum, the generalist consistently applied a method with a focus on precedents and held an interest in seeking higher degrees of fundamentality. In Ouyang Xiu's discursive world, a generality can be as small as the natural tendency of water, or as big as the ultimate *dao*. Speaking from his point of view, the difference between the generalist and the specialist had nothing to do with the distinction between idealism and practical-mindedness.¹¹⁷ It was

114. Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, 282–293, especially 283–284.

115. For instance, these two terms are both seen in a memorial in which Sima Guang tried to convince the emperor of the significance of historical precedents. Sima Guang, *Chuanjia ji*, 52.647.

116. For an analysis of *li* as “coherence,” see Willard J. Peterson, “Another Look at *Li*,” *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies* 18 (1986): 13–31.

117. My interpretation is thus different from that of Anthony Sariti, who also briefly touches upon the issue of “the generalist and the specialist” in the Song officialdom and argues that the distinction lay between an ethical orientation and practical-mindedness. It is quite clear that Song

a movement to venture out into government rather than to retreat back into private libraries. Ouyang earnestly wanted to be useful. His memorials on hydraulics demonstrated no hint that he considered his “generalist” opinions “above” the project itself. He clearly wanted his suggestions to be incorporated into the actual planning of hydraulic construction. He saw himself as equally engaged and instrumental in managing the state but his methodology was even superior.

The Specialist Stance: Li Gou’s Defense

Did the specialist also have a stance? Ouyang Xiu might not have thought so. Section III describes how he and his peers discussed the utility of the specialist. But such utility was an observation for an outsider to make. Did anyone who endorsed or was at least sympathetic to the specialist image have a story to tell? In the succeeding pages I intend to bring out this voice.

Excavating the specialist stance unearths a practical problem: simply not enough articulation. All previously mentioned figures who dealt with the dichotomy endorsed the generalist image. The logic is simple: the author who devoted great attention to the defense of a stance had that stance himself. The generalist advocates were also the primary voices who defined the *ru-li* dichotomy and took ownership of it. And while their definition held *ru* and *li* to be a pair of opposites, *ru* was always primary. They viewed possession of an intellectual voice as a criterion for telling a *ru* from a *li*. The specialist was a silent partner.

Another difficulty in discerning the specialist stance arises from the idea itself. In theory, a specialist stance undoubtedly exists and can be articulated. But can this idea in its strongest articulated form assert validity and a place in the intellectual sphere that honors its value in a way comparable to the generalist’s? This problem is both cause and effect of the dominance of the generalist image.

Among the few examples of advocates for a specialist stance, Li Gou, a contemporary of Ouyang Xiu, offers an illuminating case. He was an enthu-

generalists took their methodology more seriously than simply embellishing “practical” concerns with a “classical” outlook. For Sariti’s discussion, see “The Political Thought of Su-ma Kuang: Bureaucratic Absolutism in the Northern Sung” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1970), 52 and 86–92.

siastic supporter of Fan Zhongyan's reform, also known as one of the early "pillars" of Song Confucian learning.¹¹⁸ Not surprisingly, he was erudite and wrote extensively on the Classics. And yet Li was interestingly anti-generalist. He enthusiastically championed a piecemeal methodology which rebelled against generalization and emphasized concrete structures in the attainment of knowledge.

A look at other aspects of Li's thinking will provide background for his stance. Li Gou was a harsh critic of contemporaneous literati, whom he chastised for fixating on morality. In the first place, he renounced the interpretation of morality as a fundamental guideline—the cornerstone of Ouyang Xiu's generalist argument. He pointed to the notion that "grand councilors do not manage small things" as a seriously misleading idea.¹¹⁹ Li saw fiscal and legal affairs as so important that they required personal attention from grand councilors. "The substance of ruling a state finds its root in financial affairs."¹²⁰ To call state finance a "small thing" was, according to Li, nothing but "a frivolous utterance which harms affairs in the world," and people should "be cautious when hearing [such words]."¹²¹ Clearly Li was leaving no room for people like Ouyang Xiu to respond with the kind of subtle reasoning they wanted.

Li also observed that literati of his age tended to value empty "speech" (*yan* 言) and to evade concrete "undertakings" (*shi* 事). To run the state efficiently, Li argued, scholars should aim for a deep understanding of ancient precedents and a sincere readiness to put them to use. But to his disappointment, people with such readiness were a rarity, and the dominant majority contented themselves with piling discursive bubbles on the Classics. He once commented on the situation:

Confucius's speech is all over the world, while the *dao* of Confucius is not even being laid eyes on. [. . .] Those who have acquired his speech become rich and significant, while those who understand his *dao* subsist in hunger. How sad!¹²²

In this quotation, Li Gou blamed scholars for being unwilling rather than unable to commit the *dao* of Confucius to their actions. The interpretation of

118. For a book-length study of Li Gou's life and thought, see Jiang Guozhu, *Li Gou ping-zhuan*.

119. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji* 李觀集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 16.133.

120. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 16.133.

121. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 12.107.

122. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 20.220.

Confucius's words became an activity for filling intellectual space and satisfying greed for socio-political status. Absorbed in an agenda of self-perpetuation, scholars were no longer motivated to consider the practical implications of the ideas they generated.

The generalist envisioned by Ouyang Xiu was actually eager to commit "action," and by posing this criticism Li was engaging in "speech." But let's set aside the question of whether Li's criticism was necessarily fair and consider what he meant by "speech." In Li's view, nothing was more fundamental than the material well-being (of the state) and the activities/processes through which it was maintained. The "speech" he detested seems to be of a specific kind, namely, explanatory themes which did little to facilitate the processes. For instance, to perform a ritual is to follow its designated steps. To have an interpretation of this ritual's overall purpose does not help to complete the course of action. In this regard, almost all general models are disposable because they do not enhance empirical output.

Li Gou's view on ritual is the most revealing example of his anti-generalist stance. Ritual, a key "general model" for Ouyang Xiu, was also the focal subject in Li Gou's thinking and what made his scholarship famous. Li proffered a very different interpretation of ritual, however, one which led him through a series of steps to deprive ritual of its generalist aura and recast its significance as an entity consisting of concrete procedures and utilities.

The first step was to tie "ritual" to the more specific "regulatory rules" (*fa* 法). Li stated:

Rituals are the sages' regulatory rules. Humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and trustworthiness are the actual applications [of rituals]. Ritual is a fuzzy designation; it is [in fact] the collective name of regulatory rules.¹²³

Li asserted that regulatory rules, in their collective existence, constituted the only legitimate definition of ritual. In fact, the word "ritual" itself was such a fuzzy designation (perhaps due to contamination by other generalist conceptualizations) that it was completely replaceable by "regulatory rule." These two concepts have undoubtedly been linked since antiquity. From the very early definition by Confucius, "ritual" has always been ascribed a "regulatory" function.¹²⁴ By arguing for a complete merging of the terms, however,

123. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 2.16.

124. Herbert Fingarette provides an insightful analysis of ritual as a regulatory mechanism.

Li Gou took sides with a small community of thinkers heralded by Xunzi.¹²⁵ It was a bold statement.

An auxiliary argument in this quotation is that “humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and trustworthiness,” the four virtues, are as concrete as “regulatory rules.” Li defined the virtues as the “applications” of ritual and thus equivalent to regulatory rules in use. Talk of morality often alluded to a kind of higher life that detached itself from ordinary ends. Li Gou’s goal here was straightforward disenchantment: virtues were no more than goods derived from following mundane rules.

The next step was to offer an even more concrete way of understanding regulatory rules:

Do [such entities as] humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and trustworthiness ever have physical manifestations? . . . First there are humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and trustworthiness, and then regulatory rules emerge. Regulatory rules are ritual, music, punishment, and government. First there are regulatory rules, and then there are physical manifestations. Without physical manifestations [people] are unable to observe regulatory rules. Without regulatory rules [people] are unable to understand humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and trustworthiness.¹²⁶

The key term in this quotation is “physical manifestations.” Without them, people would be unable to grasp an understanding of either regulatory rules or moral virtues. Or, following Li Gou’s exhortative tone: “physical manifestations” constituted the only legitimate medium through which one approached ritual and morality. These “manifestations” referred to concrete processes, events, and consequences, the physicality of rules and values in action. Therefore Li completed his message: in understanding ritual, people need to begin from sensible physical events before proceeding to the specifically articulated “regulatory rules.” Concrete activities rather than any transcendental general rules served as the cornerstone of Li’s system.

The philosophical attention Li Gou paid to particular processes also features prominently in his handling of the well-field system. Li Gou wrote a famous essay titled “Essay on Even Distribution of Land” (“ping tu shu” 平土書, hereafter “Even Distribution”), in which he attempted to excavate the very

See Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1998), 1–17.

125. For a comparative discussion of Li and Xunzi, see Jiang, *Li Gou pingzhuan*, 99–106.

126. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 2.16.

concrete details of the well-field system.¹²⁷ It was an effort directly in conflict with Ouyang Xiu's: Ouyang treated the ancient practice with deliberate vagueness so as to allow room for contemporary improvisation; Li Gou, by contrast, exerted painstaking efforts to reconstruct the physical layout of the system, literally piece by piece.

The "Even Distribution" thus has a curiously dry and technical appearance. The multi-part essay textualizes Li Gou's efforts to (a) reconstruct the dimensions of arable land in the Zhou capital region and (b) map the well-field grid onto the area. Li meticulously examined all land, all civil divisions, all measurement units, that is, all data preserved in classical texts which might be relevant to the calculation. As a result, the "Even Distribution" appears to be a long catalogue of numerals and bare "facts."

