

Chapter 7

THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM AND THE BUREAUCRACY

Political developments in the seventh century, although far more richly documented than their social equivalents, present the historian with numerous problems. The first of these, the bias of traditional historiography, has earlier been discussed in some detail but it is in the political realm that it takes on its greatest significance. In the Confucian mind, questions of rule were uppermost, and by the seventh century the values of the historian were set. A good ruler was one who conformed to traditionalism and decorum, who achieved harmony in the hierarchical relationships of Heaven, Earth and Man, as well as between ruler and subject, and who brought peace and prosperity to the empire. Motivation and causation, objective assessment of success and failure except in the moral realm, are largely absent from the traditional accounts. There is a sameness in all their appraisals of the Empress Wu in her political role. She was unorthodox and undignified, ruthless and pragmatic, cruel and skillfully unscrupulous. The description of her which terms her "licentious but orderly [in administration]" (*yin erh pu-luan*) in juxtaposition to the Han Empress Lü has become proverbial.

A second difficulty lies in the fact that extant sources are concerned almost exclusively with the events and conflicts at court and usually deal only with the ruler and the highest echelons of the bureaucracy. The lower levels of officialdom, provincial administration and the extremely important class of officeholders termed those "outside the current" (*liu-wai*) are dealt with only indirectly, and the historian must rely on surmise, later sources, and occasionally the evidence of Tunhuang.¹ On the other hand, the high degree of centralization in the early T'ang makes the problem less severe than is the case after An Lu-shan's rebellion; moreover, the first century or so of the dynasty was characterized by a phenomenon known as "value the center and esteem lightly the provinces" (*chung-nei ch'ing-wai*).² This meant that most ambitious men were active at the capital, and it was there that important political events occurred. Let us now turn to some of them.

Within the governing class of pre-modern China the conventional conflict perceived by historians has been that between the "inner" (*nei*) and the "outer" (*wai*): that is, between the imperial and consort clans, their eunuchs and favorites on the one hand, and the bureaucracy on the other. Throughout history the ascendancy of a woman had almost always been accompanied by the rise of her family, the *wai-ch'i*, and by eunuch power. But under the Empress Wu, this type of analysis is of little use, for she succeeded in breaking the pattern. Never did a eunuch exercise any discernible political influence, and never did any member of the Wu clan advance much beyond the status of a tool in carrying out such specific policies as the suppression of the upper bureaucracy or the confusion of the succession.³ Even the military power held by male clan members was minimal,⁴ especially in comparison with the Han Empress Lü who had set the pattern,

and with the early eighth-century Empress Wei who prepared for her attempted coup by first placing as much military force as possible in *wai-ch'i* hands.

It is, therefore, one of the most remarkable aspects of Empress Wu's career that what she did, she did with only minimal aid from her family. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which we have looked at in our discussion of her legitimation. Even more basic than those we have already discussed, however, is the dislike she conceived for her half-brothers after her father's death with the result that she had them disgraced or destroyed between 666 and 670. Of the survivors, her nephews Wu Ch'eng-ssu and Wu San-ssu, the sons of Wu Yüan-shuang and Wu Yüan-ch'ing respectively, were summoned to the capital in 674 but were kept out of politics until after Chung-tsung's deposition. As we shall see, both of them eventually reached *tsai-hsiang* status but held it for a relatively short period of time and principally as a counterweight to such competent and assertive ministers as Ti Jen-chieh.⁵ Even the fiefs of maintenance (*shih-shih feng*) awarded to the Wu clan during Chou, although a source of criticism by historians, were not excessive in the context of the times, and the real abuse of the privilege belongs to the next reigns.⁶ The empress is said once to have remarked that she desired to have one member of her clan as chief minister at all times,⁷ but it is significant that she was speaking at the time to a maternal relative, and that the Yangs and other relatives-by-marriage were as prominent in her period of power as were the Wus. Neither, however, became dominant either in the political or military spheres, and of no male ruler in the T'ang prior to An Lu-shan's rebellion could the same be said. Her predecessor T'ai-tsung had had his Ch'ang-sun Wu-chi, and her successor Hsüan-tsung would have his Li Lin-fu. To Wu Tse-t'ien all her servants, including her own family, were equal beneath the throne.

The Empress Wu did, however, have a series of favorites whom she used for specific purposes. The best known of these were Chou Hsing and Lai Chün-ch'en who presided over the terror, Hsüeh Huai-i who was responsible not only for the architecture of the *ming-t'ang* and the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra* but served also as a general, and finally the Chang brothers whose role seems to have been that of the empress' friends and confidants and whose political interventions were the immediate cause of her deposition.⁸ In each case these men were given enormous power, but intrinsically it was chiefly the power of invulnerability, to be answerable to the empress alone, and not the power to venture into the realm of administrative policy-making. Their effects were felt chiefly in the determined absolutism of the empress as she used them to counterbalance and dilute the influence of more talented officials. As a result, they shared in the empress' political success.

Was the empress a success? As mentioned earlier, most traditional historians have said "no" and have cited her massacres along with the decline of Confucian "virtue," the demoralization of a bureaucracy marked by excessive appointments and poor quality, and China's weakness against its neighbors during Chou, as indexes of her failure. The fact remains, however, that she became emperor in a China where it was impossible for a woman to do so, and even traditional historiography praises her ability as ruler "to accept remonstrance and know men."⁹ Moreover, the internal peace and prosperity which marked her reign, and her contribution to the bureaucratization of the great clans, to the development of Buddhism and, as we shall see, to the examination system, are matters of historical record. For the modern scholar, however, these facts are not enough and must be seen in the context of teleological questions. What precisely were the

motivations and the political aims of the empress, and to what extent and why were they achieved?

The tasks she set for herself were, I suggest, simple yet visionary. First of all, I suggest that she wanted to see her husband's dynasty consolidated and, in a more general sense, to make a harmonious state, permanently united under a strong central power whose sole, free, and acknowledged head was the emperor. Second, and closely related to this, she sought to change the relationship between ruler and minister or, perhaps more accurately, to create a new type of official who would interact in a specific way with an imperial institution for which she already had a clear definition. If not unique to her, it was at least contrastable with that of T'ai-tsung, and making it a reality was the goal of much of her political policy. Without the support of Kao-tsung, who seems early to have been persuaded to her view, she could have achieved little, and the policy of reducing the *tsai-hsiang* prerogatives perhaps owes as much to him as to her. Judging from the form taken both by the curriculum and the examination process itself the empress' hand is more easily discernible than that of her husband in the development of the examination system. I shall, therefore, speak of the examination policies as hers, bearing in mind, of course, that Kao-tsung offered both his acquiescence in and the legitimation for enforcement of her policies, if not the initiative in creating them.

