

Reflection on Institution**The Examination System in China**

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Jiang Kanghu

The Origin and History of the Examination System

After the gradual dying out of the ancient public school system of education, and before the adoption of the modern educational method, the examination system played a very important part, and in fact predominated in the advancement of Chinese culture, including Korea and Annam, and even spreading its influence for a period to parts of Japan. One who studies the medieval and modern history of China is compelled to devote much time and to give much attention to this system before being able to understand and explain any political or economical institution in the so-called mystic empire.

In spite of the rise and fall of many dynasties, in spite of the invasion of the Five Hun Barbarians, K'itan-Tartars, Mongols, and Manchus, and the civil wars of the Three Kingdoms, Six Dynasties, Five Dynasties, and Ten Independent States, each of which lasted on an average of one-hundred years, the examination system continued without interruption, and even improved during this period. This is indeed a wonderful phenomenon, and there must have been a substantial reason guiding the collective mind which caused this system to endure and proceed along the even tenure of its way, which the whole surface of governmental and social orders underwent frequent changes. Let us now investigate, briefly, the source and the expansion of the forces which produced so singular a result.

Before the fixed examination system was established the scholastic degrees and official positions were conferred and offered principally under the public school system, as was also recommendation, election, special appointment, gradual promotion, etc. The examination system was founded, however, and has been in vogue since the very earliest of Chinese history. We find the origin of this system in the reign of Emperor Yao (尧, 2357 B.C.) in the *Book of History*, although it was only one of the many methods of governmental appointment, and of course was unfixed in form and not based upon written essays.

Thereafter, this system was practiced continuously with others, for a thousand years, but was regarded merely as a secondary method and the examinations were held only on special occasions. For instance, there were various titles or terms in the earlier part of the Western Han Dynasty (汉, 206B.C.-8 A.D.), namely, the Xian Liang Fang Zheng (贤良方正, Good Virtue and Square Character), Xiao Di Li Tian (孝弟力田, Dutiful Son and Diligent Peasant), Mao Cai Yi Deng (茂才异等, Abundant Ability of an Excellent Type), Ke Shi Jue Yu (可使绝域, Envoy to Foreign Country), etc. The candidates of all the foregoing four classes were recommended by the higher officials, but had to pass an

examination before the degrees or positions were conferred, and all the examinations consisted of writing essays, which were called Ce (策), or ‘Essays on Statecraft.’

The public school system became less important during the uprising of the Five Hun Barbarians (about 300 A.D.). After the quieting of the rebellion and the welding together of the warring elements into an empire by the founder of the Sui Dynasty (隋, 589), the reform of civil service became an essential question. The Emperor Yang Di (炀帝) then took the examination system for a standard method of the government appointment, renewed and improved the system, making it more strict and efficient than ever. At this time, the Jin Shi Ke (进士科, Advanced Scholar Grade) was established and was in operation from the second year of Da Ye (大业, 606) up to about ten years ago.

In the Tang Dynasty (唐) this system with its rules or regulations was carefully set forth. The grades, classes, and special lines were clearly divided. There were degrees of Tong Zi (童子, Bachelor), Xiu Cai (秀才, Good Ability), Ju Ren (举人, Recommended Man), Jun Shi (俊士, Elegant Scholar), and Jin Shi (进士, Advanced Scholar). There were specialists of Ming Jing (明经, Student of Classics), Ming Fa (明法, Student of Law), Ming Zi (明字, Student of Writing), Ming Suan (明算, Student of Mathematics), Shi Xue (史学, Student of History), Dao Xue (道学, Student of Philosophy), and Kai Yuan Li (开元礼, Student of Government of Regulations). All the candidates had to write two different kinds of theses, one Jing Yi (经义, Classical Literature) and the other Ce Wen (策问, Practical Plan). The examination consisted of two parts, first, Tie Wen (贴问) or composition, and, second, Kou Shi (口试) or conversation. All the successful candidates were ranked into four grades, except the highest degree- Jin Shi- which had but two.

