

The Examination Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"The Examination" is the story of two young brothers living in China in the sixteenth century. The brothers, named Lao Hong and Lao Chen, live in a small village in the province of Sichuan with a father who spends all of his time drinking and gambling. Their mother, who is an educated woman, has died. Chen is the older of the two brothers and is remarkable for his memory and knowledge of Chinese literature and writing. Hong, the younger brother, has a reputation for impudence and is recognized as an excellent trainer of fighting crickets.

As a promise to their dying mother, the brothers leave their small village to travel to Chengdu where a series of provincial exams are given to scholars who wish to obtain official government positions. Hong earns money for their travel by fighting his best crickets. Chen passes the provincial examination in Chengdu, ranking fifth, and the brothers proceed to Beijing, where the highest examinations are given to the best scholars. Hong uses his wariness and practical knowledge to help and protect his older brother, who is usually preoccupied with books and poetry, and who is often distracted by girls.

Along the way, Hong becomes initiated into a secret society called White Lotus and is entrusted to spy and carry messages for the subversive group. The brothers are separated when the boat on which they are traveling is boarded by pirates and they are taken captive. Hong is tortured over a message he carries for White Lotus, but escapes with the help of a fellow White Lotus member. Chen is rescued by the Chinese army and the two brothers are reunited to continue on their way to Beijing.

In Beijing, Hong becomes involved in a White Lotus plot to assassinate a corrupt government official. Chen takes the palace examinations and is declared the best scholar. He is offered a high position caring for the tomb of Confucius, the ancient teacher he most admires. Chen accepts the position. Based on his short time traveling with the army after escaping the pirates, Hong decides a military career is his calling. The book ends as he leaves his brother in Beijing, traveling south to join the army.

"The Examination" explores themes such as friendship, duty, loyalty and social justice. As the brothers travel through parts of China they have never seen before, they observe hardship and suffering among some of the peasants, stirring them to think about the causes of injustice and their personal responsibilities. Their loyalty and honesty is tested as they try to find their way through the obstacles they encounter on their journey, including pirates and corrupt officials. In the end, both brothers fulfill their promise to their departed mother and in the process develop their own set of priorities upon which they will live their own lives.



Pages 4-21

Pages 4-21 Summary

"The Examination" opens with a description of the main characters, the brothers Lao Hong and Lao Chen. Hong is fifteen years old and the younger of the two. He is the third son in the family and so is sometimes called "Three Brother." He is outspoken, hot-tempered, and sometimes disrespectful of authority. Chen is his older brother, the second son of the family who is sometimes called "Two Brother." At a very young age Chen showed a remarkable ability with language. At the age of four he had learned more Chinese characters than most adults ever learned.

The boys live with their father in a Chinese village in the province of Sichuan in the 16th century. Their mother has died and their father has squandered their once comfortable livelihood on drinking and gambling. Chen, who had been tutored by his educated mother, has passed the first in a series of official exams used by the Chinese government to judge the abilities of those seeking lucrative government positions and has earned the title "Flowering Talent" for his promising potential. Their mother had hoped Chen would continue on to take the provincial exams and possibly the highest exams at the imperial palace in the capital of Beijing, but had died before seeing her dream come true.

Now Hong intended to help his brother fulfill their mother's wish. Hong is well known for the fighting crickets he raises, and with the help his friend, an affluent boy named Wujiang, he has arranged to match his crickets against those of a wealthy landlord named Meng who agrees to put up a large sum of money should Hong's crickets win. Hong has confidence in his two best crickets, which he has named Fire Star and Dragon Legs. He intends to win the match and use the prize money to help his brother travel to the provincial capital of Chengdu to take the next level of exams.

On the day of the match, hundreds of villagers gather to watch Hong's crickets fight. There are two matches. In the first, Fire Star is killed by the opponent put up by the landlord Meng. In the second match, Dragon Legs is victorious, but is mortally injured. Hong collects his prize and buries his crickets honorably in his back yard. He knows that social tradition requires him to give some of the money he has won to his father, but he decides he will keep it all to help Chen, knowing that his father would only lose the money gambling.

Pages 4-21 Analysis

In the first two sections of the book, the outline of the story that follows is laid out. The two main characters are introduced, although Lao Chen is only described at this point and has not entered the narrative. The journey the brothers will undertake together

forms the framework for the rest of the story and the reason for that journey is provided at the opening of the book.

Some key personality traits of the two brothers are described in the opening sections as well. Hong is the more practical and worldly of the two young men, even though he is the younger. Chen possesses a keen intelligence, but devotes his attention to reading and philosophy. Hong's loyalty to his brother and his mother is evident in his sacrifice of his prize fighting crickets in order to obtain traveling money. His defiance of social conventions is also in evidence when he decides not to give any of the prize money to his father as he is expected to.



Pages 21-41

Pages 21-41 Summary

As this portion of the book opens, Chen is returning to his home village after visiting a scholar in a nearby town who had sent for him. He rides on a cart, his mind so deep in thought about books and poetry that he barely sees the features of the village as he passes them by.

Chen reaches his home, where his older sister, Bao, has prepared a meal for him. Although she is married and has a family herself, she has taken on the role of caring for their father and her brothers after their mother's death. Bao is angry at Hong for refusing to give any of his winnings to their father and pleads with Chen to convince him. Hong is reluctant, but finally agrees he will give a small amount.

The next day, Hong and Chen announce to their father, Lao Lu their intention to go to the provincial capital, Chengdu, for Chen to take the provincial exams. Lu is angry. He accuses his sons of deserting him. Chen promises that he will return to the village after the exams, but Hong and Lu know that there is nothing to keep a scholar in their small village, and that Chen is unlikely to return.

The story moves back in time at this point to explain how Chen had come to be invited to take the provincial exams. The previous year he had applied to take the district exams in the nearby town of Tianquan. To be considered, he had to provide a recommendation from someone with a good reputation that his family was of good standing. This was a problem because of Chen's father's well-known drunkenness. The local schoolmaster, although he resented Chen for his apparent effortless intelligence, had nonetheless written him a recommendation out of respect for his mother.

Chen passed the district exam and continued on to pass the county exam as well, earning the title of "Flowering Talent" and the right to wear the special robes and winged cap of a scholar. At the age of eighteen, he is one of the youngest to achieve the honor.

Pages 21-41 Analysis

The character of Lao Lu, the boys' father, that appears briefly in this section, is upset that his sons are apparently abandoning him and their home village. While Chen promises he will return, both Lao and Hong are more realistic and understand that Chen has the ability to progress to the highest level of scholarship making it unlikely he will ever return to their small village. Hong thinks about his duty to his brother, who, despite his great intelligence, is unable to undertake such a journey by himself because of his innocence about the world. Lu's prediction appears to come true by the end of the book, foreshadowing the boys' journey far from their home village. They rarely mention their father again.



This section focuses on the character of Lao Chen and provides some of his background and motivation. Chen is driven by a desire to see how he compares to others in the thoroughness of his classical education. Unlike the sons of wealthy Chinese, whose parents take them out of school and provide them with tutors, Chen is tutored by his mother until she dies, and is self-taught after that. His low background and the ease with which he learns causes resentment among some people, such as his schoolmaster. This kind of resentment will surface again later in the story as Chen progresses through the exam process.