The preceding chapter attempted to show the success of Kao-tsung's early policies to make status dependent on service to the T'ang, and to bureaucratize the great clans, especially the exclusivistic northeastern aristocracy. It further suggested the new problem which arose partially from the solution to the old. This is to say that the new bureaucracy, especially in its highest echelons, was infused with ambition, competence and the kind of self-confidence which arose from knowledge that its members possessed not only high birth but talent demonstrated either by examination or service. These officials had demands to make on the ruler and ways to abridge his prerogatives, and the representatives of their claims were the *tsai-hsiang*, officials above the third rank and of designated status.¹⁰ Since the reign of T'ai-tsung, this group had been growing in strength until by the 650s its members could justify the ancient claim that "no matter of state lay beyond their scope."¹¹ It had, of course, been the *tsai-hsiang* acting as a group who had almost succeeded in blocking the elevation of the Empress Wu, and we have seen how, with her husband's collusion, she rapidly succeeded in destroying the men involved. This had resulted in the intimidation of the group and the replacement of its members with more amenable officials like Hsü Ching-tsung and Li I-fu, but the early opposition of the *tsai-hsiang* and the attempt in 664 by another of them, Shang-kuan I, to bring about her deposition were things the rulers seem never to have forgotten.

In politics a major concern, therefore, became the definition of relations between emperor and minister, and with her customary thoroughness the empress turned first to the examination system. For the next few decades, the imperial view of the institution seems to have been that it was more a tool to achieve certain political and social ends than a method of choosing the best men to govern the state.

The first indication of concern with selection appeared in 657. In that year the vice-president of the Chancellery, Liu Hsiang-tao, submitted a comprehensive, seven-part critique of the appointment process,¹² perhaps inspired by the

fact that the notoriously corrupt Li I-fu had recently been given charge of the Board of Civil Office¹³ and was already selling posts on a large scale. At the same time, Liu identified some more general faults in the system, and because his criticisms were to be echoed throughout the next decades, it is useful to present them here in a fairly full way.

His first concern was a dual one: that too many appointments were being made and that too many men were insufficiently qualified. Elaborating on this, he pointed out that less than a third of present appointees were examination graduates while the rest were recruited from among minor governmental servants, clerical employees or guards, whom he referred to as the *tsa-se-jen* or *hsü-t'u*.¹⁴ There was no reason, he thought, to assume that these men were of virtuous character, and one of the reasons that punishments still existed in the state was that they were so numerous in the administration. His solution was the division of the qualified *tsa-se-jen* into four groups on the basis of their talents and character, with the best being attached to the Board of Civil Office, the next to the Board of War, and so on. Those who had once committed either a private or public crime should be reexamined and, unless amnestied, should receive no appointment. These measures, he believed, would purify the bureaucracy and inspire the *hsü-t'u* to a realization that competence and character were the criteria for appointment.

His second point was closely related to the first. Suggesting that the former practice whereby men "entered the current" of regular bureaucratic appointment only when vacant positions occurred was now disregarded, he pointed out that there existed at the time 13,465 officials "within the current."¹⁵ Considering that the average bureaucratic career was about thirty years in length, he calculated that the appointment of 500 persons per year would be more than sufficient to keep the bureaucracy at a constant level. Yet the Board of Civil Office at the time was making over 1,400 new appointments a year, and as officials returned from the frontier to find positions in the capital, the numbers were further swollen. This policy, he believed, was short-sighted and dangerous.

Liu's next three points concerned education and examination. Requesting first of all that two-thirds of all appointments within the current be allotted to holders of the *ming-ching* or *chin-shih* degrees, he asked also that greater consideration in appointment and promotion be given to students in the three state schools. His point here seems to have been that while the great expansion of Confucian education was highly beneficial to the state, students should have at least equal opportunities for advancement with lower-ranking officials who currently received promotion even beyond the statutory limitations as a reward for such relatively small achievements as the suggestion of administrative improvements. He recommended further that the *hsiu-ts'ai* examination be reinstated.¹⁶

Finally, Liu criticized the *k'ao* system of promotion, suggesting that officials rose too rapidly, with the result that many of them kept one eye constantly on their promotions instead of their present duties and that the common people were less inclined to obey them, knowing that their tenure was likely to be short. He concluded by returning in more specific terms to his first point, criticizing the three departments and the twenty-four offices for selecting and promoting their personnel from "outside the current." Officials of demonstrated classical and literary abilities found it shameful to serve in the same office with these inferior men, and the obvious result was that administrative efficiency was decreased. Liu requested that Kao-tsung have these matters fully discussed

and issue a decree to clarify the situation. According to one source, the emperor was willing to act, but "the great ministers (*ta-ch'en*) shrank from reform,"¹⁷ so that nothing was done.

As we shall see, Liu's views came increasingly to characterize the upper bureaucracy, particularly from the 680s when the sole ascendancy of the Empress Wu and her search for support in the lower bureaucracy brought her to attack the exclusivism and Confucian virtue which Liu so strongly advocated as necessary attributes of officialdom. Bureaucratic opposition in 657 is more difficult to account for, though the fact that only a small proportion of existing ministers possessed an examination degree may have been a factor in their reluctance to see the implementation of Liu's proposals.¹⁸ Rapid promotions were popular at all levels of officialdom except the very top, and an even more important factor working against change was the existence in the present system of opportunities for influential ministers to build a clientele by appointing friends and relatives from "outside the current." For rulers who aspired to a greater absolutism this privilege was a dangerous one, and its possible abuse was undoubtedly one of the reasons Kao-tsung and the empress turned increasingly to examination as a means of bureaucratic appointment.

To understand this development we must realize, first of all, that the T'ang offered technically five means of entry into the nine ranks of the regular bureaucracy. Of these, the three which accounted for the overwhelming majority of officeholders were promotion from "outside the current," possession of hereditary privilege (*yin*), and success in one of the examinations.¹⁹ Although examination graduates probably accounted for no more than a tenth of T'ang officialdom, they became increasingly prominent in the highest ranks of government, and we find that by the Chou dynasty, for instance, almost forty percent of the *tsai-hsiang* were graduates of the system, compared with only one of Kao-tsu's fourteen chief ministers and four of T'ai-tsung's twenty-one.²⁰ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in the period under discussion examination was becoming an increasingly favored path to high office.²¹ Because I wish to demonstrate that this was the result of imperial encouragement and that examination was the single method of recruitment which claimed the special attention of the Empress Wu, I shall now explore in detail the changes introduced into the system during early T'ang.

The mechanics of T'ang examinations are already well-known through the translations of Robert des Rotours²² but, unfortunately, the primary source of his research, the examination treatise of the *New T'ang History*, omits many of the empress' contributions to the development of the system.²³ As it existed from 622,²⁴ the T'ang system consisted of examinations held only at the capital and divided into three stages. The first of these was the *chü*²⁵ which by 657 had come to consist of two main examinations, the literary *chin-shih* and the classical *ming-ching*, as well as more specialized and less highly esteemed examinations in mathematics, law, history and calligraphy. These were held on a regular basis and were supplemented by irregular "decree examinations" (*chih-chü*) on specific themes set by the ruler.²⁶ Success in the *chü* gave the candidate an eighth or ninth rank "within the current," with no post nor salary but the right to apply for the second stage, the *hsüan*.

