
 INTRODUCTION: THE EXAMINATION LIFE

Two protests

Ch'en Shu was unpopular in the late spring of 1002. A southerner and therefore an outsider in the imperial capital of K'ai-feng, which lay on the North China Plain, Ch'en had a reputation for high principles and incorruptibility, and just months earlier the emperor Chen-tsung (r. 998–1022) had paid him the singular honor of naming him director of the civil service examinations.¹ The streets of K'ai-feng had filled with over fourteen thousand and five hundred 'selected men' (*chü-jen*) chosen by their prefectures to take the examinations in the capital. Their hopes were high, for when the examinations had last been held, in 1000, over 1500 had received the coveted *chin-shih* ('advanced scholar') and *chu-k'o* ('various fields') degrees, thereby qualifying for entry into officialdom.² When, after the grueling departmental examination (*sheng-shih*), Ch'en and his colleagues passed only 218, the shock and dismay of the failed candidates swiftly turned to anger, and it was directed against Ch'en. He became the subject of songs. Effigies of him were daubed with blood. Placards with his name were hung beside roads where they could be lashed by passersby.³

The abuse heaped upon Ch'en was verbal and symbolic. Some two centuries later Yang Hung-chung was not as fortunate. A young man who had early gained renown as a student leader at the Imperial University in the Southern Sung capital of Lin-an fu, Yang had received his *chin-shih* degree in 1205, and one of his first official postings was as preceptor (*chiao-shou*) of the prefectural school of Chang-chou, a coastal prefecture in southern Fu-chien.⁴ One of his duties was to help supervise the triennial prefectural examination at which Chang-chou's quota of twenty-one *chü-jen* would be selected to make the trip to the capital.⁵ In the fall of 1210 when the examinations were in progress or being graded (the source does not say which), a group of 'ruined and lost men' (*p'o-lo* – failed and frustrated candidates?) incited a riot. Armed with bamboo and wooden sticks, they burst through the gates of the examination hall, badly beat Yang, and injured the other examination officials. After they had departed, such was the townspeople's fear of

the *p'o-lo* that they refused to divulge their identities. Unable to punish the offenders, the court punished the prefecture instead: the prefect was demoted and Chang-chou *chü-jen* were barred from the upcoming departmental examination in Lin-an.⁶

As these widely separated anecdotes bear witness, the civil service examinations were critical and potentially volatile events during the Sung dynasty (960–1279). The fates of individuals, families, and often entire communities rode on their outcomes. Unlike medieval European society, where the nobility and clergy were sharply distinguished from the slowly emerging bureaucracy, in Chinese society of the imperial period, status, power, and wealth were intimately linked to government service. There were various ways of becoming an official: recommendation, purchase of office, protection (entry by virtue of the high rank of a relative), promotion from clerical status. But examination success conferred the greatest prestige and offered the best chances for bureaucratic advancement. Moreover, the examinations were transformed by the Sung emperors from the numerically minor method of recruitment that they had been since their establishment in 589 A.D.⁷ to a major, at times dominant, way of selecting officials. As a result, the promise of learning beckoned broadly, with far-reaching consequences for Chinese society.

The examination life

The Sung literati often described their 'occupation' (*yeh*) as *chin-shih*, that is, preparing for the *chin-shih* examination, and that preparation was an adult as well as adolescent endeavor. In the examinations of 1148 and 1256, the only two for which there are lists of *chin-shih* recipients together with such biographical information as ancestry, marriage connections, and residence, the average ages were 36 and 35 years (Chinese style) respectively, and the age ranges were 19 to 66 years.⁸ These were, of course, the fortunate few. The great majority of the literati spent much or most of their lives without achieving success.