Pages 41-65

Pages 41-65 Summary

As the next section opens on page 41, Hong is visited by a retired soldier named Zhu Tong who lives in the same village. Zhu Tong has high regard for Hong and speaks to him as an equal. He asks Hong to deliver a letter for him to his former commander, named Ma, who is stationed in Suzhou, which is on the way to Beijing. Hong agrees.

Chen is visited by the schoolmaster, Master Fei Qun, who also asks that he carry a letter. He warns Chen that the letter might upset any officials who read it and so if he is questioned he should not say where it came from. He demands the favor from Chen in return for his having written the letter of recommendation for the county exam. Chen, out of duty to his teacher, agrees. As Fei Qun is leaving Chen after giving him the letter, he comes across Hong. Taking Hong aside, he tells him about the letter and confides that he does not trust that Chen will be able to deliver it successfully. Hong agrees that Chen is careless about such things. Thinking that the recipient might give him a reward, Hong promises Fei Qun that he will personally see that the letter is delivered.

As the brothers prepare for their departure, Chen goes to visit Kuo Daiyun, the daughter of a wealthy family who has encouraged Chen from a young age. Daiyun is a girl of fourteen, and has undergone the painful traditional practice of having her feet bound from a young age, keeping them small and making walking difficult. She has learned that Chen is leaving for Chengdu and is petulant with him for leaving. For his part, Chen finds himself thinking differently about his life when he is with Daiyun, and the thought of marrying her enters his mind. He is determined to go to Chengdu, however, and leaves her.

The section that begins on page 52 opens as the brothers have taken up their packs and are on the road out of their village. Hong is somewhat surprised that none of the villagers have come out in celebration of Chen's journeying to the provincial exams, but Chen is philosophical, recalling some lines of Chinese poetry about the loneliness of travelers.

The boys travel for two days through the countryside. The ever observant Hong notices as they pass some fields of crops that there seems to be a large number of young locusts all moving in the same direction. He has heard of the great swarms of locusts that follow the wind, devastating every crop field they pass, and he predicts that another such disaster is on the way. He tells Chen what he thinks, and Chen responds that it would be unlikely that a swarm would hit their own village, but Hong replies that there was no way to know this.

Chen has no answer to this and lets the matter drop. He is commenting that they should be nearing Chengdu soon when a group of men rushes up to them and places them under arrest.



Pages 41-65 Analysis

The background is now set for the departure of the brothers on the journey that will make up the central story of the book. The author has created some tension between the two characters by emphasizing the differences in their personalities, but has also described their devotion to one another. The brothers have each been given letters to carry, which enriches the plot by adding a slightly mysterious element to their upcoming journey as the reader is not told the nature of these letters, or in the case of the letter given to Chen by his schoolmaster, to whom the letter is to be delivered.

As it turns out, these letters will play a crucial role in determining the fate of the two brothers, a fate that is foreshadowed here but left until later to be played out. Also foreshadowed is the potential for natural disasters such as locust plagues that face the people of China, and which the brothers will witness first hand.

This section ends abruptly with the unexplained arrest of Hong and Chen as they near Chengdu. It is a hint of the kind of obstacles they will continue to face.



Pages 65-83

Pages 65-83 Summary

The section beginning in page 65 finds the brothers in the custody of a magistrate who is suspicious of Chen because he is dressed as a scholar. He explains to the boys that charlatans are roaming the countryside dressed as scholars duping peasants out of their money. He does not believe the protests of Hong that his brother is a true scholar and declares the boys will be detained and whipped publicly the following day. Chen rummages through his bedroll where he has stowed his diploma to prove he is a scholar, but is unable to find it. The magistrate warns them against trying to fool him, as he was once a scholar himself.

Hong is dismayed that Chen cannot find his diploma, but invites the magistrate to quiz Chen on classic Chinese literature. The magistrate takes up the offer and calls out the names of several chapters from well-known Chinese texts. To his surprise, Chen is able to quote them fully from memory. Convinced that Chen is actually a scholar, the magistrate lets the boys go.

As they approach the gate of Chengdu, they discover a long line of people waiting to get in. They are told that customs officials are searching everyone and taking valuable gems and jade. Chen is worried about losing the jade ink stone that had been his mother's, but his status as a scholar exempts him from being searched at the gate.

There are many scholars in the city for the exam, and many residents near the exam hall are advertising rooms for rent to those taking the exams. Hong and Chen rent a shared room from an old woman, who has rented the other half of their room to another scholar named Shen Ding.

Shen Ding treats the brothers to tea at a restaurant and explains it is the fifth time he has taken the provincial exam, having failed it the previous four times. He explains to Chen that only one in a hundred pass it. Chen is surprised to learn that several thousand men are taking the exam, and Shen explains that if one fails the exam, one is eligible to return and take it as many times as one wishes. Some men had been taking the test for decades, he tells Chen. Shen expresses his own determination to finally pass the exam at this attempt.

The next morning, Chen reports to the exam hall along with the other candidates. They are searched for any possible cheating materials and sent through a process of assigning them to their own isolated cubicles where they will take the exams. Once in their cubicles, the scholars spend the night in them, awaiting the beginning of the exam the next morning. Chen sleeps in the cramped cubicle, feeling nervous for the first time. In the morning the answer sheets and first round of questions on which the scholars are to write are distributed. The section ends with Chen grinding the ink on his ink stone and making the first stroke of his brush in the answer booklet.



Pages 65-83 Analysis

The brothers overcome their first obstacle on their journey owing to Hong's quick thinking and Chen's mastery of classic literature. The episode with the magistrate puts the strengths of the two boys' personalities on display and fills out their characters. It is not the last scrape they will find themselves in.

The scholar Shen Ding is friendly at first, but the boys will soon have reason to question his motives. He dismisses the examination process as political and corrupted and suggests that Chen and other peasants scholars like him are naive to how the process truly works. For his part, Chen is astonished to hear that so many men continually fail the exam, and only take it over and over in order to obtain a good government position rather than to display their own scholarship. The author suggests that Chen perhaps is naive in his thinking, but leaves the true character of Shen Ding in doubt for the moment.

Bosse's description of the arduous process of checking in and verifying all the scholars is rich in detail and gives a clear picture of the extent of organization and bureaucracy that was in place in China at this time in history.



Pages 83-103

Pages 83-103 Summary

As Chen is waiting in line at the exams, Hong explores Chengdu. He is delighted by the wide variety of food and eats a great deal. He decides he will deliver the letter given to Chen by the schoolmaster which is addressed simply to "Ye Pan, Southwest Chengdu." Hong asks passersby for directions, but is brushed off brusquely by many of them. Finally, he is pointed in the direction of Ye Pan who, he is told, is a barber.

Hong finds Ye Pan with a customer in front of his shop. Rather than approach him directly, Hong watches him from a distance deciding if he can be trusted. Finally, Ye Pan spots him and calls angrily for him to come closer. He demands to know why Hong was spying on him. Hong answers truthfully that he was deciding whether Ye Pan could be trusted. He mentions that his schoolmaster, Fei Qun sent him and his brother to pay his respects, but does not mention the letter he carries.

Ye Pan invites Hong into the back room of his shop and praises him for his wits and courage. He begins to tell him about a secret society called the White Lotus, a Buddhist sect that stands for social justice and against tyrannical leaders. At the end of their discussion, Hong hands over the letter from Fei Qun. Ye Pan rewards him with some coins and invites him to return the next day to learn more about the White Lotus. Hong does return and finds himself stirred by Ye Pan's description of the White Lotus' commitment to avenging social justice against corrupt rulers.

