CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIETY OF LETTERED MEN

A Tainted Mandate

Ho’s career was now under way in earnest, and with it his participation in the larger worlds of Chinese political and literary history. Henceforth, his life would be inseparable from issues of public importance, and it is necessary, if many of his attitudes and actions are to be properly understood, to offer some account both of the reason why his success in the examinations was so crucial and of the inherently contradictory obligations and opportunities that the evolution of Chinese political culture had placed in his path.

The first of these can be dealt with more briefly than the second. As Charles O. Hucker has observed, The examination system had become “the preeminent avenue by which educated young men entered the civil service, and after the early Ming decades few men reached positions of influence in the civil administration without having won examination degrees.”¹ The system had emerged during the T’ang dynasty (618-906) as a way for talented men not of aristocratic birth to enter government service on their own merit. To a limited extent during the T’ang, and generally during the Sung (960-1279), the examinations provided a reasonably equitable and effective means for accomplishing this end. In place of evaluation by his peers on the basis of birth, the candidate for office was tested on intellectual or literary attainments by an ‘objective’ system operating under Imperial sponsorship.² Heated debates flourished at times over the merits of


² For an acute analysis of the significance of the examination system at the time of its reconstitution by Empress Wu of the T’ang, see R. W. L. Guisso, Wu Tse-t’ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T’ang China, Western Washington University Program in East Asian Studies Occasional Papers 11 (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1978).
emphasizing ‘practical’, as opposed to literary, content in the questions put, but direct interference with examination results by the court, if not unknown, was not systematic. The successful graduate thus carried with him, whatever the course of his later career, the prestige of having succeeded by his own efforts in a difficult and equitably judged test of ability.³

But the Mongol conquest of China during the thirteenth century had first challenged and then fundamentally altered the role of the examinations. Initially, the Mongol Yüan dynasty had simply abolished the examinations, preferring to attempt the administration of China as much as possible by non-Chinese. The examinations were reinstated by the Mongols themselves as early as 1313. But they reappeared in a form that differed in two significant ways from that followed during the Sung dynasty. In the first place, there were quotas that put Chinese, and particularly southern Chinese, at a severe disadvantage. Secondly, the emphasis of the examinations was changed from literary composition, as under the Sung, to a limited body of Confucian texts, together with a similarly limited corpus of commentaries on them based on the tao-hsueh tradition founded chiefly by the Ch’eng brothers, Ch’eng Hao and Ch’eng Yi, and Chu Hsi.⁴ Except that under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the quotas would be applied according to provincial residence—still to the detriment of southerners—rather than along ethnic lines and literary composition was entirely dropped, these two innovations were inherited from the Yüan and continued to be fundamental to the examination system during the rest of the dynasty, and by extension, to its educational institutions and, to a considerable extent, its intellectual life as well.⁵

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³ For a concise account of Sung debates over the examination curriculum, see Benjamin A. Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), pp.12-19, 25-29.

⁴ For the reemergence of ‘Confucian’ institutions under the Mongols, see John W. Dardess, Conquerors and Confucians: Aspects of Political Change in Late Yüan China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), but note the dissatisfaction with Dardess’s use of the term ‘Confucian’ expressed by Elizabeth Endicott-West in her review of the book, Ming Studies 9 (1979), pp.37-40. Benjamin Elman, in his discussion of the examination curriculum, points out that literary composition was not dropped entirely, as Dardess suggests, but rather reduced in importance; see Cultural History, pp.29-35.

⁵ For the Ming regional quotas, see Hucker, The Ming Dynasty, pp.49-50, and