Those years of study were spent in mastering a formidable curriculum, which included the dynastic histories, poetry, and the Confucian (*Ju*) classics. For most of the Sung, the last consisted of the *Analects* of Confucius, (*Lun-yü*), the works of Mencius, the classics of History (*Shu-ching*), Poetry (*Shih-ching*), and Changes (*I-ching*), the three classics of Rites (*Li-chi, I-li, Chou-li*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'ü*) with its three commentaries.⁹ Together these were considered to be the ultimate source of political, social, and especially moral wisdom. Writing in 1030, the future chief counselor Fan Chung-yen described their importance in the following manner:

Now, of those things that improve the country, there is nothing that precedes the education of talent. Among the ways to educate talent,

there is nothing that precedes the encouragement of study. And of the essentials for the encouragement of study, there is nothing that is more esteemed than following the classics. If one follows the classics, the Way will be great; and if the Way is great, then talent will be great; and if talent is great, then achievements will be great. In general, the record of the Sages' regulations is preserved in the Book of History; the methods of pacifying dangers are preserved in the Book of Changes; the mirror [for seeing] gains and losses is preserved in the Book of Poetry; the discrimination of truth and falsehood is preserved in the Spring and Autumn Annals; the ordering of the world is preserved in the Book of Rites; and the feelings of the myriad things are preserved in the Book of Music. Therefore, men of refinement and wisdom gain entry through the Six Classics and thus are able to submit to the record of regulations, investigate the methods of pacifying dangers, set out the mirror [for seeing] gains and losses, analyze the discrimination of truth and falsehood, understand the ordering of the world, [perceive] exhaustively the feelings of the myriad things and cause their followers to help complete the Way of the Kings. What more does one want?¹⁰

Preparation for the examinations involved more than just the classics, however. During the Southern Sung (1127–1279), when north China was in the hands of the Jurchen, the *chin-shih* candidate took a tripartite examination either in poetry or on a classic. All candidates had to write an abstract discussion (*hun*) on political or philosophical principles and answer three policy questions (*ts'e*), often on complicated, highly technical problems of government. These demanded a broad knowledge of history and the classics. In addition, poetry candidates had to compose a poem (*shih*) and a poetic description (*fu*) on assigned themes using elaborate and precise rules of composition. Each classics candidate had to answer three questions on his classic of specialization and a question each on the *Analects* and the works of Mencius. These required an exact knowledge of the texts and discussions of their meanings.¹¹

The lengthy education leading to the examinations began at an early age, either in the home or in small informal family and community schools.¹² Students started with simple primers. The *Three Character Primer* (*San-tzu hsün*, to be distinguished from the early Yüan *San-tzu ching*), the *Hundred Surnames* (*Pai-chia hsing*), and the *Thousand Character Classic* (*Ch'ien-tzu wen*) introduced students to the most commonly used characters in the language. The *Classic of Filial Piety* gave them their first taste of moral and political philosophy. There were also anecdotal works such as the *Admonitions for the Young and Ignorant* (*T'ung-meng hsün*) by Lü Pen-chung (1048–1145), which had stories about famous Sung teachers, admonitions

on the proper approach to study, correct deportment within one's family, and so forth.¹³

Once the student had completed this initial stage of education, he began a course of study that included composition, calligraphy, and the recitation and memorization of the classics, histories, and poetry. Without textbooks and with just his teacher's guidance, he plunged forthwith into the texts. One example of what this involved is provided by a stone inscription of school rules for an eleventh century government-run primary school (so-called, for the students had obviously progressed beyond primers):

The teacher lectures daily on three pages of classics and instructs the students on the pronunciations and meaning of the passages in the classics, on the forms of the characters, on poetry and poetic descriptions, on opposing sentence structures, and on writing stories.

The students are all divided into three levels: In the first level, the students daily draw lots to ask [the teacher] three questions on the meanings of the classics that they have heard, read aloud two to three hundred characters, practice writing ten lines [of text], recite one five or seven-syllable regulated poem [*lü-shih*] and every three days they are examined on one poetic description (or four rhymes of one) and they read one poetic description and read three to five pages of history (memorizing three events contained therein).

In the second level, the students daily read aloud one hundred characters, practice writing ten lines, recite a four-line stanza of a poem and a matching couplet, memorize two themes of poetic description and one item of history.