Why would Li Gou write an essay like this? In the preface he explicitly stated that he intended to affirm the feasibility of the ancient precedent. In addition, he criticized contemporaries who apparently "generalized" only: "If scholars intend to discuss the three ancient sage kings, how can they not make a thorough effort? [If they have not made the effort] how can they know that it (the well-field system) is no longer useful!"¹²⁸ And yet this reason does not fully account for Li's aggressive emphasis on technical details. He also made clear his intention that his work should amend contemporary policies: "With [my] clarification, if anyone intends to employ the Duke of Zhou's policy, he should consult this text and use it as a guide. Isn't [the information] ready to hand?"¹²⁹ This readiness to be useful distinguished Li from the "evidential scholars" who kept their work apolitical and renounced any immediate modern relevance.¹³⁰ In a word, Li did not just seek antiquity for antiquity's sake. He was interested in utility.

Another facet of Li's attitude may be intriguing and confounding at first sight. He does not seem eager to promulgate this utility to higher authorities—rather unusual when compared to his handling of similar cases. Reconstructing the well field was not Li's only "antiquarian" endeavor. He also composed a text titled "Diagrams of the Established Dimensions of the Luminous Hall"

127. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 19.183–213.

128. Li Gou, *Li Gou Ji*, 19.183.

129. Li Gou, *Li Gou Ji*, 19.213.

130. For a comprehensive study of evidential scholarship in the Qing dynasty, see Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2nd edition (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles Asia Institute, 2001).

(“Mingtang dingzhi tu” 明堂定制圖, hereafter “Luminous Hall”), intended for a reconstruction of an important cosmological site for state rituals.¹³¹ Li wrote the text in the same year he finished “Equal Distribution,” the year he turned twenty-eight.¹³² In subsequent years, he submitted the “Luminous Hall” seven times for purposes of self-promotion, whereas “Equal Distribution” he submitted merely once.¹³³

There was an immediate reason for this disparity. Precisely during these years, intense debates on the details of the Luminous Hall were ongoing at the court, providing an opportunity for erudite scholars like Li to seek political promotions. In a debate in 1050, Li Gou submitted his reconstruction plan to the emperor via Fan Zhongyan’s recommendation, and the emperor awarded Li the position of assistant instructor at the Imperial Academy.¹³⁴

A more latent reason is that although apparently similar in nature, these two projects differed in practical significance. The details of the Luminous Hall, once successfully reconstructed, could be directly applied to contemporary practice. The court could build a new hall using precisely the data scholars calculated. The details of the Equal Distribution System, however, did not serve such immediate interests. The measurements and units, however precise and well-arranged, were specific and thus confined to the very particular layout of the suburban Zhou capital. The numbers Li provided could not be directly mapped onto any contemporaneous locality. “Even Distribution” was thus not a user’s manual providing ready-to-use data. When, as Li Gou previously suggested, a person picks up this text and seeks consultation, what he might learn has to lie beyond the literal.

I propose that the text was a methodological exhortation through demonstration. Li saw in the study of concrete details an opportunity to cultivate practical readiness and a detail-oriented attitude. When attention to clarifying details left no room for “empty speech,” people would carry the spirit of piecemeal engineering into their own undertakings. A literatus who could properly

131. For an introduction to the Luminous Hall, see John Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (Corvallis: Windstone Press, 2011), 67–74.

132. According to his self-statement, he started these projects when he was 27; yet due to poor health, he was not able to complete them until a year later. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 27.285.

133. The statistics are based on the self-recommendations currently gathered in his collection of works. See Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 279–280, 285–286, 286–287, 288–289, 290–292, 292–294, and 297–299.

134. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 504.

configure the arrangement of land divisions while reading the Classics would presumably approach contemporary land policies with the same sense of order and mathematical skills. Thus the practical significance of Li's methodology was to prepare literati for piecemeal undertakings in praxis in terms of attitude and skills.

Li's piecemeal methodology certainly carved out a stance that the specialist could endorse. Driven by a motive to rebel against generalization, he asserted that the real significance resided in experiential knowledge—its concrete procedures and structures—rather than any general explanatory framework. To borrow Sima Guang's example, Li would argue that spreading the mesh holes in a trawl one by one was a necessity; indeed, no single action could resolve all problems. This idea would undoubtedly align with the working epistemology of many bureaucrats whose responsibilities mainly involved hewing to technical details. Moreover, in Li's era the pursuit of general explanations often transposed into discourses on morality, a tendency which may have triggered Li's dissent. He saw no virtue in moral discourse because to Li talk of morality was simply a distraction from the real business. In sum, actions—and only actions devoted to particular processes—were valid; the rest was meaningless.