After three days, the first session of the examination ends Chen is the first to turn in his answer booklets, after which he returns to his rented room. Later that night Shen Ding returns and the two discuss how they think they did. Shen Ding is skeptical of his own chances, but praises Chen's choice of essay topics.

Chen returns for the second session of exams and again finishes early. As he walks back to his rented room, he stops to speak with a grocer, who warns him not to trust people who give him advice about passing the exams. Later that night he indeed receives some advice from Shen Ding, which is that he should slip some money into his answer booklets on the final day as a bribe to the exam readers. In the end, Chen decides not to put any money in his booklets on the final day because he decides Confucius, the ancient teacher, would not have approved.

While Chen is taking the exams, Hong returns to Ye Pan. He learns more about the White Lotus and tells Ye Pan he wants to join. Ye Pan quizzes him about his motives and then shares some of the secret signs and symbols of the society. One of the signs is the number fifteen. Ye Pan tells Hong that if he is ever in trouble, he can call out the number fifteen and any White Lotus members who hear it will come to his aid.



Pages 83-103 Analysis

These two sections mark a turning point in the narrative as Hong learns about the White Lotus and decides to join the secret society even though he is told of the possible dangers. Chen takes the provincial exams and has little trouble, finishing each section well before the allotted time is over. The arc of the remaining story is foreshadowed by Chen's strong performance in the provincial exams. He will pass and go on to Beijing. The possible dangers the brothers face is hinted at by the secret distress call that Ye Pan provides to Hong.



Pages 103-126

Pages 103-126 Summary

Chen and Shen Ding must wait for the results of the exams to be posted. Shen Ding explains the process to Chen. First, he tells him, any answers with poor handwriting are thrown out. Then they are copied so that the examiners may not recognize anyone's handwriting, and annotated by the examiners. Only those judged the best are given passing marks. The process takes several days.

In the meantime, Chen reads and writes while Shen Ding goes out drinking. One night while he is drunk, Chen asks him if he had put a bribe in his answer booklet. Shen replies "Of course not," supporting Chen's suspicion that Shen Ding had given him bad advice. When the two men go to the examination hall to see if any results have been posted, they find a list of people who have been banned from taking the exams forever because they tried to bribe an official. Chen realizes for certain that Shen Ding had tried to ruin his chances.

After a few more days, the results are finally posted in ranked order on a placard outside the hall. Neither Shen Ding nor Chen find their names on the list, but the top five spots are left blank to be announced separately. These are the highest finishers who are given the title "recommended." Shen Ding leaves after not finding his name on the list and teases Chen for staying around to see if he is in the top five. Chen does stay, and watches as his name is written in the number five position. He is invited to the office of the chief examiner, named Gao Shi, who offers to be his official mentor.

Hong continues to visit Ye Pan and learn more about the White Lotus. He is told that he will be initiated in a secret ceremony, which Hong decides should be while his brother is at the special banquet that honors the highest exam takers. This way Chen will not know about it. While Chen goes through the ceremonies of the banquet, Hong goes through the induction into the White Lotus. They return to their rented room about the same time and meet Shen Ding, who tells them he has learned of a locust plague in the west, where their village lies. Chen becomes worried that their village may be in the path of the locusts, but Hong reminds him that whether it is or not, there is little they can do. The next morning, Shen Ding is gone. He leaves a note apologizing to Chen for trying to scuttle his chances at the exam and wishing him good luck.

In the following section, the boys prepare to leave Chengdu and proceed to Beijing where Chen will take the higher exams. the Examiner, Gao Shi gives Chen a letter to carry to someone named Meng Dafu who he says lives in the town of Wuhan. Hong is also given a letter by Ye Pan, to carry in secret and to be delivered to someone important in Beijing. It is a coded letter, Ye Pan tells him, and must not fall into anyone else's hands even if Hong is tortured. Hong promises it will be delivered.



The brothers leave Chengdu, and as they walk on the road, Chen is surprised that Hong asks him questions about history and rulers. They discuss the topic of unjust rulers, and Hong asks what Confucius teaches about the power of leaders.

As they near a small village, the boys are stopped by a wealthy landowner named Ma, who recognizes Chen as a scholar by his dress. He is delighted to find that Chen ranked fifth in the exams and invites them to stay with him at his home. He introduces Chen to his daughter, Weijun, to whom Chen takes a liking. They remain at the landowner's house for several days, eating well. Hong becomes concerned that Chen is paying too much attention to Weijun and suspects he is considering marrying her and not continuing on to Beijing. His suspicion is correct. Landlord Ma asks Chen to stay and marry his daughter and offers to give him control of some land to provide a good income for them. To Hong's consternation, Chen tells Landlord Ma that he will consider it, but the section closes as Chen decides that he will continue on with Hong instead.

Pages 103-126 Analysis

This section closes the first part of the book, which ends with some suspense over whether Chen will settle for his victory in the provincial examination and settle down to marry. There is not much doubt in the reader's mind that he will continue on to Beijing, but the episode does display some of the conflict faced by the young man Chen, for whom the only thing that can fully distract him from his scholarship is girls.

Bosse places the two ceremonies in which the brothers take part in a parallel setting. While Chen is pledging his life to scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge, Hong is at the ceremony inducting him into a life of struggling secretly against a corrupt social order. Soon after their separate rituals, the brothers find they share a common ground regarding the proper nature of leadership. They explore this common thinking in a prolonged discussion as they walk on the road out of Chengdu.



Pages 126-143

Pages 126-143 Summary

As Part Two opens, the brothers are walking away from the home where they have been staying as Landlord Ma rides beside them pleading with Chen to stay and marry his daughter. He offers more and more land to entice him, but when Chen keeps refusing, he stops and begins calling out insults to him.

The brothers reach Chongqing, a large town on the Yangtze River, where they purchase passage on a sailing ship down the river to Wuhan. Hong makes certain that Chen is charged the special reduced rate for scholars. On the ship, Hong meets an old merchant named Lin Shi who tells him about his years traveling the Yangtze and points out features of the landscape as they pass. He tells Hong about the dangers of the river, and of pirates. Lin Shi refuses to believe Hong and Chen are truly on their way to Beijing for the examinations, and repeatedly asks Hong what their real business is. He decides that they are actually traveling to the east to join the army to fight Japanese pirates.

Hong begins to like the old merchant, but while the ship is traveling an especially treacherous stretch of the river, Lin Shi is knocked overboard and drowns. Hong is deeply affected, but struggles to hide his emotion at losing a friend.

Pages 126-143 Analysis

The trip down the Yangtze River will prove dangerous in more ways than one, and ultimately separate the two brothers along their paths. It is the central turning point of the novel, and it begins here at the start of Part Two. The character of Hong is shown to have a trusting and friendly side as he grows close to the old merchant he meets on the river boat. His devastation at the loss of his new friend seems to harden him even more, however.



Pages 143-164

Pages 143-164 Summary

The sailing ship makes its way to Wuhan, where Chen looks for Meng Dafu to deliver his letter, but is told that he has gone to Suzhao and is not there. The brothers continue on the boat to Juijiang, a merchant port where the boat takes on some cargo. Not long after leaving Juijiang, the ship is attacked by pirates. As the pirates board the ship, Hong thinks quickly and takes his letter from Ye Pan as well as the letter for Meng Dafu and hides them under his hat.