Besides the above named degrees, which were regarded as the main ones, many others were afterwards added to be offered to the special men, such as Anthropologist, Official Administrator, Lawyer, Orators, Penmanship, Military Tactics, Foreign Affairs, and Athletics, all being equally entitled to obtain their special degrees after examination. In the 11th year of Tian Bao (天宝, 752), the term of different examinations was fixed on an average of every three years, the number of successful candidates was fixed according to the degrees, and even rules for the form of the examination papers, the width and length of the sheets of the paper, etc. were laid down. From this we see the examination system was more perfect in rule, and more important in value, and finally became the only method of public education and governmental administration in the empire.

During the reign of the emperor Shen Zong (神宗), of the Northern Song Dynasty (宋, 1068-1085) a great statesman and reformer- Wang Anshi (王安石)- was invested by the Emperor with the office of Premier of the Cabinet. Besides the changing of many other political and economical systems, he emphasized the examination system as the only proper qualification for the conferring of academic degrees and government positions. In these examinations the Four Books and the Five Canons of Confucian Classics were the most important studies, and the essays on these subjects, the Jing Yi (经义, Classic Literature) were the first consideration for passing the

examination. The general opinion among the Chinese is that the modern examination system was originated by the Emperor Yang Di of the Sui Dynasty and the examination in Classical Literature, called the Jing Yi, was established by Wang Anshi of the Song Dynasty. The Jing Yi has afterwards become known by the name of Ba Gu Wen(八股文) or the 'Eight Legs Literature,' because this literature gradually came to have a certain form which was divided into eight sections and each two of them made to balance. The Ba Gu Wen had become more and more formal in the succeeding ages, and the strict rules had made it so difficult that one could not reach its perfection despite his life's work. For this reason the scholars criticized Wang Anshi deeply, both in his time and thereafter, and regarded him as a 'devil' of literature.

In the 17th year of Hong Wu(洪武), of the Ming Dynasty (明,1384), the Triennial Great Competition system was confirmed by the Emperor's edict, and the years of the Xiang Shi (乡试, Country Examination) and Hui Shi(会试, Associated Examination) were set so that every cycle year of Zi(子), Wu(午), Mao(卯), or You(酉), the former examination was held, and every cycle year of Chou(丑), Chen(辰), Shu(戌), or Wei(未), the latter took place. The Xiang Shi was held in the capital of each province on the eighth month of the year, when the degree of Ju Ren was conferred on the successful candidates, and the Hui Shi was held at the central capital at the second month of the year, when the degree of Jin Shi was conferred. This schedule was kept in practice without change up to the end of the Qing Dynasty(清).

The number of the successful candidates of each examination was not limited at first. In the Tang Dynasty the minimum number of Jin Shi for each term was three, the maximum eighty. In the Song Dynasty the maximum number of Jin Shi was eight hundred and five, and the minimum six only. From the fifth year of Zheng Tong(正统) of the Ming Dynasty (明, 1440), the number of Ju Ren was limited to five hundred, and that of Jin Shi was not to exceed one hundred and fifty for the entire empire.

The examination system developed and reached its highest efficiency and most perfect state in the Qing Dynasty. As the writer of this paper has had the personal experience of taking these examinations, the outline and important points will be explained as follows:

The Items of the Examination System

Varieties: The main line of the examination system comprise five kinds: (1) The Yuan Shi (院试), held in each district; (2) the Xiang Shi(乡试), held in the capital of each province; (3) the Hui Shi(会试), held in the central capital (Beijing). All of these examinations took place in the examination halls which were built in all cities of the empire. After these there were (4) Dian Shi (殿试), which were held in the Audience Hall of the Palace, and (5) Chao Kao(朝考), which were held in the Imperial Court, both in the presence of the Emperor.

Terms: All the above examinations were held regularly every three years except the Yuan Shi, which was an annual examination. However, because of some unusual events, such as the coronation, marriage, or every tenth birthday of the Emperor, a special term-which was called En Ke(恩科, Examination of Grace) might be created.

