CHAPTER 6
QING SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND PEOPLES

VISUAL SOURCE
How To Take an Exam in Qing China

SHUNTIAN (BEIJING) EXAMINATION HALL: The Shunthian Examination Hall (first built in the early Ming dynasty 1368-1644) had more than 50 rows of low buildings with over 17,000 examination cells. It was one of the largest in the whole of China (only Nanking’s was larger). The larger buildings in the center and upper portion of the compound were walled off and separate from the rest of the compound and was where the administrative staff and officials who graded the exams resided.

EXAMINATION SYSTEM: Using exams to select imperial officials began in China as early as 165 B.C. A three-tier system with each tier conferring a more prestigious degree (and access to a higher office) began around 1370. The examination hall shown here held the provincial level (junen) exams. While the notion of an examination to select officials may sound quite conventional, the first record of any exams in European universities is in the early 12th century.

A TYPICAL DAY AT THE EXAMS: The question for the day would be received at 10 a.m. in the morning. The exam candidates would remain in their cells until dusk, writing a draft and then carefully copy out a final copy. The essay should be between six and seven hundred characters long. Simply copying the essay in the correct and elegant calligraphic style could even win a rapid writer more than a month. After handing their exam papers in they would then be provided with a meal and then attempt to get a night’s rest in preparation for the next day’s exam (the exam would usually last at least 3 days of exams).

CHEATING: Exam candidates upon arriving at the examination hall had to provide proof of their identity and status (to prevent others from taking the exam in their place). As they passed through the central gate they then would be thoroughly searched for cheat sheets, and forbidden from leaving the examination hall during the entire exam. Those caught cheating would be dismissed and forbidden from taking the exam for the next two cycles.

EXAMINATION CELLS: Each cell contained a bench, a table and a high shelf. The cell itself was a little over 3 feet wide and 4 feet deep. The provincial exam was typically held once every three years. Given the open nature of the cells, the exam experience was highly dependent upon the weather. With the stress and minimal amenities, it is no surprise that candidates (some were in their 60s and 70s) died during the exams. In such cases, their bodies were wrapped, labeled with their name and thrown over the wall for municipal authorities to collect and notify their next of kin.
In the United States today, 3 out of every 100 students will receive an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree. Given the open access to education widely available throughout the modern world, it is difficult to imagine a society where only two or three percent of eligible students are able to attend. In China, however, the situation is significantly different. China faced precisely these daunting odds. As different as the modern American and Chinese educational systems seem to be on the surface, they are based on similar myths of education as the great equalizer. Both cultures promote education as offering advancement open to both rich and poor regardless of their background. Yet, if the American notion of education is a "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps" variety, that of imperial China was rooted in something quite different.

For three thousand years, examinations have been the mode by which the Chinese imperial governments selected its officials, insinuating itself into the very fiber of Chinese society. Over the centuries, the sacrifices made by young students and scholars in the pursuit of securing an official post evolved into elaborate narratives and moral tales. Parents and teachers would tell children about former scholars who repeatedly jettisoned themselves into the wind with an awl to remain awake; or one who collected fireflies allowing him to read through the night. Such stories became as an integral part of Chinese culture as those of your Alabamian or Lincoln walking miles to borrow books to be read by candlelight in his log cabin. Yet, these stories all had a grain of truth to them. The most visible measure by which people could acquire wealth, land, or influence was for one of its members to become an official.

The Chinese civil service examination system can best be understood as a three-tier system preceded by an entrance (or qualifying) exam (jingshi). After passing this qualifying exam, one could be admitted to the prefectural (shengyuan) exam typically offered twice every three years. If you happened to be among the privileged few to pass (examination quotas allowed only 50,000 every three years), you were then eligible to take the provincial (jianren) exam held in the provincial capital every three years. By the mid-nineteenth century only 1,500 scholars were selected every three years. Those jianren could then attempt the pinnacle of the examination system by traveling to Beijing to take the Metropolitan Examination (jinshi) with only 500 individuals succeeding every three-year cycle.

In comparison to the highly rigid class-based European system where upward class movement was extremely rare, the Chinese examination system can better be understood as a meritocracy. A system through which, theoretically, even the poorest Chinese subject from the remotest corner of the empire could experience upward mobility by taking and passing the exam. Although the government did not formally institute restrictions on those who could take the exams, there did exist some very real obstacles. For any child to be able to master the necessary knowledge needed to pass the exams, a family would have to possess the means to pay for his education and be able to spare him from the home. But even if the children could be educated to the point where they could pass the certification exam (tongheng or 'certified candidate'), they would have an infinitesimally small chance of moving upward to the next level. One scholar has suggested that of the 2 percent of Chinese who achieved the "certified candidate" status, each had only a 1-in-6,000 chance to pass the next two levels and attain the highest "Achieved Scholar" (jinshi) status. Thus there existed by the nineteenth century a certain self-exclusion to the entire venture not unlike those who continue to buy lottery tickets fully realizing the long-odds of ever winning the jackpot. This comparison is flawed however, in that the examination system (and the scholar-officials that were selected by it) was perceived as a central pillar of the political, social, and cultural framework of Chinese society.

EXAMINATION QUOTAS—Unlike modern university entrance or SAT exams on which the test taker is given an objective score, each sitting of the imperial exams had a specific quota of degrees to be offered that year with each province designated a pre-determined number of degrees to be issued to those candidates who scored highest on the examinations.