The pirates search the passengers and take their valuables, including all of Hong's money, but they do not find his letters. They are impressed by Chen's robes and decide he might be worth a high ransom. They take him away to their chief, while Hong is tied up with the other passengers.

Hong is taken to a pirate encampment, which is a former army outpost that the pirates have captured. He is put in a small cell with another boy named Yao, who is a captive who works for the pirates carrying messages. He warns Hong to cooperate with the pirates or they will kill him. His letter from Ye Pan is discovered and the pirates read out the coded words to him, asking what they mean and who gave him the letter. Despite being beaten, Hong tells them nothing. The pirates resort to a form of torture called the Thousand Cuts, which is excruciating. As Hong is about to pass out from the pain he calls out the number fifteen, the distress call of the White Lotus.

When Hong awakes, he is back in his cell and Yao is caring for his cuts. Yao has heard his distress all and tells Hong he is also a sworn brother of the White Lotus. He offers to help Hong escape.

Pages 143-164 Analysis

Hong's loyalty is put to the test when he is tortured mercilessly by the pirates. The danger foreshadowed by the mysterious warnings of Ye Pan has come to pass and Hong is facing his first real test of the promise he made to secrecy.

Chen's fate remains unknown for the time being as the two brothers become separated. The story now focuses primarily on Hong, establishing him more firmly as the central character in the book. The narrative has also taken on a quicker, more adventurous tone as the potential dangers have become more real.



Pages 164-196

Pages 164-196 Summary

Hong agrees to try to escape with Yao, but insists that he get his letters back from the head pirate before leaving. Yao gives the guard to the pirate's quarters a bottle of liquor and when the guard has fallen asleep drunk, the boys retrieve the letters from Ye Pan, and the ones for Meng Dafu and Commander Ma. They escape by battering through a loose board in the outer wall, but while Hong gets through before the noise they make arouses the pirates, Yao does not make it through.

Hong gets away alone and makes his way to a farmhouse where he hides in a barn. He is discovered by two girls who live on the farm, who bring him food secretly, afraid that their parents will return him to the pirates for a reward if they find him. Hong is sick with infection and fever from his torture, but he recovers and leaves the barn.

Hong comes across a troop of soldiers marching along the road. He stands nearby and calls out to them that he has a message for Commander Ma and asks that he be taken to see him.

As the next section begins, Hong is being taunted by some soldiers who have stopped to listen to him. One of them pushes Hong and they notice the bandages on his chest. They ask what has happened and Hong tells them he escaped the Thousand Cuts torture. Impressed by Hong's courage, they agree to take him to Ma, who is now a general.

Hong travels with the army group for several more days and is finally taken to see General Ma. He tells him the story of his escape from the pirates and how Yao helped him but was probably killed for helping him escape. He delivers the letter from Zhu Tong and is thanked by the General.

As Hong is with the army, word comes that the outpost where he was held was recaptured by the army and that most of the pirates were killed. There was no word of Yao's fate, however. General Ma is pleased at this and tells Hong he is on his way to fight the pirate chief, Wang Chih. Hong informs him that Wang Chih may be holding his brother captive.

Hong witnesses battle for the first time and is greatly excited by it. General Ma has to hold him back from jumping into the fray. Wang Chih's forces are defeated, but the pirate chief escapes by boat to an island. Surrounded by the army, Wang Chih offers to give up his captives if he is allowed to leave. If not, he sends word, he will execute his hostages. General Ma accepts Wang Chih's demand and Chen is freed, reuniting the brothers.



Pages 164-196 Analysis

Part Two of the book ends as the brothers are reunited. Little is mentioned about Chen's own adventures as a pirate captive, as Hong is the central character in the middle part of the book. Hong has been tested in real circumstances and has passed an examination of sorts of his own.

The sacrifice of the young Yao to save the life of his fellow brother in the White Lotus underlines the seriousness with which the members of the secret society take their responsibility to one another. Hong has been warned that he is expected to give up his own life if it means helping a brother save his own, and this is what he has seen Yao do.

Hong's perseverance is evident from the bandages and scars he carries from the torture at the hands of the pirates. They serve as a mark for the character, one that proves his strength and courage to others.



Pages 196-226

Pages 196-226 Summary

The brothers catch up with one another at the beginning of Part Three. Chen tells Hong how he was sometimes beaten by his pirate captors, but that the worst part of his captivity was that they gave him nothing to read.

General Ma is disappointed with Hong that he does not choose to stay with the army and become a soldier. He has observed him and feels he could be a natural warrior. Hong apologizes, but tells General Ma he must help his brother get to Beijing. Ma invites him to return to the military afterward and Hong says he will consider it.

The brothers decide to go to Suzhao to deliver the letter to Meng and then on to Beijing. In Suzhao, Chen finds Meng easily, as most people in the town seem to know him. He delivers the letter and is greatly enchanted by Meng, who is an alchemist and scientist working on various scientific advancements. Meng is impressed by Chen's quick mind and apparent ability to solve practical problems. He invites Chen to stay and become his apprentice. Chen considers this, especially when he meets Meng's beautiful daughter, Yuying.

Despite being warned by a servant that Meng is terribly jealous of his daughter and does not allow her to speak to anyone, Chen arranges to meet her in a formal garden where her father lets her go alone. They meet several times in secret. Chen tells Hong he intends to stay.

Hong visits a fortune teller, called a Wu, who gives him a charm to protect him and his brother as they travel to Beijing. She also performs a ritual where she claims to channel the spirit of Hong's mother. Hong asks his mother's spirit what he should do and the Wu affirms that he should make sure Chen goes to Beijing.

As Chen and Yuying meet more often, Chen finds himself more and more attracted to the girl, but unsure of what to do. Without fully realizing what he is suggesting, he asks if he might come to see her alone in her rooms one day. Yuying takes offense at the suggestion and runs to her father, telling him that Chen had made an improper advance. Meng is furious and Chen decides to leave for Beijing rather than face him. The brothers leave Suzhao on the Grand Canal, a canal that runs all the way to Beijing.

Pages 196-226 Analysis

Once again a woman threatens to stop Chen's advance toward Beijing. This time Hong is only indirectly involved in changing Chen's mind about staying, but a mystical element is introduced into the story when Hong visits a fortune teller who affirms his mission to see his brother through to the exams in Beijing.



Hong's fate is foreshadowed in the invitation by General Ma to return to the military and receive his help in becoming a soldier. This is indeed what Hong will eventually do, and this passage in the story prepares the narrative for this possibility.

Chen's character is shown to have a practical side as well as a philosophical side. He is quickly able to solve some of the practical problems that Meng puts to him, and is skeptical of the mysterious alchemical experiments of Meng's that aim to find immortal life by transforming the elements.



Pages 226-253

Pages 226-253 Summary

The brothers take the Grand Canal as far as they can until they are told the way is no longer passable because the Yellow River has flooded. The brothers decide to walk toward Beijing, but are warned about traveling through the flooded regions, where there is famine and people are killing one another for what little food they can get. Despite the warnings, the brothers decide to proceed.