In the third level, the students read fifty to seventy characters, practice writing ten lines and memorize one poem.¹⁴

As students progressed, they moved into a world of diverse educational institutions. Many were privately-run, ranging from the humble community schools mentioned above to the grand Neo-Confucian academies (*shu-yüan* or *ching-she*) of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which were at times as much centers for philosophical discussion as they were schools. Many others were run by the government. At the height of their development in the early twelfth century, government schools were organized into an empire-wide school system with a combined enrollment of some two hundred thousand students, extending from county schools (*hsien-hsüeh*) up through prefectural schools (*chou-hsüeh*) to the august Imperial University (*T'ai-hsüeh*) with its 3,800 students.¹⁵

For the more advanced students, study was supposed to be less a matter of memorizing and understanding texts (though these tasks never ceased)

than one of applying what they had learned to specific issues and problems. In the words of one thirteenth-century writer: 'The upper school follows principle in order to illumine the affairs of the world; the lower school approaches affairs in order to view the principles of the world.'¹⁶ Using principles to 'illumine the affairs of the world,' we might note, was very much the aim of the examination policy questions.

This connection to the examinations was not accidental, for most education was oriented to the examinations and involved, moreover, frequent testing and evaluation. At the government schools from the late eleventh century on, entrance was competitive and advancement within them was determined largely by tests: monthly, seasonal (at the University), and annual.¹⁷ This was excellent preparation for the civil service examinations; indeed, the annual tests were explicitly modelled on the examinations. But to many critics, it was a perversion of genuine education. To cite just two examples, the rise of the Neo-Confucian academies in the late twelfth century was accompanied by condemnation of examination-oriented education, while in the earlier *Admonitions for the Young and Ignorant* we find the query: 'If examination preparation is used to educate human talent, [the talented] will not know the essentials of action, so how can they be employed [by the government]?'¹⁸

The life of a student involved more than slavish study and examination preparation, however. By taking a select group of boys and young men away from their families and homes and throwing them together (students usually boarded at school), schools served as powerful socializing forces. This was especially true of the University. Its students studied under famous thinkers (University professorships were prestigious positions within the bureaucracy), had opportunities to meet influential officials, and at times played an important role in court politics.¹⁹ We hardly need mention the worldly pleasure offered by the great metropoli of K'ai-feng and Lin-an.²⁰ But not the least important were the friendships they made with each other, lifelong friendships in many cases. The noted poet Yang Wan-li (1124–1206), in reminiscing about a former fellow student, Liu Ch'eng-pi, offered a rare glimpse of student life at the University in Lin-an:

When Yen-ch'un [i.e., Ch'eng-pi] and I were in school together, on every clear night, after studying to the point of exhaustion and when the markets were devoid of human traces, together we would climb into a pavilion, scoop up pond water with our hands, and play under the frosty moon. I think that the happiness of us two was promoting the happiness of the world. How could one change that happiness?²¹

Study and examination preparation were by no means limited to schools. Even apart from those who were educated entirely at home, for most *chin-*

shih there was a considerable gap between the end of formal schooling and examination success.²² During that interval, young men commonly had other concerns, most notably marriage, and returned to their studies only as the triennial examinations approached. Many took to teaching, in government schools, as tutors (*men-k'o*) in wealthy households, or more humbly, as teachers in village schools. One encounters others serving as merchants, tending to family estates, or active in community affairs. We can only guess at the psychic strains and costs that such a life entailed, with the long three year wait for the examinations and the bitter disappointment which usually attended announcement of the results. But occasionally one can hear the disappointed voices. Liu Nan-fu (1202—ca. 1238), a three-time *chü-jen* from the Chiang-hsi prefecture of Chi-chou, exclaimed to his friend, the famous teacher Ou-yang Shou-tao (b. 1209): 'The examinations have long tired me. If in one's life one can saunter through forests and valleys and fill one's belly with books, that is sufficient. Of what use are other aims, alas!' Liu finally received his *chin-shih* degree in 1238 but he died before he could take any post. 'This can be called drowning in the examination hall,' wrote Ou-yang.²³

We have talked thus far about the achievers, the rare survivors of the long educational process. Most of those who began their studies with dreams of a *chin-shih* pennant one day flying outside their houses dropped out along the way. Some did so quickly, like the one-time brigand and, later, Sung general, Ma Jen-yü (933—82):

When he had passed the age of ten, his father ordered him to go to school. He immediately ran away [but then] returned and was sent again to a village school where he studied the *Classic of Filial Piety*.

