Abstract

Over the long history of the imperial examination, one thing that distinguishes the Song period from other dynasties was its unceasing effort to pursue changes. At no other times was the examination systems challenged so drastically as in the Northern Song. The purpose of this paper is to point out the relations between the Qingli reform and the imperial examination systems as well as to establish constructive relations with the socio-intellectual development during the mid-eleventh century.

Basically, the imperial examination system in the early Song followed that of the Tang dynasty. It tested zhuke candidates by requiring them to identify incomplete phrases taken from the classics (tiejing 帖经) and coming up with subsequent phrases following the ones read out loud by examiners, a testing technique known as moyi 墨义. For the jinshi examination, candidates were only required to write elegant poetry. However, the above-mentioned examination systems faced large-scale criticism starting from the Zhenzong era. In general, scholar-officials advocated an examination system which would allow the imperial court to identify genuine talents who were able to, to use a Chinese term, actualize the "kingliness-without" (waiwang 外王, i.e., solving the political and social problems). In view of this, they suggested changing the emphasis in both
examinations. For the jinshi degree, they proposed reversing the customary order of subjects and putting discussion and policy question first and poetry and poetic descriptions last. In addition, zhuke candidates were to be tested on the meaning of the classics. Reformers during the Qingli reform advocated similar suggestions for the same reason. Moreover, they emphasized on the moral cultivation of the candidates. To ensure a feasible selection of candidates with virtues, reformers proposed that the practice of covering up names on the examination papers should be abolished and that the candidates must attend prefecture schools before taking prefecture examinations. Following the abortive effort of the Qingli reform, the examination system continued unaltered. Nonetheless, attempts to bring about changes continued to take place. There were three major suggestions: abolishing altogether the examination system and directly selecting officials from schools; strengthening moral education in schools; and implementing the recommendation system. The common aim of these three suggestions was to select officials of high moral values.

In short, the Qingli reform and the changes in the examination system of pre- and post-Ch’ing-li eras exhibited the changing ideology of the scholar-officials as encapsulated in the following trend: from pursuing “kingliness-without” alone to pursuing “kingliness-without” and
“sageliness-within” (*neisheng* 内聖, i.e., achieving a high standard of morality through self-cultivation) concurrently and finally to pursuing “sageliness-within” alone. This trend coincides with the intellectual transition which witnesses a change of emphasis in learning from “kingliness-without” to “sageliness-within” during the Northern Song.