They come across a small house where two weakened men with pitchforks come out to demand food. Hong shakes his pointed walking stick at them and they lumber back into the house. Nearby, the brothers find two women sitting, weak with hunger. One of the women explains she is the mother of the woman next to her, and that most of their family was killed in floods. She is too weak to walk, and her daughter has stopped eating and is dying. The brothers give the women some rice, then wonder if the men in the house will kill the women to take their food. Hong goes back to the house and pours out some rice near the door. The brothers move along the road.

They come to the Yellow River and pay to cross it by ferry. Hong suggests they alter their route toward Beijing to visit the town of Qufu, the place where the tomb of Confucius is located. Chen is pleased that his brother makes the suggestion, as he himself wants to visit the place that honors his ancient teacher.

In Qufu, the brothers visit the tomb of Confucius, where Chen is spotted by the people who maintain the tomb and invited to meet with Wei Xi, the secretary who oversees the mansion and grounds that are dedicated to Confucius. Learning that Chen is going to Beijing, Wei Xi asks him to carry a letter to an important official named Tang Wangai. Chen agrees.

The brothers travel on with a determination and finally reach Beijing. They are housed in a large villa where other scholars are staying. Hong goes in search of the recipient of the letter from Ye Pan, which he still carries. It is addressed to Sun Qi, one of the famous Red Horseman of the palace guard. Hong finds Sun Qi, who is greatly impressed with Hong's story of escaping the pirates and rescuing the letter. He explains to Hong what the coded letter means. It means nothing at all. It was merely a test by Ye Pan to see if Hong could successfully deliver the message to Sun Qi without losing it or giving away the secret. He has passed the test.

Chen delivers the letter from Wei Xi to Tang Wangai, who is grateful. Tang Wangai is impressed with the intelligent young man and wishes him good luck in the upcoming exams.



Pages 226-253 Analysis

The brothers face a moral dilemma when they meet some starving villagers on their way to Beijing. By giving the women some food, they make them a target of the two starving men who may kill the women to get it. They give some food to the men as well, but then leave without seeing what happens. Later in the book, the brothers each admit to thinking the right thing to do would have been to kill the two men so the women might live. The dilemma has no clear solution, and serves as an example of the difficulty in determining and enforcing social justice. Within the narrative, the episode is transformational to the brothers, who are rapidly forming their own ideas about right and wrong in the social order.

The letter that Hong has nearly been killed for carrying turns out to be meaningless in itself. His actions in carrying it have proved to be a valuable indication of his courage and dedication, however, and he is greatly admired by Sun Qi for his success. Chen earns the admiration of Tang Wangai, an important official in Beijing, for his delivery of the letter from Wei Xi. It will prove to be an important meeting later in the book.



Pages 253-269

Pages 253-269 Summary

The examination in Beijing is in two parts, the narrative explains. The first is the municipal examination that weeds out all but a few hundred of the best. Those top ranked scholars then take the palace examination. Chen prepares by visiting the imperial library every day to read and study. He is aware that his travel to reach this point has broadened his mind and made him much more aware of his surroundings.

While Chen is studying, Hong meets secretly with other members of the White Lotus. He learns of a corrupt official named Ni Fenglin, the highest ranking minister below the emperor. Ni Fenglin uses his position to further his own gains, Hong is told. The White Lotus plans to assassinate him.

One evening, Chen is the guest of three other scholars who are taking the exam. The three are from wealthy backgrounds, and while they seem friendly at first their intention is to get Chen drunk and ridicule him for being from the country. Chen, who has always been ignorant of social convention and seldom drunk, unintentionally insults the three scholars, making their words even harsher.

The format for the municipal exam is the same as for the others. Chen is assigned to a small cubicle and given his answer sheets. Unlike before, however, he has difficulty starting his answers to the questions. He finds he is nervous for the first time. He calms himself by methodically preparing his ink and brushes and begins to write. He is dissatisfied with his essays, however. He knows they are written well, and are in the general style the examiners are looking for, but he now feels that academic scholarship by itself does not address the complexities of the real world that he has witnessed on his journey.

Hong is taken into the assassination plot by the White Lotus. Ni Fenglin keeps his schedule closely guarded so his whereabouts are not easily known. Tang Wangai, the high official, has access to Ni Fenglin's schedule, however, and is in on the plot. Hong's mission will be to secretly communicate with Tang Wangai to learn the time and place where the assassination might take place. If he is caught by Ni Fenglin's spies, Sun Qi tells him, he is expected to kill himself before revealing the plot.

Pages 253-269 Analysis

The tension increases as the end of the book nears. Hong is taken into a secret plot to assassinate a corrupt leader and is given a very important role. For the first time Chen seems to have some difficulty in completing the examination which has given him little trouble in the past. It is the final test for both brothers, and the stage is set for them to learn their ultimate fate.



Pages 269-286

Pages 269-286 Summary

As this section opens, Hong is riding in a cart on his way to a ceremonial tomb dressed as a young Buddhist monk with a shaved head and a prayer wheel, which he spins ritually. He is to meet Tang Wangai at the tomb and learn the time and place where the White Lotus will find Ni Fenglin in order to kill him. Hong carefully makes his way around the grounds of the tomb, watching for the Silk Robes, disguised spies for Ni Fenglin who are thought to be tailing Tang. As Tang Wanglai pauses at a monument, Hong approaches and walks nearby, muttering a prayer to himself. Tang whispers the message to him as he walks past, and Hong continues on as if nothing has happened.

Tang leaves the area and Hong continues to wander around the grounds. He is cornered by two men who demand to know what Tang Wangai said to him. Hong pleads ignorance, repeating over and over that he is only a young monk. Apparently convinced, the men leave him alone.

After a few days, the results of the municipal exam are posted. Once again, the top finishers' names are left off the list until the end. Chen is ranked second. Hong is excited, but Chen does not seem surprised.

The palace exam determines the final ranking, but it is a much less structured format than the earlier grueling exams. The scholars are asked to write on a single question, supposedly composed by the emperor himself. The question is "What does 'good' mean in the social order?"

Chen is torn, because his own personal experiences seem to conflict with what he has learned through scholarship. He begins to write about his own experiences from his journey, but changes his mind and composes an essay on what makes a good leader.

As Chen is taking the palace exam, Hong visits with Fufang, the daughter of a cook in the villa where they brothers are staying. She is an outspoken girl and Hong finds her pretty, although he is not terribly interested in girls. He also runs into a man who has traveled through Hong's home village recently. From him he learns that the locust plague had missed that village, although it had devastated others nearby. Hong is greatly relieved.

Pages 269-286 Analysis

Chen continues to struggle to reconcile his scholarship with the things he has seen and learned on his journey, but his performance in the examinations appears to have benefitted from the increased depth of his thought. He is ranked second in the country after the municipal exams.

A tense scene ensues as Hong is nearly caught by the sinister Silk Robes after receiving a secret message from Tang Wangai. While the questions of Hong's success in his mission and Chen's success in the municipal exams are settled, new ones open up as the end of the book grows closer. The results of the palace exam and the outcome of the assassination plot remain to be resolved in the final pages.

Interestingly, the character of Tang Wangai figures prominently into the fates of both brothers, although he himself is unaware of their relationship.