When after more than ten days he had not learned a single character, his teacher whipped him. In the middle of the night Jen-yü went alone and burned down the school hall. The teacher barely escaped with his life.²⁴

More typical, one would hope, was the case of Wang T'ing-chen (1088—1142), also of Chi-chou, who was from a well-established scholarly family; one of his brothers became a *chin-shih* and two others were locally noted scholars. T'ing-chen 'did not enjoy the grind of being a section-and-paragraph-writing student' and was even less pleased upon being promoted to the prefectural school. So he quit school and the scholarly life altogether and proved to be very good at making money.²⁵

Finally there were those who took the examinations, sometimes repeatedly, only to give up in despair or disgust. Though we have records of only that tiny fraction who made names for themselves, the unsuccessful greatly outnumbered their more successful contemporaries, especially in the Southern

Sung. Some were extolled as exemplars; Wu Shih-jen of Lin-an returned home after failing the examinations and gained renown as a teacher. He 'willing [accepted] poverty and held to the Way, concentrated on mastering the study of sincere righteousness and clear principles, and did not engage in heretical talk.'²⁶ For others, retirement was intellectually liberating precisely because it freed them from the strictures of the Confucian curriculum. Thus Liu Chi-ming (1059–1131) of Chi-chou turned from the examinations to a broad array of interests which, in addition to the classics, philosophers, and history, included strange and unusual tales, works on astronomy, geography, divination, medical nostrums, Buddhism, and Taoism.²⁷ And Wang Lo-hsien of T'an-chou (in Ching-hu-nan) upon failing the departmental examination, angrily tore up his (scholar's) cap and became a Taoist monk.²⁸ In yet other cases retirement led to drink and, occasionally, to ruin. Indeed, in the anecdotal literature popular in Sung elite society one encounters such somber figures as a University student murdered in a brothel and the ghost of an impoverished *chü-jen* haunting a Buddhist monastery.²⁹

The examination literature

The voluminous literature dealing with examinations and education in Sung and, more generally, late traditional China has primarily been of two varieties: institutional history and that concerned with the composition and mobility of the ruling elite. The former is the more venerable, with its origins in the treatises of dynastic histories, a genre that was well established by Sung times. When archivists, historians, encyclopedists and local historians dealt with these topics, they usually wrote institutional histories of them, thereby providing us with the bulk of our information about them. In this century this tradition has been very fruitfully continued by such historians as Ch'en Tung-yüan,³⁰ Terada Gō,³¹ Araki Toshikazu,³² and Thomas H.C. Lee,³³ to cite just a few examples. With discrimination and a sure grasp of the major sources, they have produced detailed histories of the development of government recruitment and examinations, and of schools. Yet informative as they are, these internalist approaches suffer from a certain narrowness, for they do not as a rule relate the institutions to their social contexts.

Such is not the case with the latter approach, which has produced a vigorous debate over the nature of Chinese society. A few decades ago Edward A. Kracke, Jr. and Ping-ti Ho created a stir in the scholarly world by arguing that traditional Chinese society was far more mobile than many scholars had believed was possible for a premodern society.³⁴ In their studies based upon *chin-shih* lists for the Sung (Kracke) and *chin-shih* and *chü-jen* lists for the Ming and Ch'ing (Ho),³⁵ they found that a majority had no officials among their paternal great-grandfather, grandfather and father, and thus were

upwardly mobile. They concluded that the late traditional Chinese elite was dependent upon office-holding and the examinations for its position and, given the difficulties of examination success, very fluid in its composition.

The lasting achievement of this mobility approach has been its demonstration of the centrality of education and academic achievement in elite and even non-elite society, for the promise of learning did beckon broadly.³⁶ However, the mobility thesis and its accompanying model of Chinese society has come under challenge in recent years, for it is vulnerable on at least two counts.

First, by making elite membership a function of examination success and/or government service, it confuses status group with class.³⁷ While the examination system clearly constituted the preeminent status hierarchy in Chinese society and high status usually (though not always) entailed power and wealth, it does not follow that degree holders (and their families) constituted a ruling class or social elite. Much more persuasive is the concept of upper class membership based upon land ownership which then could lead to education and office.