In spite of the forcefulness of the rebellious stance, Li Gou was quietly wrestling with some ambiguity. In proposing a new orientation like this, Li was not really “defending” the specialist within the generalist-specialist framework as defined by Ouyang Xiu and others; in fact, he was challenging the validity of the entire framework. In the Ouyangian dichotomy, having an intellectual voice was what distinguished *ru* from *li*. By giving *li* an intellectual stance, Li Gou had already endowed the new *li* with some *ru* capacity. And by arguing that this stance was superior, Li was almost suggesting that the new *li* was actually the new *ru*—the new embodiment of culture. Behind the bold claim, however, Li faced a dilemma: before his new idea could gain recognition, was he ready to jettison the socio-intellectual connotations of the old framework? The answer, apparently, was no.

Therefore, we can see that in most cases Li held firm in asserting his methodological difference without the old *ru-li* framework, but he had occasional moments of vacillation. Throughout his extant writings, Li Gou only rarely mentioned the *ru-li* dichotomy. And he most often used *ru* in a derogative way, namely, to refer to a group he saw as moralistic, overtly rhetorical, and

essentially opportunistic.¹³⁵ These two characteristics are consistent with his resolve to discard the framework.

On one occasion, however, he did call on the old binary to use in his own evaluative language. It is an account in which Li praised a friend, an official who once supervised the state monopoly of salt, as someone so versed in precedents that he had the entire history of the salt industry available as if “in front of his eyes.”¹³⁶ Due to such spectacular capability, this person resolved various problems that “highly capable specialists” (*qiangli* 強吏) could not settle.¹³⁷ Li’s friend and “highly capable specialists” now constituted two ends of a dichotomy, and the underlying philosophy of the polarity was familiar: knowledge-based action prevails. The two parties were engaged in supervising the same (concrete) process, and yet the more learned man stood out as superior due to his grasp of historical precedents. This type of cultural pride, which Li could not help but profess, diluted his focus on the methodological difference. The sentiment is understandable: he was not ready to call himself or his kind of people *li* when the old definition had no capacity to accommodate his claim for cultural prestige.

Li Gou’s ambiguity speaks to a certain extent to the general difficulty in articulating a specialist stance. Fulfilling this task would require a person who wrote extensively and who had recourse to the cultural resources and vocabularies already claimed by the generalists. In addition, appropriating the resources and prescribing new meanings would require strenuous efforts. This was Li Gou’s predicament.

Moreover, what would a textualization of the specialist stance look like? The “Even Distribution” may be a good example. It is dry, technical, and perhaps not as appealing as many other contemporary statements of ideas. There is good reason for this choice of style, however, as it makes perfect sense to let such a line of thinking come to light through demonstration rather than articulation. Such demonstration normally occurs through describing procedural processes. To many, technical details may not even constitute a subject that merits textualization. A famous example occurred when Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), another Northern Song literatus and prolific author, purchased a tract of land and enacted a well-field experiment on his own. And

135. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 21.233.

136. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 31.461.

137. Li Gou, *Li Gou ji*, 31.461.

yet we have no textual record that he or others might have made to describe the process. The ideological message of his action was compelling without the existence of a procedural report. This may partly explain why such writings did not gain true popularity, and why Li Gou failed to sustain an enduring legacy in the form of a textual tradition.

Conclusion

This article selects a few examples to explore the Northern Song use of the dichotomous pair *ru* and *li*. This binary concept was a labeling device commonly used by Song literati. Woven throughout the discursive fabrics of literati writings, it teased out two different intellectual orientations. Both took root in the context of bureaucracy in action. The generalist, according to Ouyang Xiu, was learned and active, with a persistent interest in pursuing fundamentality. He relied on old texts for precedents and valued general models extracted from the past as his ultimate guide to action. The generalist sought frameworks and systems for solving problems. He represented the “big.” The specialist was his quiet partner. To advocates of the specialist stance, such as Li Gou, he was equally educated and active; yet he directed most of his attention to particular knowledge rather than generalization. The way of the specialist was to focus on the “small” and become good at it.

The popularity of such a labeling practice reflects at least two broad historical developments. First, the bureaucracy had developed to the point where an elaborate division of labor was necessary and specialized skills were valued for their practical significance. The fact that the institutional design was not yet ready to lend full support to this development only exacerbated literati’s anxiety and intensified their thinking on this subject. Second, examination-generated literati made a constant effort to translate their cultural virtuosity into a specific stance in statecraft, and they remained eager to make improvements and explore new possibilities. The common use of *ru-li* dichotomy clearly tilted to the generalist and favored the second trend. The generalist image set the keynote in the intellectual world, and the pursuit of generality fostered more elaborate iterations. Despite the imbalance, both generalist and specialist types drew supporters and were able to assert validity in their own ways. They required each other’s company.

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