Pages 286-296

Pages 286-296 Summary

After only a short time, the results of the palace exam are posted. Chen ranks at the very top of the list, a position called Hui-Yuan, or "top graduate." He attends a great banquet hosted by the emperor where the top ranked scholars receive their diploma from the Minister of Rites. As top graduate, however, Chen is handed his diploma by the emperor himself. On the same day, Ni Fenglin is found assassinated.

As the top graduate, Chen is offered a number of official positions. He considers taking a position as a magistrate, but Hong tells him that he cannot imagine Chen handing out punishment to anyone. Chen is patient in considering his options, while Hong is impatient, convinced that Chen will never make up his mind. Finally, Chen is invited to meet with Tang Wangai, who tells him that Wei Xi, the secretary in charge of the tomb of Confucius, has been promoted to the position recently held by Ni Fenglin. That leaves a vacancy that he asks Chen to take. Chen is delighted to have the opportunity to be in charge of the tomb of his ancient master.

Meanwhile, Hong decides that he can now leave his brother, having seen him through to the end of the examinations. He visits Sun Qi and tells him he intends to return to General Ma and become a soldier. Sun Qi reminds him of his sworn duty to the White Lotus and gives him a charm as a gift.

The book ends as Hong takes to the road out of Beijing, alone.

Pages 286-296 Analysis

The independent actions of the two brothers are brought together at the very end of the book. As it turns out, the assassination that Hong is instrumental in bringing about creates an opening for Chen to take the official position he would most desire.

Chen's success in the palace exams is not a great surprise to the readers, although the internal struggles he faces are a new development for the character, and indicate the extent of the transformation he has undergone owing to his personal experiences.

Hong's fate is resolved, as he is freed from his self-imposed obligation to see his brother through to the end of the examination process and make sure he is instated in a good position. The novel ends on an optimistic note as Hong leaves Beijing, slightly saddened at the absence of his traveling companion, but excited at his future as a warrior.



Characters

Lao Hong

Lao Hong is a Chinese boy about fifteen years old who is living in a village in the Tianquan district of China in the sixteenth century. He is an outspoken boy, known for his defiance to authority and independent personality. He has a reputation as an excellent trainer of fighting crickets and he cares for his crickets with great attention.

Hong is the third son in his family, and so sometimes called Three Brother. His mother, an educated woman, has died and he lives with his brother, Lao Chen, and his father, Lao Lu, in a small village house. Although once comfortable, he and his father and brother now live in near poverty because of his father's drinking and gambling since the death of his wife.

Hong is fiercely loyal to his older brother, Chen, and to his dead mother. He has promised his mother to help Chen through the series of academic examinations that he has started, and he makes numerous sacrifices to help his brother achieve this goal. Hong shows intense courage and bravery as the two brothers make their way toward Beijing where Chen is to take the highest examinations.

Hong is a natural soldier, according to the assessment of one general, and after seeing his brother through the exams in Beijing, Hong returns to the military where he intends to have a career as a warrior.

Lao Chen

Lao Chen, also called Two Brother, is the older brother of Lao Hong. At a very young age, Chen showed a remarkable ability with language and writing. Tutored by his educated mother, Chen soon outshone all the other children in his village, to the resentment of the local schoolmaster. At the age of seventeen, Chen took the district and county examinations, a series of written tests on classical Chinese learning, and passed them, earning him the title "Flowering Talent." His goal to continue taking the provincial, municipal and palace examinations seems impossible until his younger brother Hong finds the money to support the trip to the provincial capital for the first of the exams.

Chen has a remarkable memory and fills his days reading, writing and thinking about Chinese texts and poetry. As a result, he often seems unaware of his surroundings and is notoriously ignorant of the proper polite traditions of Chinese society. His seeming innocence is a concern to Hong, whose more practical personality sometimes clashes with Chen's academic nature.

Chen's outlook on society and the world changes as he is forced to confront the sometimes difficult reality he witnesses on his journey to Beijing. He passes the



provincial examination, ranking fifth, then passes the municipal exam, ranking second. Finally, he is ranked the top graduate in the palace exam, opening a wide range of possible official positions to him. He decides to accept the position of the administrator over the tomb of Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher whom Chen most admires.

Lao Lu

Lao Lu is the father of Hong and Chen. After the death of his wife, Lu takes to drinking and gambling, putting his family into near poverty. Hong is ashamed of his father and the character is seldom mentioned after the beginning chapters of the book.

Mother

Hong and Chen's mother was an educated woman, which was rare in China at this time in history. She tutored Chen as a boy, helping him attain his high scholastic ranking. She had hoped to see Chen proceed through the national examinations, but died before this was possible. Hong believes that he communicates with his mother through a fortune teller, who encourages him to continue to help Chen complete the exams.

Daiyun

Daiyun is the daughter of a wealthy family the the home village of Hong and Chen. She has undergone the traditional practice of having her feet bound as a child, keeping them small. This is done to show that the girl is wealthy and never expected to do any hard work. Chen entertains the idea of remaining in his village and marrying Daiyun, but is ultimately drawn to leave the village and pursue his academic career.

Ye Pan

Ye Pan is a barber in Chengdu, indirectly introduced to Hong through his schoolmaster. He is a member of a secret society called the White Lotus. Ye Pan inducts Hong into the society and gives hi a message to be delivered to Sun Qi in Beijing.

Gao Shi

Gao Shi is the examiner of the provincial exams in Chengdu. He is a scholar and is greatly impressed with Lao Chen. He offers to be Chen's official mentor and gives him a letter to deliver to Meng Dafu, another scholar, on his way to Beijing.



Yao

Yao is a boy in the captive service of the pirates who take Hong and Chen hostage. He is a sworn member of the White Lotus, and helps Hong escape the pirates after he is tortured. His fate is left unknown, but it is probable he was captured and killed by the pirates for helping Hong escape.

General Ma

General Ma is a high-ranking army officer who Hong seeks out to deliver a letter from a former soldier who lives in his home village. Ma is greatly impressed by the Hong's courage, and offers to take him into his service and train him to be an officer. Hong refuses at first because of his obligation to his brother, but he returns to Ma after Chen has passed the palace exams.

Meng Dafu

A scientist and alchemist introduced to Chen through the letter he carried from Gao Shi. Meng is a fascinating character, and Chen considers becoming his apprentice. A falling out over Meng's daughter ends this plan, however.

Wang Chih

Wang Chih is the leader of a the group of pirates who capture Hong and Chen as they travel down the Yangtze River. Wang Chih personally takes Chen hostage, thinking that the young scholar will demand a large ransom. Wang Chih is pursued by General Ma and eventually frees Chen in exchange for his own freedom.

Wei Xi

Wei Xi is the secretary in charge of the mansion and grounds surrounding the tomb of Confucius. Chen meets Wei Xi when he visits the tomb to pay respect to his ancient teacher. Wei Xi introduces Chen to Tang Wangai in Beijing by way of a letter he asks him to deliver.

Sun Qi

Sun Qi is an imperial guard and a member of the White Lotus. He is the recipient of the coded letter from Ye Pan carried by Hong. He takes Hong into a plot to kill Ni Fenglin, a corrupt Chinese official.



Tang Wangai

Tang Wangai is a censor, a high ranking official in Beijing. He takes an interest in Lao Chen after the young scholar delivers the letter from Wei Xi. He ultimately offers Chen Wei Xi's former job at the tomb of Confucius. He is also in on the plot by the White Lotus to assassinate Ni Fenglin.