Second, by its narrow focus upon direct patrilineage, the mobility thesis ignores such critical factors as lineage, marriage relationships, and even siblings and uncles. This is partly a function of the information given by the examination lists, but it is also the result of using a Western model predicated upon the nuclear family as *the* significant social unit. Given the well-known importance of kinship and lineage in Chinese society, such an approach is bound to be misleading.

Even before Kracke and Ho published their studies, there were those whose conceptions of Chinese society were quite different. Karl Wittfogel, in an article on the uses of protection (*yin*) in Liao and Sung times, concluded that the Chinese ruling class was relatively stable in its composition.³⁸ Hsiao-tung Fei, writing about the rural gentry in the early twentieth century, stressed both its stability and its economic basis in landowning.³⁹ More recently, Hilary Jane Beattie,⁴⁰ Robert M. Hartwell,⁴¹ and his students Robert Hymes⁴² and Linda Walton⁴³ have argued that late traditional China was dominated by a landholding upper class of elite lineages remarkable for their ability to perpetuate themselves and from whose ranks the great majority of officials was drawn. Because of their importance for the present study, Hartwell's findings, which concern the lineages that provided incumbents to the Sung fiscal bureaucracy, demand special consideration.

Hartwell argues that for most of the Northern Sung, the fiscal bureaucracy and, by extension, the government were dominated by a small group of lineages which he calls the professional elite. These lineages, which claimed descent from the great T'ang lineages,⁴⁴ maintained their positions by marriage

alliances, by optimum use of the examinations and protection, and by factional alliances that gave them control over promotions. Their domination began to weaken in the late eleventh century, however, when the increasing severity of factional disputes resulted in the exclusion of a large number of these lineages from high office. As a consequence, the fiscal bureaucracy from the early twelfth century on was characterized by a larger number of less dominant lineages whose marriages were primarily local in character and whose ability to use protection was relatively limited.⁴⁵

This thesis contributes significantly to our understanding of Sung society. By systematically introducing the variables of lineage, marriage patterns and factionalism, it is able to explain much more than the mobility model, which emphasized the two factors of wealth and examination success for the achievement of status and power. Hartwell, in fact, regards the examinations as a virtual non-factor in social mobility:

There is not a single documented example, in either Su-chou or in the collective biographical material on policymaking and financial officials, of a family demonstrating upward mobility solely because of success in the civil service examinations. Indeed, in every documented case of upward mobility, passage of the examinations *followed* intermarriage with one of the already established elite gentry lineages.⁴⁶

In other words, marriage, not examinations, was the critical criterion for entrance into a socially-defined elite. Such a position, however, is open to qualification on three counts.

First, even if Hartwell's observation of the temporal priority of intermarriage is borne out by future research, it does not prove that examinations were unimportant, but only that elite intermarriage was a necessary if informal precondition to examination success and office-holding. In fact, most upwardly mobile families also invested in education at an early stage in their rise. A wealthy but uncultured merchant would typically hire teachers for his sons and try to marry them to women from established, respectable families.⁴⁷ In the Southern Sung especially, such an academic strategy was socially expected and it provided the most likely means for the achievement of official status. Although members of some rising families may have entered the bureaucracy via the protection privileges of their affinal kin, for most the initial entry had to come via the examinations. Indeed, for many, perhaps most such families, examination success was not achieved. Respectability and local prominence could still be had, but there were clear limits to their potential status and power.⁴⁸

Moreover, it is not clear that examination success was the completely dependent variable that Hartwell makes it out to be. For some young literati

from humble backgrounds, the promise of success was the deciding factor in making advantageous marriage matches.⁴⁹ In other cases, success itself was the necessary condition for marriage. Chen Ying of Chi-chou, who was from a 'guest' family (*kuan-k'o*) bound to a magistrate's family, was unable to get the latter's permission to a marriage until after he passed the examinations.⁵⁰ Even more remarkable is the story told by Hung Mai about a county clerk who learns through a dream that the son of a neighboring doctor (an inferior occupation) would pass the examinations. Approaching the doctor, who has already registered his son for the examinations, the clerk promises his daughter in marriage if the son succeeds. He does and the marriage is concluded.⁵¹ Therefore even as marriage could aid one in the examinations, so could examination success be of benefit for social climbing through marriage.

