Sung (Song) China: Imperial Examination System

One of the unique features of the imperial government of China was the imperial examination system. Through it, the Chinese government recruited the members of its bureaucracy from the general populace, rather than leaving the imperial administration to the hereditary nobles. This system evolved gradually, starting in the second century B.C. during the former Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 8), becoming more elaborate and institutionalized during the early part of the Sung (Song) dynasty (960–1279), and continuing with only slight modifications down to the early years of this century. The last imperial examinations were held in 1905.

Millions of young men in China during the imperial period invested their time, energy, money, and passion in an effort to pass the examination, since this was the road to power and wealth. Aspirants for imperial bureaucratic posts usually spent ten or more years preparing for the examination, primarily by reading, analyzing, and memorizing the voluminous Confucian classics. During the Sung period, prospective candidates for imperial administrative posts were expected to pass three levels of highly competitive examinations—prefectural, metropolitan, and palace—and attain the Presented Scholar (Chin-shih [jinshi]) degree, which was the most coveted degree, roughly comparable to a Ph.D. in the West. The candidates in the palace examination were ranked in order of their achievements in the examination. The higher the rank the candidates achieved, the better the chances were that they would receive more powerful and prestigious imperial appointments. The candidate for the Chin-shih degree was required to produce, among other things, poems in various styles, a rhyme prose piece, a policy essay, answers to five policy questions, and answers to ten “written elucidation” questions on Confucian classics such as the Spring and Autumn Annals and the Book of Rites. The following selection is an example of an essay question on policy matters.

Questions:

1. What do you think are the merits and demerits of the Chinese imperial examination system?

2. How does this system compare with the way the Ottoman Empire recruited Janissaries?


It is stated in the Book of Kuan-tzu [Guan Zi]: “the method by which a sage rules the world is this: he does not let the four classes of people live together. Therefore, there are no complaints, and things run smoothly. As a result, scholars know how to spend their leisure, laborers abide with the orders of officials, merchants go to the marketplaces and farmers go to the fields. Everyone goes to his appropriate place and lives there satisfactorily. Young children are sent to study; their wills are satisfied and they do not change their minds when they see strange things.” The Kuan-tzu Book further states: “Children of scholars and farmers must always be scholars and farmers and children of merchants and laborers must also always be merchants and laborers, so that a scholar can give instructions and take care of
his proper status, and a farmer can work attentively in cultivating his crops to feed the people. Everyone is satisfied with his occupation and does not seek to change. This is truly good! Otherwise, hundreds of laborers might all go to the marketplaces and ten thousand merchants might all try to work in the same [most profitable] business; they would all become cunning, deceitful, eager to play tricks, and they would also become capricious, greedy and seek only profits."

Now, to fit people in their occupations is not to improve morals. To see something better and change—what harm is there in this? Take the example of Tuan-mu [Duanmu] who became a merchant [after being a disciple of Confucius], Chiao Li [Jiao Li] who became a fisherman [after being an important official] and Wang Meng who went to sell dust-baskets [after being a prime minister]; these men responded to their times and changed in myriad ways, why should they have been restricted to their fixed occupations? Similarly, Huang Hsien [Huang Xian] was originally a lowly veterinarian, Sang Hung-yang [Sang Hongyang] a merchant, Sun Shu-ao a wood-cutter, and yet they all were able to preserve their intelligence and help strengthen their states. How can we accuse them of responding to their times and of going to take up responsibilities other than their own occupations! We now have a regulation keeping the descendants of those in despised occupations from taking the civil service examinations. Although this rule has been in force for some time, I consider that it still is a good time to examine this regulation. You candidates have excelled yourselves in knowledge of the past, and in debating various problems; I would like you to spend time considering the issue I have just outlined above.

1. Kuan-tzu or Master Kuan [Guan], who lived in the middle of the seventh century B.C., is regarded in Chinese history as one of the most innovative government reformers in ancient China. He was a great supporter of a centralized form of government.