The En Ke might be held between the terms of the regular examination, but if with it, then the number of degrees conferred upon the successful candidates was doubled.

Dates: The date of Yuan Shi was uncertain and was announced on the program which was arranged by the examiners. The date of Xiang Shi was always the 5th day of the eighth month, and that of Hui Shi the 5th day of the second month. Both were divided into three periods of three days each, one holiday being given after the first period and also the second period. During these periods the examination officials, candidates, and employees were enclosed in the Examination Hall building, and of course boarding and rooming inside.

Candidates and Degrees: The candidates of Yuan Shi were called Tong Sheng(童生, Boy Student), which is not a degree but has to be certified by the district magistrate upon passing the premier examination. The degree of Xiu Cai was conferred upon the successful candidates of the Yuan Shi. After a Xiu Cai passed the Xiang Shi he was awarded the degree of Gong Shi(贡士), and became eligible for the Dian Shi. After he passed the Dian Shi he was awarded the degree of Jin Shi. The Jin Shi was the highest degree, and who ever held it was entitled to take the examination of Chao Kao, which was the examination given in order to choose the members of Han Lin Academy(翰林院). The Han Lin was regarded more as an honorary title than a degree.

The Yuan Shi, Xiang Shi, or the Hui Shi, were open to the legal candidates as long as they wished to try for the degrees. The Dian Shi and the Chao Kao offered but one chance to very candidate, and he who failed at first failed forever. Therefore, the degree of Jin Shi and the honorary title of Han Lin were very rare and highly appreciated.

Number of Candidates and Successful Men: The number of candidates of various examinations was uncertain, and the number of degrees conferred differed according to the population of each locality. This may be roughly outlined as follows: The number of Xiu Cai was fixed for each district. In a small district only two or three Xiu Cai were conferred each year, while a large district would produce ten times more. The number of Ju Ren was fixed for each province, the populous province of Jiangnan (Jiangsu and Anhui) conferred the degree upon about 150 men every examination term, while the province of Gansu conferred less than 50. The Shun Tian(Beijing and Zhili) examination held in the central capital, was the exceptional case. Here, all candidates of other provinces having residence in Beijing were allowed to take part, this not being limited to native citizens, as was the rule for other provinces. For this reason the number of Ju Ren conferred at this examination was as many as 300 every term. The number of Gong Shi for every term was about 300 in all. After they passed the audience examination, about one-half of the candidates would be awarded with the degree of Jin Shi, and another half with the similar degree called Tong Jin Shi(同进士, Identical with Jin Shi), and a very small number might fail. The number of Han Lin was but one-third of that of Jin Shi, and this title was temporarily awarded after they passed the court examination. They were then entitled to bear the official title of Han Lin Yuan Shu Ji Shi (翰林院庶吉士), “The Students of Han Lin’s Academy.”

Three years later they had to be reexamined, and of those who passed only about two-thirds of the entire number became regular members of the academy. The number of competitors of various examinations was usually many times more than the number of degrees allotted. The writer remembers when he took the Xiang Shi examination in Beijing in 1898, there were 1200 competitors for the 283 degrees to be conferred. The Xiang Shi examination always had the largest number of competitors, and its percentage of successful members was the smallest of all kinds of the examinations. Therefore this examination was much more difficult than even those for a higher degree.

Honorific Titles: Those who passed highest in these various examinations were regarded with great honor, and there were special terms or titles to indicate them. The first of Xiu Cai was called An Shou(案首); the first of Ju Ren was called Jie Yuan(解元), and that of Gong Shi was called Hui Yuan(会元). The second of Ju Ren and Gong Shi were called Jing Kui(经魁). The first three of Jin Shi forming the first grade of that examination were called Ding Jia(鼎甲), and of these the first one was called Zhuang Yuan(状元), the second Bang Yan(榜眼), and the third Tan Hua(探花). These three alone would receive the title of Han Lin without taking further examination. They were held high officially and socially, as they were the very highest of the learned class.

