Synopsis

*Shengyuan* referred to subsidized students of the National University (*Guozijian*) as well as the local government schools in the Ming dynasty. They possessed the first degree in civil service examination and was popularly known as “Xiucai”. They were subordinated to the local schools in the native place and the supervision of local government officials and the provincial school-officials.

*Shengyuan* were not imperial government officials, but they belonged to the top of the four social classes in traditional Chinese society, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants. They were treated as semi-official and their social status were utterly different from the common people. *Shengyuan* could enjoy many privileges, including legal privilege, ceremonial, judicial and financial privileges.

*Shengyuan* belong to the social status of the gentry. If we were to give it a precise definition, they were the lower strata of the gentry class. They gradually dissociated from the social status of the gentry and became a relatively independent social class in Ming society.

*Shengyuan* also belonged to the social status of the scholar-official (*Shidafu*). There exists an moral identity between the scholar (*Shi*) and the official (*Dafu*), but the actual difference between them depends on whether or not the person is holding a government position. The scholar-official belonged to the ruling class, but they also play the part of an intermediate force between the imperial government and the local society. We may say that the scholar-official were the gentry. Just as the scholar-official could be divided into the higher and lower stratum, the gentry could also be separated into the higher and lower stratum. *Shengyuan* were the lower stratum of the gentry class.
On the other hand, Shengyuan also belonged to the social status of the literati. The gentry were certainly a part of the literati, but the literati might not possess the qualifications and status of the gentry. In Ming and Qing dynasty, Confucian scholars who studied the Confucian classics were regarded as typical literati that marked the demarcation between the civil official and the literati.

This thesis examines the Shengyuan from the following two aspects: First, we must study the government schools and the imperial civil examination systems in the Ming dynasty, including studying and examination in the local schools, and how the government students entered into the official career. Secondly, we also study the society of the Ming dynasty, including the social mobility of the government students who failed in the civil examinations and their social activities.

The writer suggests that the term Shengyuan has double meanings in the Ming dynasty. On one hand, they were the government students entitled to state stipends, and supervised by the imperial officials and the local school-officials. On another hand, Shengyuan referred to an academic degree, the most basic title in the imperial civil service examinations.

Shengyuan belonged to the local gentry class, and the emergence and continuity of the gentry merely relied on the civil examinations and school systems. The purpose of the civil examinations was to recruit scholars for government posts. Whereas the government schools were the place for training scholars. The original aim was very different between the civil examination and the government school. However, when candidates must came from the government schools, it led to a close link between the civil examination and the government school.

The writer also discovers that Shengyuang had witnessed a remarkable change since the middle period of the Ming dynasty. Because of the lack of training and discipline, it led to their degeneration and dissolute style of life.