The *hsüan* or selection for a specific post was mandatory for those whose basic rank (*san-kuan*) was lower than five²⁷ and consisted of examination by the Three Selectors (*san-ch'üan*), usually the president and two vice-presidents of

the Board of Civil Office.²⁸ Under the procedure completed in 669, the candidate presented a curriculum (*hsüan-chieh*) and was then tested on his calligraphy (*shu* 書), his judgment of a hypothetical case (*p'an*), his physical appearance (*shen*), and his manner of speech (*yen*).²⁹ If he was successful, there were three further criteria (*san-lei*): virtuous conduct (*te-hsing*), [administrative] ability (*ts'ai*), and diligence (*lao*). In this process it might be noted that the selectors enjoyed wide powers of discretion. A provisional nomination (*ch'ang*) was then posted with the candidate having the option of up to three refusals, and a final list (*chia* 甲) was then submitted to the Chancellery for verification, approval and submission to the emperor. When the appointments were announced, the new official received a tally (*fu*) and a patent of appointment (*kao-shen*).³⁰

The third stage of the system, the *k'ao*,³¹ was an evaluation of performance for the purposes of promotion. Details of its workings are scarce, but it seems that a report on the administration of each official was submitted annually to the Board of Civil Office which in turn distributed it to the office concerned. All officials were ranked in one of nine categories, and the rankings technically were to be discussed and revised by a committee with representatives from the three departments before they were recorded, conveyed to the emperor, and made public. The ranking was made on a complicated system of "good qualities" (*shan*) and "perfections" (*tsui*), and a high score meant an increase of rank or salary or both. A low score meant fine or demotion. It was a complicated and time-consuming process, and since the major responsibility rested with a handful of men within the Board of Civil Office,³² it could never have been too effectively administered. Two of the few extant descriptions of actual cases in the period suggest laxity of enforcement.³³

From the preceding summary two points of great importance emerge. First, the *chü* and *hsüan* were different in nature. The *chü* at its most basic level may be seen as an expression of the pristine purpose of the examinations, the recruitment of the ablest men into the ruling group. The *hsüan*, which only appeared in 628,³⁴ served as a control, increasingly becoming a means to ensure that unsuitable or socially undesirable men did not hold high posts. Second, as office came more and more to be the determinant of status, the desirability of a degree made the examinations an ideal mechanism through which to exercise state control. The curriculum of the *chü*, for instance, could determine the values and attitudes of much of the bureaucracy while the criteria for success in the *hsüan* could control its size and composition and predict its internal tensions.

As we have seen, the Empress Wu came to power when the system was still in a formative stage. No major modification had occurred since 628, and neither *hsüan* nor *chü* would take their final forms until the years 669 and 681 respectively. Several issues, some of them raised by Liu Hsiang-tao, remained unresolved. How could ability best be measured, and should it take precedence over "suitability"? If the *hsüan* in particular were to be seen as a means of state control, who represented the state, the ruler or his ministers? And who defined suitability? The empress had answers to these questions and though she unfolded them in stages, they might have been inferred from her opening move. In 659 a ceremony was held at the palace to honor 900 men successful in the *chü* and, after a quiz on current affairs, the top five were assigned to prestigious special positions.³⁵ The examination system thus became, at a stroke, the approved form

of entry into the civil service.

The year 659, it will be recalled, was also the year of the *Hsing-shih lu* and the second of the T'ang marriage bans. Bureaucratization of the great clans, especially those in the Northeast, was the political priority, and it is to this end that initial recruitment policies were directed. Thus in the same month as the ceremony held for examination graduates, control of the Board of Civil Office was taken from the hands of Kuan-chung aristocrats like T'ang Lin and Liu Hsiang-tao,³⁶ and the presidency was granted to Li I-fu who claimed membership in the northeastern aristocracy. For the next three years, he exercised control over the *hsüan*, and his extraordinarily close identification with the empress is additional confirmation that she was more concerned with bureaucratic appointment than was her husband.

Although Li I-fu was more noted for corruption than for competence, his appointment was necessary from the rulers' point of view since the Board of Civil Office had been in the hands of northwestern aristocrats since the beginning of the dynasty. Of the five holders of the top offices under Kao-tsu, for instance, all were from this group.³⁷ From the beginning their influence was great since at the time there were too few officials to fill the posts, and appointments were made on the basis of tallies (*fu*) sent directly to the prefectures designating those who should come to the capital for appointment.³⁸ With the creation of the *hsüan* in 628, this practice ended but by that time entrenchment had occurred within the Board. Under T'ai-tsung the only important officeholder not born into the group was Ma Chou, and his appointment came in 645 after he had formed a close relationship with it both through his career and his marriage.³⁹ The other incumbents of the Board during the period included representatives of such celebrated clans as the Ch'ang-sun, Liu, Tai, and Wei whose surnames were all pre-eminent in the Northwest.⁴⁰ Their monopoly, as we have seen, continued into Kao-tsung's reign.

As a group they had more in common than their regional and social origins. In the years prior to 659, and counting only the twenty-five men who served as president or vice-president, more than half were related to each other either by blood or by marriage.⁴¹ They seem, moreover, to have shared a certain exclusivist consciousness, with Wei T'ing, for example, scornfully incredulous that Ma Chou had reached such high posts in spite of his mean birth.⁴² An interest or expertise in status and genealogy may also have been common since the two men chosen by T'ai-tsung to head the compilation of the *Shih-tsu chih* were plucked directly from their positions in the Board of Civil Office.⁴³ The collective influence of Board members on the government must also have been great since over forty percent enjoyed *tsai-hsiang* status concurrent with their selection duties, and of these most were connected with the Chancellery whose role in the selection process was greater than that of the other Departments.⁴⁴ Their biographies suggest that some were responsible for the recruitment of thousands to the civil service and that the opportunities for the building of personal bases of support were not neglected. It was probably these men who aborted the reforms suggested by Liu Hsiang-tao in 657. It is worth noting, finally, that only three men who held the top positions in the Board prior to 659 had themselves taken examinations.⁴⁵

When Li I-fu became president in 659, he was already notorious for the selling of posts and, although his tenure seems to have served the purpose of bringing

more northeasterners to the capital,⁴⁶ his conduct in office did not change. In 663 he was tried for gross speculation with many members of his family and sentenced to distant exile (*ch'ang-liu*) from which he never returned.⁴⁷ Liu Hsiang-tao, who had been Li I-fu's judge, replaced him as president of the Board, and of the six presidents and vice-presidents between that time and 669, three were from the Northeast, two of them representatives of the great aristocracy.⁴⁸

In the decade following 659, it seems likely that the empress believed she had succeeded in achieving the social and regional balance which had been her first priority in the reform of the recruitment system, because in 669 she moved to the second stage. This consisted of systematizing the *hsüan*, and the man placed in charge was P'ei Hsing-chien.⁴⁹ A scion of one of the eminent Shansi clans, P'ei had qualified by *yin* to enter the state university, had passed the *ming-ching* examination, and had seemed assured of a brilliant career until his opposition to the elevation of Empress Wu sent him to the borders in disfavor. His administration in the An-hsi Protectorate had shown that he was a man of unusual talent, and he was recalled to the capital where he became vice-president of the Board of Civil Office, probably in 669. Only one source gives a reason for the reform, suggesting that "since *lung-shuo* [661-664] a great number of unworthy officials had been appointed,"⁵⁰ and the reference is probably to the difficulty of stemming the corruption begun by Li I-fu. Since the number of candidates was increasing each year, even with honest officials in charge of the *hsüan*, methods of deception were being found, and the *New T'ang History* tells of forged tallies, false identities, and various sorts of cheating during the examinations.⁵¹ Since, however, similar criticisms were to continue for some time, a more basic purpose of the reform of 669 was probably to mold officials to the empress' purpose. Certainly it is this aim which is reflected in the new regulations.