Examination Officials: The examiners conducting the Yuan Shi were called Xue Zheng(学政), one being sent to each province and serving an official term of three years. The examiners conducting the Xiang Shi were called Zhu Kao(主考), two being sent to each province whenever occasion demanded. These examiners were not allowed to conduct examinations in their native provinces. The examiners conducting the Hui Shi were called Zong Cai(总裁), four in number, for every term. All the above officials were appointed by the Emperor from the Han Lin Academy through an examination. Excepting the Xue Zheng, they all had assistant officials, which were called Tong Kao Guan(同考官). The number of Tong Kao Guan varied from four to eighteen, according to the variety and number of candidates to be examined. Each of them received an even number of the examination papers, read them through, and recommended the successful papers to the examiners, who finally decided the matter. The examiners of Dian Shi, and Chao Kao were both called Yue Juan Da Chen(阅卷大臣), eight in number, appointed by the Emperor from high rank officials without examination.

Examination Subjects: The most important subjects of all the examination, except Dian Shi and Chao Kao, was the Jing Yi (Classical Literature), which had to be composed in the style Ba Gu Wen(八股文) or 'Eight Legs Literature.' Besides these there were questions on philosophy, history, politics, science, art, and a poetical composition. The first of the three periods of the Xiang Shi and Hui Shi was devoted to the writing of three essays in the Ba Gu Wen style. The themes were given by the emperor (as in Xiang Shi). All the themes were from the Confucian Four Books. Following these was a poem composed according to strictly formed rules. The second period consisted of five essays in the Ba Gu Wen style, the themes given being taken

from the Confucian Five Canons. The third period included five essays on given questions or problems. The Ba Gu Wen was of certain form and limited to about 750 characters for each piece. The poem was called a ‘ruled poem of eight rimes’ because it was composed under a strict rule and contained 16 lines of 5 characters each. The essays on questions or problems were less formal.

Examination Papers: The stationery used in the various examinations was fixed in form. The paper used for Yuan Shi, Xiang Shi, and Hui Shi, were of folded white paper with red square ruling. After the essays were written by candidates the paper was called Mo Juan(墨卷, black ink paper), then it went to the copyist and the contents were transcribed in red ink to another paper, which was called Zhu Juan(朱卷, red ink paper). This copy was presented to the examination officials instead of the original paper, in order to avoid the recognition of the handwriting. The paper used for Dian Shi was of large, heavy, folded white paper, with red vertical lines, and was called Da Juan (大卷, great paper). The paper used for Chao Kao was of medium size, thin, folded, white plain paper without lines, and was called Bai Ze(白折, white fold). The above two papers needed no transcribing, and therefore had to be written very well. The successful candidates were allowed to publish their papers with the examiner’s comment, and the candidate’s personal history, for distribution among his friends, who would reward him with gifts. The examination office also published the very best papers to serve as models, and these were called Wei Mo (围墨).

Official Treatment and Appointment: Although there were some other ways of becoming an officials, the officials selected through the foregoing examinations were Zheng Tu(正途), or ‘legitimate,’ and were regarded as of a higher class, and of course had more chances and better treatment. A Jin Shi was entitled to become an official, at least magistrate of a district, without taking civil examination, and this was also the only degree that entitled one to become a member of the cabinet. A Ju Ren was entitled to become a Jiao Guan (教官, teaching official) in a local college (see my paper on the Chinese Public School System) without taking a civil examination, and a magistrate if he passed it. A Xiu Cai was entitled to be a candidate of the civil examination for Jiao Guan and other government positions of similar rank. The Han Lin was an honorary body, from the membership of which all the high officials were chosen and promoted. Moreover, a new member of Han Lin was only of the 7th official rank, yet he was entitled to equal official courtesy as that accorded the highest official- that is, no official could treat a Han Lin as his inferior, and only a higher official who was a Han Lin and was successful in three or more examination terms (a term averaged three years) before him, could treat him as a student.