Second, there is an inherent imprecision in speaking of 'elite lineages,' for Chinese lineages could be extremely heterogeneous bodies, as their common charity provisions for poor members bear witness.⁵² To belong to an elite lineage did not mean that one was elite, although the connection undoubtedly conferred many benefits upon the poor member unavailable to his unconnected neighbors. Thus under the umbrella of the lineage and perhaps concealed by it, there was ample opportunity for individual and family mobility, both upwards and downwards.

Third, Hartwell's view of the examinations does not take into account the growing centrality of schools and examinations in Sung society. The changes underlying the very different conditions of the two protests described earlier are reflected by many Sung writers. Consider the following entries in the Sung dynastic history (the *Sung-shih*). Describing the beginnings of the central government's significant involvement in local education (ca. 1022), it says:

In the time of Jen-tsung [r. 1022–63], scholars who pursued Confucian learning had been unable to proliferate. So early in his reign he endowed the Yen-chou school [in Ching-tung-hsi circuit] with school fields and also ordered border and capital regions all to establish schools.⁵³

Two hundred years later, in 1231, we find the observation that 'the scholars in the examination halls of the time were daily increasing and the rolls of scrolls were like mountains.'⁵⁴ We might note, too, an essay by one Li K'ang of Ming-chou (in Liang-che-tung) commemorating the building of a library in 1090:

Nurtured and nourished by the imperial Sung, the people have increased greatly. Those who study esteem the years and months of grinding [effort] and scholars daily increase. Good people consider not educating

their sons to be shameful and their posterity consider the lack of renown to be a disgrace.⁵⁵

The change, in short, lay in the greatly increased value accorded education and in the growing predominance of an elite lifestyle that was rooted in education and oriented towards examination success.

The examination system occupied a critical nexus in Sung society. A complex institution, it served many interests and performed many functions, not merely of bureaucratic selection but also of elite advancement and representation, social and intellectual control, and imperial symbolism, to name just a few. Yet none of the studies mentioned above has focused upon that conjunction between institution and society. Such is the aim of this study.⁵⁶ While questions of institutional history, social mobility and social structure will not be ignored, the emphasis will be upon the social functions of the examination system and people's perceptions of it, and especially how those changed during the three century span of the Sung.

The plentiful sources that have been used are largely those of past studies – government documents, histories, encyclopedias, the writings of individuals – but they will be used in at least two different ways. First, the sources have been combed for data to make possible quantitative generalizations about the impact of the examinations on Sung society. In particular, the use of over one hundred Sung, Yüan, Ming and Ch'ing local histories has allowed a perspective which emphasizes the humble as well as the exalted and the prefecture as well as the capital. Second, the institutional literature has been read with an eye to its social ramifications. Did certain groups or regions benefit more than others from the examinations' rules, and if so, why? Upon what theory or theories of education were the examinations predicated? And how did China's elite culture adapt to the powerful organizing force of the examinations? It is with such questions that subsequent chapters will be concerned. But first we should consider how society was generally changing during Sung times.

The historical context

The characterization of the Sung as a period of major social and economic change has by now gained widespread acceptance. It was an age of great contrasts, the most remarkable being the coexistence of military (and often political) weakness with economic and cultural vigor. Since the middle of the T'ang, China had been undergoing what some have called the 'medieval economic revolution.' In the countryside, the growth of estates (*chuang-yüan*), the rise of the lower Yangtze region as the empire's economic center and, in the early Sung, advances in techniques of rice cultivation all contributed to a rise in agricultural production. This, together with the growth

of a cash economy, the increasingly common payment of taxes in cash, the spread of paper money and the beginnings of industrial development, contributed to a rapid growth in commerce. For the first time fairs and periodic markets appeared in the countryside. In the cities, the walled wards and controlled markets of the early T'ang disappeared. From K'ai-feng south along the Grand Canal and throughout the southeast, sprawling cities emerged, whose size reflected their economic and not necessarily their political importance.⁵⁷