P'ei and his colleague in the reform, Li Ching-hsüan,⁵² proposed not only the form of the *hsüan* as outlined earlier but were also responsible for the "long list" (*ch'ang-ming pang* or *ch'ang-ming hsing-li pang*).⁵³ The nature of the list has long been a puzzle to scholars who generally conclude that it was simply a list of the candidates eligible for posts and was designed to combat fraud and bias.⁵⁴ The earliest sources, however, invariably use the term *hsing-li* in referring to it, and this coupled with other evidence suggests that the list was related to the bureaucratic career of other members of the candidate's clan.⁵⁵ It was also an admission that anonymity was undesirable, and when it was suppressed in 683, the reason given was that it had become an instrument of preselection and bias: "When the long list was posted, all knew who would be chosen."⁵⁶ Family background was, therefore, almost certainly a formal consideration in the *hsüan*, and this is wholly consistent with the evolution of the institution and with the spirit of the other provisions of the reform.

The reorganization of 669 was in many respects an affirmation of the status quo, in no sense designed to open the road to advancement to the lower orders. It seems designed rather to bar from office all but those with some prior bureaucratic connection, and it is important to note that the early prohibition against the candidacy of merchants, artisans, and other despised professions as well as relatives of felons, remained in force.⁵⁷ The existing elite, consisting of relatives of the imperial clan, possessors of the *yin* privilege, some holders of honorific rank (*hsün-kuan*) and members of their immediate family, as well as graduates of the state universities remained eligible for the *hsüan*

without prior examination.⁵⁸ At the same time, all candidates needed an introduction from a local official and the signatures of five capital officials as guarantors (*pao*). One of these was to have personal knowledge of the candidate.⁵⁹ In the interview only those "tall and handsome" and whose speech was "judicious and precise" were to be chosen,⁶⁰ so that a man of rustic background would have little chance. And finally, the categories of "virtuous conduct," "talent," and "diligence" were nebulous enough to give the Three Selectors virtual veto power. The Board of Civil Office thus retained control of appointment to officialdom.

The Empress Wu must have approved of these measures, for not only did Kao-tsung ratify them, but he left their authors in command of the Board for the next seven years.⁶¹ This is an inconvenient fact for those many scholars who wish to see the empress fostering a "new class" through the examination system. Their view, of course, gains validity from the 680s onward, but the provisions of 669 should be seen in the context of their time and as measures consistent with her aims and methods. As noted earlier, she worked in stages, and the immediate task was to confer prestige upon bureaucratic service and examination as a means of entry into it. After the ad hoc recruitment methods by which the early T'ang had tried to cope with the shortage of officials and which by 657 had produced a bureaucracy of very mixed origins, this was crucial. There is ample evidence throughout the century to show that those with social pretensions were reluctant to serve in office with their inferiors.⁶² The empress was conscious of this. As pointed out earlier, she held no enlightened egalitarian views and, what is even more important, she had at her disposal a large pool of prospective officials with respectable *shih* lineages. Only one source mentions a decree from the end of 669 which also facilitated the entry to regular officialdom of clerks and minor functionaries in certain Boards.⁶³

The immediate effect of the reform, according to the *New T'ang History*, was that "from that time those who sought official posts became extremely numerous."⁶⁴ The immediate addition of a second vice-president charged specifically with the examination function is one reflection of this and the board membership was to be repeatedly increased through the rest of the century.⁶⁵ The settling of the *hsüan* also enabled the empress to turn her attention to the *chü*, and from 669 her efforts were devoted to fastening the examination habit on the country. In the next few years, for instance, the centers and opportunities for examination were extended even to the most distant prefectures of the South, special honors like the *ta-ch'eng* were granted to top graduates, and in 670 a decree was issued to restore the schools and Confucian temples in the countryside.⁶⁶ Decree examinations began to occur with greater frequency than before.⁶⁷

Literary evidence will shortly be introduced to show the rapid response to the growing imperial patronage of the *chü*, but it is useful here to introduce the sole source of statistical information on successful examination candidates in the T'ang. This is Hsü Sung's *Teng-k'o chi k'ao*, a Ch'ing work based upon a listing in the *Wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao*.⁶⁸ It has been shown to be unreliable in some respects, but there seems to be general agreement that the figures given for *chin-shih* graduates are accurate.⁶⁹ If so, the year 669 appears to have been something of a dividing line. From 664 to 668 an average of nine men passed each year. In the years 670-674, when the examinations were held only three times, the average was thirty-eight! Likewise, if Kao-tsung's reign is divided at 669, we find that prior to that year, the average annual number of successful candidates was fourteen, while after 669 the corresponding figure was forty-eight.⁷⁰

From these figures it seems safe to conclude that during the 670s examination was gradually becoming the preferred form of entrance into the civil service, at least for those who aspired to the highest ranks. Needless to say, there was resistance. In 674 a memorial complained of the increasing reliance upon literary ability in selection and the frequency of cheating among candidates, going on to say:

When the Board of Rites [*sic*] chooses officials, it relies solely upon literary ability in ranking [the candidates], and thus the *shih* of the empire all disregard virtuous conduct and hasten to [practice] the literary arts. There are those who pass an examination in the morning and at night face criminal charges. Although they recite 10,000 words in a [single] day, what relation does this have to governing the state?⁷¹

In 678 Wei Yüan-chung, a student at one of the state universities, commented on the reasons for recent defeats by the Tibetans, suggesting that the important [things] in governing a state are both civil and military. Now those who speak of civil [virtue] consider elegant expression to be first [in importance] and do not attain to moral principles (*ching-lun*). Those who speak of the military emphasize horsemanship and archery, not strategy and tactics.⁷²

Even within the Board of Civil Office there seems to have been some dissatisfaction and, two years later, an auxiliary secretary, Liu Ssu-li,⁷³ submitted an extremely important memorial which provided the immediate impulse for change. In it he stated that

most [examination candidates] in the *ming-ching* do no more than copy out fragments on the general meaning [of the classics], and *chin-shih* candidates only reproduce by rote former dissertations in answer to the questions (*ts'e* 策). They are without real talent, and the officials concerned [with marking them] accept them without taking into account anything but the number [of candidates] to accept.⁷⁴