Strict Rules: The rules of examination were very strict and rather cruel. The following are given as examples.

A candidate was not allowed to bring any book or paper with him, and was searched before entering the examination hall.

Everybody engaged for the examination service was locked in the hall during the period and no communication with the outside was allowed.

The cells for candidates were numbered, and so constructed as to prevent any intercourse between them.

The names of candidates had been pasted up and sealed and none could see them before the degrees were decided.

All papers of candidates were re-copied by copyists so nobody could recognize the person's identity by his handwriting.

The subjects, or themes, which were given by the emperor were sealed and opened after the locking of the hall. If the subjects were given by the examiners they were selected by ballot, and must have been agreed upon by all of them after the locking of the hall.

Should any dishonesty be found among officials or candidates a special penalty was provided, and would be carried out without fail. The punishment for guilt was very heavy; during the late dynasty one premier and several other officials have suffered the death penalty for their dishonesty in examination.

Miscellaneous Examinations: Besides the main line examination above mentioned, there were many other examinations for different purposes. Nearly all civil government employees were chosen by examination, although the Eight Legs Literature was not used in all cases. The Wu(武), or military officials, had also to pass the examination which formed a main line by the three degrees, but the names were called Wu Xiu Cai(武秀才), Wu Ju Ren(武举人), and Wu Jin Shi(武进士)(Wu means military) and, of course, the subjects were entirely different. These were, however, regarded as less important and were also less difficult compared with the literary examination. A special extra examination was held once during the reign of Kang Xi(康熙,1679), and also once during the reign of Qian Long(乾隆,1736). This was called Bo Xue Hong Ci Ke(博学鸿词科, Extensive Learning and Excellent Literature). The candidates for this examination were recommended by high officials. It required first-class specialized study, as the name indicated, but no preceding degree was necessary. That is, any person who was recommended and became a candidate was entitled to take this examination under the same subject with a Han Lin member who studied in the same line. In this examination many examiners were appointed by the emperor, and each group took charge of a certain special line. The successful candidates of the first term were 59 in number, and of the second term 19. Each of them was granted a literary title and received rapid promotion from his own rank. This was an unusual event, and was therefore regarded as even more honorable than Han Lin, for Han Lin was but a regular production of every three years, and many Han Lin members were candidates in this examination. All the candidates including the failures were entitled to be called Zheng Jun(征君, Scholars Invited by the Emperor), and they were mostly famous scholars. In the 28th year of Guang Xu(光绪,1903), a similar examination had been held which was called Jing Ji Te Ke(经济特科, Special Examination for Statesmen). A number of note men, headed by Liang Shiyi(梁士诒) and Yuan Jiagu(袁嘉谷), were chosen in this examination.

Comments on the Examination System

In the latter part of the Qing Dynasty, after the outbreak of the Tai Ping Rebellion(太平天国运动), the government officials and many other learned men began to realize the inefficiency of the administration which depended upon the examination system only, and demanded a change. The Jun Gong(军功, Military Service) and Bao Ju (保举, Official Recommendation) had been greatly exercised and the evil system of Juan Na(捐纳), or 'buying of officials' was also adopted to meet deficits in the national finances and also lack of military preparedness. However, the men who occupied the important positions were exclusively those selected from the examinations, and it is especially notable that all the famous generals who suppressed the Tai Ping Rebellion after a struggle of 18 years, and who succeeded in reconquering Chinese-Turkestan, such as Zeng Guofan(曾国藩), Zuo Zongtang(左宗棠), Hu Linyi(胡林翼), Jiang Zhongyuan(江忠源), and Li Hongzhang(李鸿章), were either Han Lin, Jin Shi, or Ju Ren. Since the ending of the China-Japan War(1894) the Reform Party of China, headed by Kang Youwei(康有为), a Jin Shi himself, advocated the abolition of the examination system and the adoption of the modern public school system in its place. This was one of the many modern reforms advocated by the Constitutionals during their famous One-Hundred Days Rule in 1888. This reform had the sanction of the Emperor Guang Xu, who intended to put this new plan into effect but was prevented by the return to power of the reactionary element headed by the Empress Dowager. So that for about two years this important reform was held back until the evil results of the Boxer Outbreak, in 1900, taught the Empress Dowager a sadly needed lesson and forced her to accept it. In the following year the Eight Legs Literature was changed into informal modern essays under the same examination system. Since the year the Eight Legs Literature was changed into informal modern essays under the same examination system. Since the year 1905, when the modern public schools had been established in every district of the empire, the examination system has been abolished entirely. The statesman and scholar responsible for this change was Zhang Zhidong(张之洞), himself a Han Lin member.