This was an age of great technological advances, not the least being the development and spread of printing. Invented by the Buddhists in the eighth century or before, wood-block printing was first used by the government in the tenth century to produce authoritative versions of the classics.⁵⁸ During the Sung it rapidly spread throughout the empire, most especially in the prosperous southeast, as temples, schools and private enterprises set up their own shops (by one count there were some 173 printers during the Southern Sung).⁵⁹ The impact of printing on Sung China was profound, and profoundly different from that on Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For where the latter led through the vernacular Bible to the Reformation, the former led through the classics to the examinations.⁶⁰ Although this study will be concerned primarily with the institutional factors behind the growth of the literati, that growth would certainly never have happened without printing to make books less expensive and more available.

The social changes of the T'ang–Sung period were equally noteworthy. During the middle and late T'ang, the overwhelming political and social dominance of a small number of aristocratic lineages had given way, at least partially, to the rising power of provincial lineages. According to Denis Twitchett, this was made possible by

... the greatly increased and diversified possibilities for employment in provincial governments of specialized government agencies, which followed the decay of central civil authority and the transfer of effective political and military authority from the central government to the provinces a century or more later.⁶¹

During the Five Dynasties (907–60), many of the aristocratic lineages disappeared under the repeated onslaught of wars and rebellions, rebellions noteworthy for their expressions of class hatred.⁶² Soldiers and wealthy merchants played an unusually prominent role in government,⁶³ and in general political fragmentation provided opportunities for advancement to many local groups. Thus by the early Sung elite groups were various, including the remnants of the T'ang aristocracy, bureaucratic and military

lineages from the north and wealthy southern lineages that had flourished under the relative tranquility of the southern kingdoms.

This diversity was a far cry from the homogeneity of the eleventh century's national elite which, according to Professor Hartwell, dominated the bureaucracy. Why the change? Peace and prosperity, urbanization (especially that of K'ai-feng, the great imperial metropolis), and the increasing availability of books all played a role. So too did the examination system. An old institution even in the tenth century, it was put to new uses by the early Sung emperors who saw it as an instrument for reordering elite society. If the results were complex and often unintended they nevertheless had far-reaching consequences for the development of Chinese society.

The examination system inherited by the Sung had been founded by the Sui in 589 and had changed rather little in the intervening four centuries, when it was characterized by its variety of degrees, its exclusive provisions for candidacy, and its numerically small but prestigious impact upon the bureaucracy. The Sui-T'ang system had six different degrees. Three were specialized, concentrating on law (*ming-fa*), calligraphy (*ming-shu*) and mathematics (*ming-suan*), while the remainder, the *hsiu-ts'ai*, *ming-ching* and *chin-shih* degrees, tested a broader, more traditional corpus of knowledge. From early on, the degrees were sharply differentiated by their prestige and importance. The *hsiu-ts'ai* ('cultivated talent') degree was so difficult that it never had many graduates and disappeared after the early years of the T'ang. The *ming-ching* ('understanding the classics') degree tested one's knowledge of the classics and had the largest numbers of candidates and graduates. But most important was the *chin-shih* ('advanced scholar') degree, the only one that tested poetic abilities, which eclipsed the classics degree in prestige and all of the others in numbers and prestige.⁶⁴

The T'ang examinations were held annually in the capital. There were two ways to qualify for them: through recommendation from prefectural officials – 'district tribute' (*hsiang-kung*) or 'tribute selection' (*kung-chü*) – and through *hsiao-chü*, attendance at one of several schools in the capital, which with one exception were open only to the relatives of officials. The latter route appears to have accounted for the great majority of the graduates.⁶⁵

The pre-Sung examination system constituted a small and prestigious route of bureaucratic entry. Although its graduates accounted for only six to sixteen percent of the civil service,⁶⁶ their career prospects were high and they frequently predominated at the highest levels of government.⁶⁷ By introducing literary achievement as a significant factor in political success, the examinations may have helped undermine the position of the great

lineages. But contrary to the assertions of some historians, they did not facilitate social mobility, for the system insured that degree holders would come either from the great lineages or from locally prominent lineages with traditions of office-holding.⁶⁸