These different perspectives of the critics must have represented a wider spectrum of discontent, for the *New T'ang History* speaks in graphic terms of numerous other abuses current both in *chü* and *hsüan* during the period--forgery of *fu* and *kao-shen*, impersonation, and rustic unknowns finding guarantors at the capital. It tells how on the examination day some candidates were aided by others inside or outside the halls, and how they often paid someone else to write the examination for them.⁷⁵ Partly as a result of corruption, men became qualified for positions which simply were not available and sometimes waited months or even years for an assignment.⁷⁶

To what extent this situation reflects any conscious policy on the part of the empress is difficult to say. P'ei Hsing-chien and Li Ching-hsüan, who were in charge of recruitment through most of the period, were both noted for their enthusiasm in recruiting.⁷⁷ The empress herself, ever since Kao-tsung had attempted to abdicate in her favor in 675, was bearing an ever greater burden within government, beginning what was virtually a regency in 675 under the cloud of whispered accusations that she had poisoned Crown Prince Hung. The failure of the *ch'ien-feng* coinage was obvious by the 670s, and to the embryonic economic difficulties this caused were added the foreign policy reverses which, as we shall see, began late in the decade. For these reasons the examination system could not claim her whole attention. On the other hand, since she was anxious

to promote the desirability of examinations, she may have seen laxity of selection as an advantage and so permitted its continuation. By 681, however, it appears that the effects of corruption were destroying respect for the system, and this she could not permit. Thus in that year, and principally in response to Liu Ssu-li's memorial, the form of the major examinations was settled, and there was to be no substantial change until 737.

Since there is some contradiction among the sources, I present the facts describing the reform in tabular form, with the new features of 681 underlined.

| Source | <i>Ming-ching</i> | <i>Chin-shih</i> |
|---|---|---|
| <i>TTCLC</i> 106: 18ab (dated 681, eighth month) | (a) <u>Successfully respond to 6 out of 10 citations or <i>t'ieh</i> from the classics.</u> (b) [Respond orally to 10 questions on the general meaning of the prepared classics. Probably two classics were chosen.] (c) Afterwards, give [3] dissertations in answer to questions on current affairs. <i>TTLT</i> 4:4b indicates that this may have been oral. | (a) [Answer citations on <u>one major classic and perhaps others.</u>] (b) <u>Write two compositions of different literary forms or <i>tsa-wen</i>.</u> [These could be, for instance, remonstrances, inscriptions, memorials or, later, poetry.] (c) Afterwards, write [8] dissertations in answer to questions on current affairs and on the <i>Tao-te-ching</i> . |
| <i>HTS</i> 44: 3737:2. [des Rotours, <i>Examens</i> , pp. 152 and 167.] | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Same. | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Only those showing thorough knowledge of literary principles (<i>wen-lü</i>) would advance to this stage. |
| <i>THY</i> 75, pp. 1375-6. | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Same. | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Must have knowledge of literary principles before proceeding. |
| <i>TT</i> 15, p. 83a. | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Same. | (a) Same. (b) Same. (c) Same as in <i>THY</i> . |
| <i>T'ang Chih-yen</i> I, p. 9. | (a) Unmentioned. | (a) Reform incorrectly dated and Liu Ssu-li incorrectly identified. |

| Source | <i>Ming ching</i> | <i>Chin-shih</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| | | (b) Those of great literary talent should proceed. Suggests that the candidate needed to write only one dissertation until 685, when three were required. |
| CTS 190 <i>chung</i> : 3582: 2. | (a) Reports that Liu Ssu-li was responsible for adding to the number of citations. | (a) Reports that Liu's request added <i>tsa-wen</i> to the <i>chin-shih</i> examination. |
| Notes: | <p>(i) For the classics on the curriculum for each examination and the categories into which they were divided, see des Rotours, <i>Examens</i>, pp. 136-38; 142, n. 3; and 147, n. 1.</p> <p>(ii) The exact number of citations and dissertations varies widely in the different texts, and none of the above are specific as to the number in 681. The number of citations differed as to the number and length of the classics chosen for presentation by the candidate, and in the <i>chin-shih</i> no source offers a clue to the number at this time. After 737 it was necessary to answer 4 out of 10. In the matter of dissertations, the <i>chin-shih</i> had 5 at the beginning of the dynasty, and in 675, 3 more were added on Lao Tzu. In 737 the <i>Tao-te ching</i> was moved to the <i>t'ieh</i> section. <i>TTLT</i> 4: 4b-5b, is the most complete description of this aspect of the system prior to 737 for both <i>ming-ching</i> and <i>chin-shih</i>. The <i>HTS</i> reproduction of it is faulty.</p> <p>(iii) In 634 the <i>chin-shih</i> also required a memorized oral recitation (or reading?) (<i>tu</i> 讀) from the classics or histories and, judging by Liu Hsiao's memorial of 674 (note 80), this may still have been in force.</p> | |

The reforms of 681 are best regarded as a response both to the growing popularity of and confusion about the *chü* and to the ease with which a degree was won. They are, moreover, not entirely a response to criticism for, if anything, literary ability became even more necessary. Rather they express what seems to be an imperial awareness that the time was now ripe to use the examinations to create a particular type of official. The addition of the *Tao-te ching* to the curriculum in 675, a measure noted earlier, was an obvious first step, and the form given the two major examinations in 681 was the second.

Specifically, the *chin-shih* now became the most prestigious and desirable of degrees. Hu San-hsing, remarking on the situation in the ninth century, was to say: "In the T'ang the *chin-shih* was highly valued while the *ming-ching* was scorned. A proverb said that while the fragrance of incense celebrated the *chin-shih*, a screen was erected for the *ming-ching*."⁷⁸

His view is borne out by numerous anecdotes and contemporary observations after the 680s,⁷⁹ and it must, therefore, be understood that the renown which the *chin-shih* came to enjoy was the creation of the Empress Wu. In the early part of the dynasty it was the *hsiu-ts'ai* whose difficulty led to its abolition

in 651,⁸⁰ and after 658 the "decree" examination, which seem to have monopolized prestige, and even the *ming-ching* was considered by the throne to be a more formidable achievement.⁸¹ Judging by the number of *tsai-hsiang* who had chosen the *ming-ching* over the *chin-shih* prior to 705, the former seems early to have been as important a qualification for high office as the latter.⁸² By the reign of Hsüan-tsung, however, only three of his twenty-six *tsai-hsiang* had opted for the *ming-ching*, and since almost all of them made their choice of examination after 681, the change in preference was a rapid one.⁸³

Several factors account for the comparative popularity of the *chin-shih*, most of them stemming from the reform of 681. The examination was now the more difficult of the two, requiring both classical knowledge and literary skill, and we are told that the success rate was soon only one-tenth of that in the *ming-ching*.⁸⁴ The difficulty of the *chin-shih* was certainly real, but it was a particular sort of difficulty. Although it placed less reliance on pure memory, it also required a less rigorous, lengthy and costly training in the classics. It tended to appeal, therefore, to the most intelligent members of a somewhat lower stratum of the *shih* class than did the *ming-ching*, and its popularity in this stratum was enhanced by the fact that in it the scope for corruption and favoritism was narrower. As we have seen, the Board of Civil Office was largely the preserve of the great aristocracy, and in the second or oral stage of the *ming-ching* subjective judgments were all-important.⁸⁵ Finally, the role of imperial patronage was crucial.