Ni Fenglin

This is a corrupt palace official who is killed by the White Lotus.

Weijun

This is the daughter of a wealthy landowner Chen meets along his journey. He briefly considers marrying the girl until Hing talks him out of it.

Landlord Ma

This is a wealthy landowner who strongly encourages Chen to marry his daughter after Chen passes the provincial exams. Chen ultimately refuses.

Fufang

This is the daughter of the cook in the villa where the brothers stay in Beijing. She is an outspoken girl and Hong takes a vague liking to her.



Objects/Places

Tianquan

This is the district in western China where the Lao brothers live.

Chengdu

This is the capital of the province where the Lao brothers live and the location of the provincial exams. It is also the home of Ye Pan, the barber who inducts Hong into the White Lotus.

Suzhao

This is the city along the Yangtze River where Chen looks for Meng Dafu, who has moved on.

Beijing

This is the capital city of China and the home of the Chinese emperor. Located in northern China, it is the ultimate destination of the Lao brothers and the location of the municipal and palace exams.

Chongqing

This is the city along the Yangtze River visited by the Lao brothers on their journey.

Yangtze River

One of the major rivers of China, the Yangtze runs mainly eastward through the center of the country. The brothers travel part of the way toward Beijing on the Yangtze, and are taken captive by pirates as they sail down the river.

Yellow River

Another primary river in China, the Yellow River is north of the Yangtze. It floods frequently, sometimes causing widespread devastation and famine.



Grand Canal

This is the long canal that connects Beijing with the Yangtze River. The brothers travel part of the way on the Grand Canal.

Examinations

This is the series of academic tests offered to Chinese scholars. Those who pass the tests earn the right to be free from taxes and get money from the state. Those who pass the higher exams can expect lucrative government appointments.

Analects of Confucius

This is the collection of the sayings of Confucius, an ancient Chinese teacher and philosopher. Lao Chen is a devotee of the teachings of Confucius and often quotes from the Analects

White Lotus

This is the secret Buddhist society in China dedicated to righting social injustice and battling against corrupt rulers. Hong is inducted into the secret society and takes part in a plot to assassinate a corrupt official.



Themes

Loyalty

The theme of loyalty runs throughout *The Examination*, providing the motivation for much of the action, particularly to the main character Lao Hong. Hong is devoted to his older brother, Lao Chen, in the way a mother is devoted to a son. Hong is relatively happy in his home village, despite the shame his drunken father brings on the family, yet out of loyalty to his brother and his mother's wishes, Hong decides to sacrifice his own happiness and security.

Hong's loyalty to his brother never wavers, even though he is sometimes frustrated by his brother's seeming ignorance of reality and his academic approach to everything. Hong does what he can to encourage his brother to follow through with the progressively harder examinations even when Chen gets distracted by the possibility of other paths. It is Hong's sense of duty to his mother and faith in the talents of his brother that motivate him to push his brother so hard.

Hong also proves his loyalty to those who trust him. He delivers the various letters he is entrusted with despite extreme difficulties and takes an oath of loyalty to the White Lotus society which he knows may require him to give up his life.

Hong's loyalty is not given lightly, however. Despite the strong tradition of showing loyalty to one's father, Hong dismisses his father as a drunkard and a gambler. At first he refuses to share any of the money he wins fighting crickets, and only relents at Chen's urging.

Chen displays a different kind of loyalty. While he is entrusted with responsibilities by others, these are usually passed off to Hong. Chen shows himself to change his mind often and to ignore the traditional manners expected of him. He does not seem to have much time for interpersonal relationships of the kind that Hong develops.

Yet Chen is loyal to his ancient teacher, Confucius, and to the ideal of teaching and scholarship that drives him. While others take the exams only to gain high government positions, Chen is dedicated to the learning involved and is motivated by the desire to compare himself with others. His loyalty to his scholarship and to himself are rewarded in the end.

Coming of Age

The Examination is a coming of age story, which is a common theme among novels in which young characters go through various experiences that transform them into adults. Lao Chen and Lao Hong are young men but still boys in many ways as the novel begins. Ironically, it is the younger brother, Hong, who seems to be more mature of the two. Hong cares for his older brother like a mother and does his best to keep him on the



path to Beijing. Chen grows up knowing only books and poetry and has very little practical knowledge of the world.

Hong is very practical minded, but the environment of the small village where he lives offers little to challenge his talents except for cricket fighting, at which he is very successful. Over the course of the novel, Hong discovers that his quick wits, his ability to read the motivation of others and his dedicated loyalty serve him well in the larger world. His travels open his eyes to the injustices in his society and he begins to think about his own place in the world and how he can help overturn those injustices. It is this calling that drives him to join the military and make his own way.

Chen has a similar awakening as he experiences the world outside his home village. He never doubts his academic abilities, but begins to see how they are inadequate by themselves to effect any real social change. Like his brother, Chen thinks deeply about his own place in his society and how he can best serve the personal convictions he has developed after his journey.

Social Injustice

One of the characters the brothers meet on their journey is a farmhand who tells them the story of how he lost his farm and family to the temple association that lent him money for his crops, then forced him to stop cultivating his fields when he could not make a payment on the loan. It is the first taste of social injustice they encounter, and it sets them each to thinking about the role the government should play in securing the rights of its people.

For Hong, the episode prepares him to accept the principles of the White Lotus, a secret society that aims to fight social injustice of the type suffered by the farmhand at the hands of officials. The society teaches its members that it is right to overthrow even an emperor if he is corrupt or does not respect the rights of the people he rules.

Hong discusses the subject with Chen, who looks at the matter from the viewpoint of Confucius, who called on leaders to treat their subjects justly. Although the brothers do not agree exactly on how to address the problem, they share the same concern over injustice.

This concern is what motivates Hong to take part in a White Lotus plot to assassinate a corrupt palace minister in Beijing. In Hong's mind, killing can be justified if it is done for the right reason. He had considered this moral question earlier in the book when he wondered if he should kill the starving men who threatened him to keep the men from killing some weaker women.

Chen is troubled by his sense of social injustice as he takes the final palace exam. He is driven to write about his own experiences where he witnessed the unjust suffering of people. He controls his urge to write about himself and channels his feelings into an essay about good leadership, using the position he acquired through his scholarship to address the emperor directly about social injustice.

Style

Point of View

The Examination is told primarily from the point of Lao Hong, a young boy whose older brother, Lao Chen, is a "Flowering Talent," a title given to promising young scholars expected to advance into public service after passing a series of grueling examinations. Lao Hong is a practical and wary boy who feels he must help his highly-intelligent but naive older brother. His point of view is of a loyal brother who respects his sibling for his intelligence but is sometimes exasperated at his trusting and innocent nature. Hong's fairly narrow point of view is broadened as he travels with his brother and meets people outside his small home village.

A second point of view in the narrative is that of Lao Chen, the nineteen-year-old Flowering Talent who is preoccupied with the teachings of Confucius and ancient poetry. His point of view is also broadened during his travels as he finds himself becoming more aware of women and of his own desires. The social upheaval and injustice witnessed by both characters changes their outlook considerably as well. Their narrow focus of getting to Beijing for Chen to take the palace examination expands to include the wider society they have observed on their journey and turns to the future as they look ahead to their own place in that society.