Beginning in 977, the Sung government began conferring examination degrees in the hundreds rather than scores; the annual average of degrees given went from approximately thirty for the preceding three centuries to 192 for the years 997–1272.⁶⁹ In expanding the examinations and instituting other critical reforms, the early Sung emperors were acting upon several concerns. They wanted to fill the civil service of the just reunited empire with bright and educated men. They wanted to control the military which had grown dominant in court politics and curb the power of those great lineages that had survived the wars. And they were not unmindful, if somewhat wary, of providing opportunities to men from the developing south.⁷⁰

Most of these concerns were met. The government of the mid-Northern Sung was dominated by an energetic group of men who by and large owed their positions to examination success. Coming from both established northern families and 'newly risen' families of the southeast,⁷¹ their social stratum was much broader than that of the T'ang elite but still small enough to be centered on the imperial capital of K'ai-feng, cosmopolitan in character, and interlaced by marriage ties. This was possible not only because this elite group dominated the recruitment process, as Hartwell has argued, but also because they were relatively unchallenged by others. Many families of means which could have engaged in education and the examinations chose not to do so.

During the late Northern Sung, however, a rapid spread in government schools to most prefectures and counties made education more available and popular than ever before. Thus as factional struggles eroded the political position of the eleventh century elite, it began to merge into a larger and growing stratum of local elites. As a result, Southern Sung elite society was much larger but more parochial than its Northern Sung predecessor, and tended to be socially centred at a regional or even prefectural level. Economically based upon landowning and, to some extent, commerce, it nevertheless was deeply involved in education and in the bitterly competitive rigors of examination life. As will be shown in the next chapter, several hundred thousand typically took the prefectural examinations in the early thirteenth century, compared with a few tens of thousands two centuries before.

Given these social changes, one would expect very different relationships between the examinations and society in early, mid, and late Sung, and indeed, the subsequent chapters will be devoted to showing how this was the case. Much of the argument rests upon the numbers presented in Chapter 2,

for the manifold increase in candidates points to an increasingly profound involvement in the examinations by the landowning upper class, and with that involvement came many attendant problems.

Who took and passed the examinations? In Chapter 3 we shall see how the institutional developments of the early Sung were shaped largely by an imperial ideal of fairness in support of the earlier mentioned aims of creating an able civil service and controlling potential rivals. This policy worked fairly well so long as candidate numbers remained modest, but, as we will see in Chapter 5, when competition became acute in the Southern Sung, relatives of officials used their right to take special examinations to subvert the essential fairness of the system. These privileges also served to give the region or prefecture with many native officials an advantage over others, as we will see in Chapter 6. With successes breeding success, a few regions such as the southeastern coast and northern Chiang-hsi were able to gain unparalleled representation in the civil service.

What should the relationship be between education and the examinations? It might seem strange that this question arose, for examinations required years of education to master their Confucian curriculum and they were justified by the Confucian principle of government by the virtuous and talented. Yet Confucian critics asked, first, how the virtuous could be selected when the anonymous examination procedures of the Sung made considerations of character impossible, and second, how moral education could be pursued when students set their sights on examination success and not the Way. As we shall see in Chapter 4, reform minded statesmen in the Northern Sung answered the first question by advocating and then creating an empire-wide school system which, for a time, took over the functions of the examinations, only to see the unwieldy system with its two hundred thousand students fall under charges of favoritism, cheating and poor education. Southern Sung Neo-Confucians, by contrast, reacted to the unprecedented examination competition (caused, in part, by the educational programs of the Northern Sung) by arguing for disinterested study and moral cultivation, or in other words, for a separation between education and examinations.

Finally, as examinations became established in society, they had to be integrated into culture. As Chapter 7 will show, the examinations spawned popular stories, portents and myths. With burgeoning numbers of failed candidates, such social roles as the aging candidate and the wandering literatus were developed and popularized. But most important were the ceremonies, clothing, buildings and community support organizations with which Southern Sung local leaders created visions of examination honor even as they subverted the examinations. The myth of opportunity was as important for social stability as its lie was to the elite's privileged position.