The Empress Wu, as we know, was deeply and sincerely devoted to literature. From the appearance of the North Gate Scholars around 666, her closest associates if not particularly distinguished for political talent, all had literary ability, and in the course of her career she was to turn her hand to most literary genres.⁸⁶ Many of her extant edicts reflect the contemporary belief that "the ancient dynasties chose officials for their literary ability (*wen*), since the origin of [good] literature is conduct (*hsing* 行), and conduct is known through words."⁸⁷ Thus in the *tsa-wen* section of the *chin-shih*, she held out the promise of due and lavish reward for those of literary talent, and since the *ming-ching* required only a "rough command of literary principles" (*ts'u yu wen-li*),⁸⁸ it became much less attractive in comparison.

A more cynical interpretation of the empress' motivation is also possible given the fact that the two examinations produced different types of officials. Since both her present role and that which she was destined to play shattered precedent, the deemphasis of the Confucian classics in the *chin-shih* could only be of advantage to her. For a would-be absolute ruler any division within the upper bureaucracy was to be exploited, and increasingly the prestige of the *chin-shih* relative to other degrees could be useful for that end.⁸⁹

Finally, we might note that in 681 the *chin-shih* examination became preeminently a test of literary ability⁹⁰ and, as many contemporaries noted, it produced an official who was articulate and facile, elegant and competent in language, versatile but somehow superficial and lacking in the self-confidence which might arise from a sense of personal worthiness. The old values of virtue, integrity and right conduct, which theoretically gave the *chün-tzu* the right to participate in the process of rule, were passing or rather were being surrendered, thereby a tacit admission was being made that it was the ruler who set the standards by which he would judge his aides. Under the Empress Wu office, status, and

self-image came to depend upon an institution which existed through imperial patronage and sufferance and as a result, the relationship between ruler and minister began a transformation which would end in what some scholars term the "Sung despotism." When the empress wrote her two-volume "Model for a Minister" (*Ch'en-kuei*) and in 693 made it part of the examination curriculum,⁹¹ she was only making explicit the ruler's new power to set the standards for judging aides.

There were, as I have said, some officials who recognized what was happening and had the courage to speak up against it. Among them was Wei Hsüan-t'ung, a *chin-shih* graduate and in 685 vice-president of the Board of Civil Office.⁹² His memorial that year was basically a criticism of the Board of Civil Office and its selection practices, and in providing documentary evidence of the results of recent examination policy, he also isolated the root causes of what he saw as the problems. His critique began with a short history of the recruitment policies of early dynasties, recognizing the novelty of the examinations and characterizing their literary emphasis as "the modern way of power [politics]" (*chin-tai chih ch'üan-tao*). He then turned to the inadequacies of the Board of Civil Office, pointing particularly to the small number of officials who had sole charge of a task of great magnitude and importance, and to the ease with which the Board was intimidated by men of influence to appoint their protégés so that, in effect, the state was "buying stolen goods from thieves." He went on to speak of the desirability of holding office and the plethora of candidates so that even though 1,000 *chu-se* "entered the current" each year, the shortage of vacancies meant that only one in ten actually received an appointment. So confused was the system that "stones were not divided from jewels," meaning that those who did gain office were not always chosen for the right reasons.

His solution to the problem was to return to some degree to earlier practices whereby the task of selection was shared widely among high-ranking officials who knew the characters and talents of their subordinates, while only the top officials were appointed by imperial order (*wang-ming*). Although Wei avoided the use of the term, he was actually advocating the restoration of the *p'i-chao* system referred to earlier.⁹³

Broadening his argument, he spoke of the necessity of learning (*hsüeh*) for one who would be an official. The ancient practice whereby young men were schooled in the "six proprieties" and "seven teachings"⁹⁴ before entering officialdom was superior to the present way whereby the sons of the wealthy and influential received posts even before reaching the age of twenty and in most cases were unprepared by education or character training for their responsibilities. The whole system of education suffered from the fact that these appointments were so lightly made. Moreover, said Wei, appointments from "outside the current," and particularly from the holders of honorific rank (*hsün-kuan*) and the Guards (*san-wei*), were not made by their local superiors but by a test of their calligraphy and judgments (*shu-p'an*).⁹⁵ Again this meant that virtue and conduct were denigrated. Even the process of recommendation was badly handled since it was not only officials above the third rank who were so frequently given the privilege but all officials "within the current," and since the ruler showed little concern with the process, the recommendations were made randomly and excessively. Wei concluded by calling for a division of the selection powers of the Board of Civil Office and a return to the recruitment system of the Chou and the Han.⁹⁶

This memorial, whose sentiments were soon to be echoed by those of other critics like Ch'en Tzu-ang,⁹⁷ is interesting on several grounds. We find, for instance, that several of the problems isolated thirty years earlier by Liu Hsiang-tao had remained unsolved and, at the same time, that the reforms of 669 and 681 had not been wholly successful in producing the ends for which they were designed. This memorial, moreover, is one of the clearest statements we have which argues against use of the examinations as a mechanism of social mobility for the lower orders. The wealthy and influential continued to manipulate the selection process for their own advantage, and birth, Wei indicates, was still of greater importance than talent in gaining office. His perceptions, however, go even deeper than this, for he makes the crucial connection between the form of the examinations and the "modern way of power politics." In this statement lies a recognition that when literary ability was emphasized over virtue and conduct, the self-image and self-respect of the official were under attack, that he was regarded as an instrument or tool of the ruler rather than as a rightful and deserving aide in government.

His memorial, however, was not well-timed and it elicited no response. The Empress Wu had just deposed Chung-tsung and was ruling through the ineffectual Jui-tsung, attempting at the same time, of course, to bolster her own legitimation. She was not interested, therefore, in placing barriers on the road to office, and was even less desirous of producing officials of strong character whose "virtue" might lead them to oppose her unorthodox role in government. As we have seen, after 684 she was moving in fact to facilitate entry into and accelerate promotion within the bureaucracy and, moreover, she continued to patronize examination as the favored path to high office. In 689 she demonstrated publicly what the role of examination was to be in the dynasty she was soon to declare when "she examined the candidates [herself] at the Loyang palace and after [questioning them] several days, she dismissed them [since none met her standards]."⁹⁸ In this event are to be found the origins of the famous Palace Examinations (*tien-shih*) of later centuries, though for the empress it was simply the logical last step in the evolution of her policy of conferring prestige upon the system.⁹⁹

The Chou dynasty was to see continued rapid rise in the popularity of examination, and in 691 a memorial, which again complained of the emphasis on literary ability in selection, graphically told of how at examination time the candidates swarm to the [gates of the] offices [in charge]. They request to visit the powerful and wealthy to display their poems, memorials and [other] writings, seeking the benefits of [being able to use] fine words. Packed together they hope for the favor of support. Therefore, people commonly speak of the candidates as *mi-chü*. The term 'mi' means 'self-seeking' (*tzu-ch'iu*).¹⁰⁰

The author went on to request a greater measure of practicality in the examinations, the replacement of "fancy and empty verbiage" by the discussion of practical policies. He recommended further that before permanent appointments were made, candidates hold provisional office for a period so that the selection of officials would have time to assess their performance.