Setting

The Examination takes place in a partly fictionalized region of China during the Ming Dynasty in the 1500s. Lao Hong and Lao Chen live in an unnamed village in Sichuan Province in southwestern China. Their journey takes them to the city of Chengdu, the main city in the province, and from there to the Yangtze River, a large river that runs through the country. They travel eastward by boat down the Yangtze to near where it connects with the Grand Canal, a waterway constructed to connect the Chinese capital city of Beijing with the Yangtze. From here the brothers travel northerly to Beijing, the seat of the Chinese government under the Ming Emperor.

The story takes place at a time when travel is difficult and uncommon among poor villagers like the Lao brothers. Dangers including thieves and pirates lie along the roads and on the rivers. They pass through several small cities as well as villages, sometimes finding friendly hosts and sometimes sleeping in barns. As they travel along the lower Yangtze, they pass through an area devastated by flooding that has ruined the crops and food supplies, causing famine.

In Beijing, the brothers are treated very well due to Lao Chen's high standing as a young scholar. The setting is quite different from the small agricultural village from which they came. Beijing is a bustling and busy city, with large markets and popular temples. Within Beijing is the Forbidden City, an elaborate palace compound that is the home of



the Emperor. Chen enters the compound to compete in the palace exam, and has the opportunity to meet the Emperor himself.

Language and Meaning

The Examination is a young adult fiction title and the construction is straightforward narrative suitable for the audience. Bosse utilizes a rich vocabulary within his narrative structure to create an interesting and compelling story. As the story takes place in China, there are many Chinese words and place names used. The character of Lao Chen is a young scholar well-versed in the writings of ancient Chinese philosophers and poets, and Bosse frequently has him quote from these texts.

The narrative is in the voice of an omniscient observer who explains the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the two primary characters, Lao Hong and Lao Chen between which the point of view shifts back and forth. Other characters are richly described, but their thoughts and motivations are revealed through their actions and from the interpretation of the main characters, not as part of the narrative language. This creates tension and suspense within the story as the young main characters guess at the motivation of the people they meet on their journey and try to judge the truth of what they are told.

Bosse relies heavily on dialogue to move the narrative along and to expose the setting and background information that support the main story. The story is told primarily in the simple past tense and in the third person with the exception of the passages of dialogue.

Structure

The Examination is presented in three main parts, with several unnumbered short chapters within each part. Part One contains 12 chapters. It covers the story of the brothers Lao Hong and Lao Chen from their introduction in the small Chinese village where they live through Chen's successful completion of the provincial examination in the town of Chengdu. As Part One closes, the brothers have left Chengdu to proceed to Beijing, and Chen has just refused to marry the daughter of a wealthy landowner.

Part Two is made up of seven chapters and follows the brothers on their journey to Beijing where Chen will take the highest examinations. They are separated when the ship they are traveling on is boarded by pirates and they are taken captive. As Part Two closes, the brothers are reunited after Hong escapes his captors and Chen is ransomed.

Part Three contains 11 chapters and picks up the story where the brothers have continued on their journey to Beijing. The final six chapters take place in Beijing, where Chen successfully passes the palace examination. The book ends as the brothers part ways.

The book includes a map at the front illustrating the region of China where the story takes place. The author also includes a brief historical note about the time in history when the story occurs.



Quotes

"Lao Hong was born under the sign of the Tiger, so he ought to be strong, if reckless; loyal, but hot-tempered; compassionate, though with little respect for authority. People declared that in every respect young Hong was true to his birth sign" (pg. 4.)

"Chen stared at but failed to see his village as the cart entered it: the wattle and plaster walls, a pond green and fecund with slime, the sagging door on a weathered old hut, shoes drying on hooks after an early morning rain, a pile of sodden straw. He saw none of these things. His mind was filled with a book" (pg. 21)

"For two days they labored through the mountain passes, following the tortuous paths between spruce and lindens with heart-shaped leaves, through groves of birches and ancient larches. The rain kept up a steady tattoo on conifers and flocks of sheep that huddled on sumac-covered hills" (pg. 56)

"There, just ahead of them, rose the huge arched West Gate of the city. Its thick, nail-studded doors were open to a stream of wagons and pedestrians, all eager to funnel through the second gate with its high forbidding towers. Traffic was backed up, however, because of customs inspection by a team of officials, some of them armed with cudgels and swords" (pg. 70)

"While Two Brother waited in line for hours to reach his examination cell, Three Brother tramped the bustling streets of Chengdu, awestruck by the energy and color of what he saw: markets with straw ware and bamboo ware and silks and pottery (and crickets for sale, most of them guoguo, the big fat singing kind); Buddhist monasteries, taoist shrines, parks, tombs, governmental palaces. But mainly he ate" (pg. 83)

"Chen could do nothing but wait for the results to be posted. Thousands of exams had to be read behind the locked and sealed Great Gate, where examiners and clerks must remain - even their corpses, if any - until every paper was graded" (pg. 103)

"The brothers had never seen anything like Chongqing. Wooden houses rose from stilts that clung to the steep promontory. Everything seemed at a tilt, unstable, ready in one good gust of wind to blow over and topple into the confluence of the Jialing and Yangtze" (pg. 129)

"Day followed day on the treacherous Yangtze, with bends and eddies enlivening its rapid passage downstream. Trackers were everywhere, hauling the upstream boats between rocks and shoals, hunching nearly parallel to the earthen banks and crawling with slow insectile determination among boulders" (pg. 143)

"Once they were alone, Chen described to his brother the worst thing about his captivity. The pirates had given him nothing to read, nothing in all that time, but had laughed in his face whenever he pleaded for something to look at, even an old astrology pamphlet or a list of items on a bill of lading" (pg. 197)



"Encountering a village, they smelled damp clay but saw no one, not until they reached the last huts there. out of a doorway staggered two men holding pitchforks, yelling weakly for food food food! The brothers pointed their walking sticks at them, warily turning as the circling men wobbled and lurched, hardly able to hold the pitchforks" (pg. 228)

"Lao Chen had access, through the Ministry of Rites, to the imperial library, and every day he went there to reacquaint himself with the world of scholarship. So much travel had shaped his consciousness into something more than a repository of ideas and words. He was far more aware of what went on around him" (pg. 253)

"Instead of the usual rain or snow at this time of year, dense clouds of reddish-yellow dust, carried by shrill winds from Central Asia, blew ceaselessly into the capital of Beijing. A powdery red substance whirled upward on fierce drafts of air and surged high overhead, then drifted down lightly to cover everything in sight" (pg. 276)

"Hoisting the knapsack, he went through the courtyard. Without looking back Lao Hong leaned into a swirling gust of winter snow. He headed south, his eyes blinking rapidly as if snowflakes were in them. 'On the road,' he said aloud as if Two Brother were beside him. Then he said, 'Once more on the road'" (pg. 296)



Topics for Discussion

The title of the book is "The Examination." To which examination does the title of the book refer? Is it a literal title?

How do the two brothers change over the course of the narrative? What causes these changes?

How does the author incorporate nature and the landscape into his writing? What role do these elements play in the story?

How is the subject of family loyalty addressed in *The Examination*? Are Hong and Chen always loyal to their family members?

How does the relationship between the two brothers change? What causes this change?

Discuss the dilemma the brothers face when they meet the starving villagers. Do they do the right thing?

Hong takes part in the plot to assassinate a corrupt official. Does he do the right thing?