The social, familial, and personal pressure to pass the examinations often pushed the candidates to find ways of "improving" their odds. Aside from the familiar "crib sheets," there was a thriving industry in printing minuscule copies of the key texts, and even producing undergarmets with key passages inscribed on them. Some especially desperate (and rich) individuals hired someone to take the exam in their place. In still other cases the exam-takers (or their families) simply bribed the examination officials. Such practices, (admittedly highly honored by the nineteenth century), caused elaborate counter-measures to be instituted by the state. Before entering the examination hall, all candidates had to produce letters vouching for their identity. Then they would be meticulously searched for banned items. In some instances individuals would be stripped of their inner garments when it was learned some test takers were lining their garments with study aids. Throughout the entire examination period (lasting over a week at the provincial and metropolitan levels), guards were stationed throughout the entire compound.

To prevent the examiners from recognizing handwriting (or other prearranged signals), scribes copied each essay before being read by the judges. None of those measures prevented periodic scandals, including a famous instance in 1858 when the chief examiner in Beijing was found guilty of improprieties and sentenced to death.

Given the years of learning and the numerous exams the average scholar took before passing to achieve success at any level of the exams was worthy of considerable celebration. Villages and cities would erect monuments trumpeting their top scholars and the populations of entire provinces would take pride (and boast) of native sons who had achieved high imperial positions. It is perhaps no surprise that in an age when no higher respect could be achieved than to be an imperial official, so many spent their entire lives attempting to pass the imperial exams and become a coveted degree-holder. There was considerable truth in the Chinese proverb that "no one knows the ten-years of cold-windows, but once you succeed you are known by the world."

EDUCATION

Despite the centrality of the examinations to the Chinese government and the prestige that came with the degree-holders, instruction remained by and large in the private sphere. While the wealthiest families might hire a private tutor for their children, most Chinese students attended private village schools. The teachers, usually low or non-degree holders, charged rates according to their ability, reputation, and track record with producing successful examination candidates.

Typically, young boys would begin their education around the age of six or seven. Since they needed some means by which to learn to read the Chinese characters and yet also acquire the rudimentary precepts of classical Chinese necessary to read the Confucian classics, most students would begin their education with the Three Character Classic, before moving onto the Thousand Character Treatise. When the student had mastered these two tracts, they would have a vocabulary of approximately 2,000 characters, but even at this stage they were academically unprepared to begin the Four Books that formed the

EXAMINATION DEGREES—The three imperial exams degree relate to the modern system as follows: the bachelors (or "Budding Genius") is a bachelor's degree (BA), the juren (or "Promoted Genius") is a master's degree (MA), and the jinshi ("Achieved Scholar") is a doctorate (Ph.D). The average age for passing was 24 years old for the shengyuan degree, 21 for the juren, and 35 for the jinshi.

THREE CHARACTER CLASSIC—A Confucian primer, which served as an introduction to Confucian thought for most young children.

FOUR BOOKS—The core of classical learning in late imperial China included: Confucius' Analects (Lun Yu), Mencius (Mengzi), The Doctrine of the Mean (Zong Yong), and the Great Learning (Da Xue).
wash and purify himself, and, having notified the Municipal God, he took to fasting and sleeping in his study alone. While he was [dreaming], a long official entered, holding a tablet in his hand, and said that he had come from the Municipal temple with the following instructions to the:—

Snow on the whiskers descending:
Live clouds falling from heaven:
Wood in water buoyed up:
In the wall an opening effected.

The official then retired, and the Governor-General waked up; but it was only after a night of tossing and turning that he hit upon what seemed to him the solution of the enigma. "The first line," argued he, "must signify old (lao); the second refers to the dragon (long); the third is clearly a boat; and the fourth a door (men)." Now, to the east of the province, not far from the pass by which traders from the north connect their line of trade with the southern seas, there was actually a ferry known as the Dragon (Lao-long), and thither the Governor-General immediately dispatched a force to arrest those employed in carrying people backwards and forwards. More than fifty men were caught, and they all confessed at once without the application of torture. In fact, they were bandits under the guise of boatmen; and after begging passengers on board, they would either drug them or burn stupefying incense until they were senseless, finally cutting them open and putting a large stone inside to make the body sink. Such was the horrible story, the discovery of which brought throns to the Governor-General's door to serenade him in terms of gratitude and praise.

WOMEN

Western representations of Chinese women, whether in Hollywood movies, two-dimensional portrayals like those in Pearl S. Buck novels, or the recent book Balzac's Seamstress, reinforce the impression of Chinese women as uneducated, exotic, and repressed. Such portrayals are not so much outrageously inaccurate as they often perpetuate half-truths that do not give a full picture. Generally speaking, women in the Qing era rarely held public positions of power outside of the home. Footbinding remained common among the vast majority of Han Chinese women (the Manchu and other ethnic groups being prominent exceptions). However, significant trends regarding the education, treatment, and opportunities for women did occur in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with an increasing number of essays and primers written specifically for women (6.8). Despite such substantial advances, the restricted legal status of women (6.9) in the law code, and footbinding remained a conspicuous aspect of Chinese society. By the last decades of the Qing, the topic of women's rights moved to the forefront of discussions in the mainstream discussions of modernization and political reform occurring throughout the empire (6.11).