The empress is said specifically to have rejected these suggestions but, as we have seen, she was then much concerned to bolster her personal support and if, as seems to be the case, the examinations were still being manipulated by "the powerful and wealthy," her attempts to win popularity among the lower

stratum of the *shih*, who were the chief beneficiaries of her examination policy,¹⁰¹ would be frustrated. It was for this reason that she made another historic innovation, the introduction of the principle of anonymity (*hu-ming*) into the examinations.¹⁰² Although she was forced to abolish the usage in 695,¹⁰³ the precedent had been set for later rulers.

The Chou dynasty saw other measures designed to rationalize and extend the examination principle, the most notable of which was the inauguration of the military examination (*wu-hsüan*) in 702.¹⁰⁴ Criticism continued but it is of great significance that its form now was changed. No longer was the principle itself questioned. Instead, men attacked the failures in administering the system, focusing most often on the various irregular forms of appointment and promotion which the empress used to supplement it and which resulted in the well-known abuse of the "supernumerary officials" (*lan-kuan*). Typical of this sort of criticism was a memorial in 695 from Wei Ssu-li¹⁰⁵ in which he lamented the decline of classical education caused, he believed, by the fact that appointment to office had come to be based upon carelessness and corruption within the system, upon what he termed "lucky chance" (*chiao-hsing*). It was still those of the great houses (*kuei-men*) who obtained positions, and often without examination or even prior study, so that officials, particularly at the local levels, were not only becoming increasingly mediocre but harsh and self-seeking. He advocated a thoroughgoing reform in education along with a tightening of recruitment procedures.

Implicit in his memorial, of course, is a lingering feeling that character and virtue were too little regarded in appointment, but the greater issue was what was happening to the bureaucracy itself. In a subsequent remonstrance,¹⁰⁶ he made this clear, pointing out that both entry into and promotion within the bureaucracy were carried out in a most careless fashion with the natural result that officials and would-be officials competed against each other and curried favor in a most unseemly fashion. There were no longer enough posts to absorb all appointments, and the establishment of auxiliary (*yüan-wai*) positions which far outnumbered the regular ones had failed to solve the problem. Officials were in an uproar as they waited for lengthy periods to receive their appointments, and state revenues were being exhausted for their upkeep. Although Wei Ssu-li was in this case speaking of the situation in 709, he was also describing the outcome of the policies of Wu Tse-t'ien.

In short, the Empress Wu had in the space of only a few decades brought about a significant change in officialdom. On the surface, the change appears circular rather than linear, for Wei's fears--careless selection and too many officials--seem exactly to parallel those of Liu Hsiang-tao in 657. There was, however, a crucial difference. The form taken by the empress' patronage of examinations had now concentrated in the highest ranks men who had qualified for office *both* by examination and by birth, so that in the year of Wei's first memorial, for instance, only four of the twelve *tsai-hsiang* were exceptions to this rule.¹⁰⁷ This meant that the old division of the bureaucracy at the fifth rank¹⁰⁸ had in fact hardened under the empress, and that below it was to be found what we might term in highly qualified usage the "newly rising class"¹⁰⁹ of the late seventh century.

This configuration explains the principal tensions within the Chou bureaucracy. The upper ranks felt threatened, almost overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of those

pressing from below, "unqualified" and "unsuitable" men eager to seize their positions and emoluments. I shall later show that the empress only belatedly realized the existence of this fear, that her attempts to deal with it were ineffective, and that her failure was an important factor in the seeming paradox of 705: the fact that her deposition was the work of officials who owed their own rise to the expanded opportunities she had offered through the examination system.

A complete description of the composition of the lower bureaucracy in this period is very difficult because our sources tend either to be vague or deprecatory in character. Liu Hsiang-tao, it will be recalled, listed a number of posts in the departments and the courts which seemed to have become the preserve of men appointed from "outside the current,"¹¹⁰ and the critics thus far mentioned confirm that men of *liu-wai* origins consistently entered the bureaucracy in great numbers and perhaps in increasing proportions. Who were these men?

The *liu-wai* officials, who were often referred to along with an even larger mass of minor governmental employees by such terms as *li* 吏, *hsü-li*, *tse-se-jen*, etc., outnumbered officials "inside the current" by at least four or five to one and were employed both inside and outside the capital in fairly routine clerical or guard positions.¹¹¹ At the local level, many of them were appointed directly by the prefect¹¹² so that the central government had very little control over their quality. Certain categories whose responsibilities were greater, as well as those who wished to serve in the capital or possess formal *liu-wai* status, were compelled after a certain term of office to undergo an examination called the *hsiao-hsüan*.¹¹³ This examination was administered by a superior secretary (*lang-chung*) in the Board of Civil Office and seems not to have been very demanding. After a successful transfer into the "current," advancement was possible on the basis of annual merit assessments, though men who began their career in this way were barred specifically from the "pure" offices¹¹⁴ and so were seldom able to reach the fifth rank without special consideration.

It is difficult to find clues to the social origins of the *hsü-li*, though one source suggests that under T'ai-tsung they were often chosen from the superior category of household (*shang-hu*) in each prefecture.¹¹⁵ Whether or not this remained a consistent policy we cannot be sure, but it seems certain that they were of lower status than most of the central officials in the early T'ang, and this would account for the reluctance of the latter to be associated in office with them. We know also that certain offices were reserved for them and that in the Chou an attempt was made to take away some of these posts and grant them to examination graduates.¹¹⁶ For some posts the possession of honorific rank (*hsün-kuan*) seems to have been a requisite,¹¹⁷ and this compounded the problem since this privilege was progressively devalued by the Empress Wu through its too frequent bestowal.

Honorific office, which was itself considered *liu-wai*, had originally been granted as a reward for outstanding military service, was limited to 900 men, and was considered nominally equivalent to regular offices of high rank. It carried with it certain privileges like tax and corvée exemption, the right to acquire land, and the right of sons to enter officialdom by hereditary privilege.¹¹⁸ Its recipients, at least in the early years of the system, were from that stratum of society which entered the military, and perhaps the fact that the *Hsing-shih lu* was christened the *Hsün-ko* by the aristocracy suggests a contempt for awards of this sort as early as 659. Although it is difficult to

document the process, evidence from the eighth century would seem to indicate that a fairly rapid devaluation of the awards had occurred in the late seventh, with lavish conferrals made not only as military activity accelerated, but also for non-military merit and even in return for money payments.¹¹⁹ By the *k'ai-yüan* period (713-42) the excessive awarding of *hsün-kuan* was a serious economic problem for the state, but in the seventh century its significance seems to have lain more in the additional pressures it placed upon the regular bureaucracy, as its recipients or their sons converted the rank to substantive office. One scholar estimates the awards in the seventh century at over 10,000,¹²⁰ and since the *liu-nei* bureaucracy, counting only regular appointments, numbered less than 20,000 even in the eighth century, this pressure was not negligible.

