

Mar Iazed-buzid, the Great Donor: Part 4B



Testers for imperial examinations. Song Dynasty painting

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The Inscription is emphatic that I-ssu received his high appointment *by examination*. This phrase leaves open two possible paths toward his life's conclusion (**G** and **H**), and leaves me uncertain about which path he followed. My uncertainty derives from the two possible interpretations, in Tang usage, of the single word *shih*, which preceded his title as Director of Palace Administration.

(G)

Taken to mean "probationary," *shih* refers to the status of a newly appointed official during his first year of service at an appointment, a dubious honor to be recorded in stone if I-ssu did not ultimately make the grade. Following this

interpretation, the word suggests that I-ssu led a short courtly life and held his high administrative position for only one year in attendance to either Emperor Hsuan-tsung or Su-tsung. Here possibility bifurcates again. In one possible version of the story (**G₁**), I-ssu leaves Balkh as a candidate for examination under Hsuan-tsung as a provincial, but so worthy that he is appointed primarily on his intellectual merit above thousands of other worthies; he serves the traditional probationary period of one year; during the invasion of 755, he flees the city and follows the Emperor to Ma-wei; there I-ssu joins the army of the heir apparent, who becomes Su-tsung, and is appointed to be a general because of his high standing; he makes war on the rebels; then I-ssu either returns to Chang-an when Kuo Tzu-i is recalled in 760 or else he continues on in a military career until his retirement a few years later. In the second possible version of the story (**G₂**), I-ssu establishes a military career under Su-tsung at Ling-wu first; he spends a probationary year at his high post under Emperor Su-tsung sometime between 760–763 (that is to say, before Su-tsung's death and before Su-tsung's son, the new heir apparent, overturns the authority of both his empress mother and her chief eunuch, Li Fu-kuo); later, I-ssu retires, or for some reason he is dismissed from his office.

(H)

If we take the prefix *shih* to mean "by examination," we are not required to imagine that I-ssu possessed the almost fantastic ability needed for a candidate from a dreary northern province to move directly into high-level palace work; nor are we required to accept the unlikelihood that a man so gifted would enter a high-level military career before he served at some other post first nor that he would then take an early retirement to live numerous years in nonfunctional obscurity.

Here a third possible story presents itself (H_1): I-ssu wins his position as administrator in the final year of Hsuan-tsung's reign by the usual means of candidacy and examination; while he serves his probationary year (*shih*), the rebellion breaks out; as a close associate of the emperor, and responsible for the transportation and accommodations of the emperor while he traveled, I-ssu follows the emperor's entourage and guard to Ma-wei; there he witnesses the political assassination of the emperor's consort; I-ssu travels with the emperor's son to Ling-wu, where he receives his military commission under the new Emperor, Su-tsung. This third version of the story clearly embodies one sense of the military title attributed to I-ssu in the Inscription, where he is referred to as an *associate* military vice commander. The prefix *associate* (*tung*), when it does not indicate a shared authority, indicates that the holder of the title is temporarily serving his assignment at the same time that he holds another, usually higher, title. This third version also accounts for the immediacy with which I-ssu's retirement is brought up in the Inscription. A fourth possible version (H_2) begins like the third, but includes long years of government service before I-ssu's retirement to the monastery.

The characters or selves which I-ssu plays in his public life are the same in all four versions of the story: bishop, warrior, high government official. Only the sequence and duration of these roles change. In one story, I-ssu wins a high position by great personal ability and learning according to the rite of imperial candidacy and examination; he lives the life of a noble for less than a year and the life of a warrior for four years; he retires early from government service, perhaps disillusioned, but with imperial gratitude for his service; he continues his existence for many years in a monastery temple. In the second version, I-ssu arrives as a learned but provincial monk; he serves a short time in palace service; during the rebellion, he wins enough renown as a military leader to recommend him later to high imperial

office; he serves in that office for many years; later, he retires with gifts of imperial gratitude. The third and fourth stories share the thematic elements of the first and second versions. All four stories are possible. Only one is true. Without the gratuitous invention of extraordinary personal circumstances, only one accounts for I-ssu's lasting wealth, his quick rise to high station, and the show of imperial gratitude. The argument and plot of this story, more lively and more likely than the others, is the one followed in this narrative.

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