As I have attempted to show, the role of the Empress Wu was a critical one in this particular trend. The nature of her search for legitimation was such that she was forced to seek additional bases of support outside the constituency of the higher-level bureaucracy which continued to be highly aristocratic and Confucian in tone even as examination became more common as a means of entry. Men who began their official careers in the *liu-wai* bureaucracy which continued to be highly aristocratic and Confucian in tone even as examination became more common as a means of entry. Men who began their official careers in the *liu-wai* bureaucracy presumably tended to be less well-educated and less committed to Confucian strictures against female rule. Particularly because the existing system slowed down their careers,¹²¹ these men were also natural targets in the empress' search for popularity. We find, therefore, that after the 680s several new *liu-wai* positions were established¹²² and, more importantly, that promotion 'within the current' seems to have been accelerated. According to Ssu-ma Kuang, with the *feng-shan* sacrifice in 666 the empress began to advance officials rapidly 'within the current' on numerous auspicious occasions:

Prior to this, rank (*chieh*) was not excessively increased but awarded by examination of merit (*k'ao*). [For] advancement to the fifth and to the third rank, [a special procedure of] *tsou-ch'ü chin-chih* [was followed]. At this time began the practice of excessive award, and in later years the court was thronged with those wearing the purple robes [of high officials].¹²³

Su Mien was to comment in the early ninth century on the "excessive promotions of [imperial] favor" (*fan-chieh chih en*)¹²⁴ in this period and, as we will see, the historian Liu Chih-chi was to remonstrate frankly about it in the middle of the Chou.

We must bear in mind, however, that complaints of this sort were often exaggerated and represent more accurately a fear of upper-level bureaucrats than an actual situation. Of all officials who reached the fifth rank, a group of about 4,000 men, only a few could have done so through transfer from *liu-wai* status, and the "pure" offices seem to have always remained untainted.¹²⁵ The effects of the process seem rather to have been, first of all, the growth of widespread support for the empress in the lower bureaucracy and, secondly, a strengthening of imperial prerogative as each "promotion of favor" weakened the concept of merit and earned status within officialdom. Within the lower bureaucracy, a good deal of evidence can be adduced to show a certain deterioration of quality and of the idealism of its members.¹²⁶ As these men became increasingly defensive, jealous of their perquisites and ambitious, officials in the "clear stream" struggled to enforce obstacles to their further rise. The case of Chou Hsing whose early

career was hampered because his origins were not of the "clear stream" is a good example.¹²⁷

His case was not unique. Within the bureaucracy of the Chou and succeeding periods, intra-bureaucratic strife accelerated and began rapidly to take on characteristics of a different nature from the factionalism of the early T'ang. From the later part of Kao-tsung's reign onward, cohesive groupings among high officials, especially among *tsai-hsiang*, were often directed against the lower bureaucracy, and there are numerous examples of action taken against colleagues whose origins and rise the *tsai-hsiang* regarded as unconventional.¹²⁸ The *tsai-hsiang* who had united in 654 against Kao-tsung's choice of the Empress Wu represented perhaps the final assertion in the seventh century by the ministers of their *right* to set the limits of imperial prerogative. When a parallel situation arose in the Chou over the empress' designation of a successor, she was able simply to declare it a household matter and to go unchallenged until 698. Even then, the objection was raised by a single minister, and one whose position in the empress' trust was unique.¹²⁹ As Chapter 9 will show, her view of selection had been determined consistently by her wider political aims, and in the Chou her attention was to be focused upon the upper bureaucracy as the key to her achievement of legitimacy. Her attempts to mold it to her purposes, often using men from the lower bureaucracy as her aides, account for much of the political strife in the period. And the fact remains that by the Chou, the position and the aspirations of the upper bureaucracy had been changed.

To understand this more fully, let us recapitulate our findings on the evolution of the selection system and their political ramifications.

The political policy of the empress unfolded in stages, with the years 654 to 660 devoted chiefly to working out the nuances of her partnership with Kao-tsung, to the elimination of her ministerial enemies and to the weakening of the exclusivistic political control of the remnants of the Six Garrisons bloc whose dominance had been so marked both in the Sui and the early T'ang. In 659 she and Kao-tsung put into effect a series of measures designed to complete T'ai-tsung's policy of bringing social status into line with service to the T'ang and were more successful than he in enticing the aloof aristocracy of the Northeast to accept office in the capital. The fact that the Empress Wu was by that time almost an equal partner in government and was not a member of the Kuan-chung bloc undoubtedly facilitated the achievement of this aim, and an examination of the backgrounds of the *tsai-hsiang* listed in Appendix B offers empirical evidence that a high degree of success was in fact achieved.

The next decade was devoted to consolidation. A genuine centralization began to take hold, and the rulers felt confident enough of their primary goal, the continuance of the dynasty, to celebrate the great *feng-shan* sacrifice, to launch their all-out attack on Korea, and to permit the empress' emergence from behind the screen to an active and open role in politics. In 669 she took the important step of reforming and rationalizing the *hsüan*, a measure designed not only to fasten the "examination habit" more closely upon the country, but also to create within the existing power structure a greater feeling of security, to reassure its members that no flood of low-born *shih* would threaten their prerogatives. This does not mean that she failed to anticipate that applications for examination would increase rapidly and would come largely from a stratum of society not altogether acceptable to the existing elite in the upper bureaucracy. Once that process was under way, she undertook the reform of the *chü* in 681, justifying

the measure on the ground that it combated this trend. By incorporating a greater degree of difficulty into the examinations, it purported to bring the number of appointments more closely in line with the number of bureaucratic vacancies. Her real motive, however, was to turn the examinations into a bureaucratic control mechanism, and the absence of serious opposition in 681 is something of a tribute to the skill of the empress' polical timing.

The death of Kao-tsung and the prospect of a weak successor precipitated a crisis. The empress saw her work as incomplete or at least realized that it could easily be undone, and so launched the two most notable political events of the 680s: the influx into the bureaucracy's lower ranks of officials whose social status was low but whose advancement was rapid, and the terror which all but eliminated officials above the fifth rank. The decade was, therefore, much more than a preparation for usurpation. It was also the period which saw the severe weakening of the *tsai-hsiang* and the entire one-tenth of the bureaucracy which made up the "clear stream." Positioned squarely between two pressures, one above and one below, they opted first to defend themselves against those who would replace them, and so mounted no collective action against the terror. As a consequence they were unable to protest in concert against the one female usurpation in Chinese history.