The serious defects of the examination system, especially that of the Eight Legs Literature may be outlined as follows: (1) National classics only being the important study, the sciences and foreign languages were entirely neglected. (2) The formal literature and the writing alone were insufficient to prove the actual scholarship. (3) The difficulty of maintaining a standard and drawing a line between success and failure. (4) The ability to write an examination essays in a short period, being no measure of the qualifications necessary for his life's work. As the result of an enthusiastic propaganda by the reformers the examination system, which operated for thousands of years, was discontinued at once without any reaction or excitement. From this we see how the people were tired of it, since it had long since outgrown its usefulness. However, at the same time we must remember that this system was the result, or fruit, of a long, long experiment in civilization, having been successful for a quarter of human history while others failed, therefore it must have had some good points which caused it to survive all other systems. In the writer's opinion, the examination system itself should not be blamed so much for the bad results shown,

for it has created some remarkable conditions which we may praise. (1) If this system were successfully carried out there would be no caste or class antagonism existing. Every man had an equal chance to do his best. No matter from what family he may have come, after he received the degree he was treated by the government officials and also by society as honorably as any of his fellow men, and was equally eligible to become an official. According to the Chinese custom a scholar from a poor, humble family always drew more sympathy and respect for his own victory. We have a proverb saying, 'The nobility has no seeds.' For China has had no inherited officials since the abolition of the feudal system by the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221, B.C.). A man may inherit the noble title from his family, but the title is but a title and he cannot obtain any official position unless he passes the main line examination, and when he goes to the examination his title counts for nothing. (2) If this system were successfully carried out there should be no personal or social influence working in the candidate's favor. Prior to the examination for his degree no influence of any kind could be brought in, as it was prevented by the strict rules and punishment previously cited. A Ju Ren could always be a lower official, and a Han Lin could always be a higher official if they so demanded. With few exceptions an official was always promoted at certain periods and up to certain rank. The whole government service was like a huge machine, and the degrees were the forces which caused the revolution of its vast wheels, and any influence to the contrary could not do very much toward lessening its motor-power. This was probably the only safeguard which preserved the bureaucracy free from corruption. (3) If this system were successfully carried out there would be nobody holding government positions, especially the higher offices, except the learned men-or at least what we call the 'Book Readers.' This would make the standard of officials high and cause a tendency toward the goal of 'government by the best'-an aristocratic republican idea. This was the very ancient form of government in China, and was, as many scholars believe, the best form of all. (4) If this system were successfully carried out it left all the educational affairs to be decided by home rule, and let the people consult together and conduct their affairs according to the local conditions and in harmony with public opinion. The central, and even provincial, government need not interfere with their work or help them in their finances. The only functions which properly belonged to the government might be enumerated under three headings, as follows: (A) To inspect and encourage their works. (B) Keep one, and only one, school in every large city as a model. (C) To select good examination officials and observe the rules of examination strictly. This makes the government control of education simple, and the people may be taught according to their various ideas or systems of instructions, which although lacking in uniformity yet involved more freedom and escape from enslavement under the all-powerful national tendencies. It is doubtful, ever in the mind of the writer, whether or not this feature of the ancient system is better than the modern public school system. However, as it is so different from the latter, we must take it into consideration.

The writer was one who passed this examination, yet one who urged the reform. The deficiencies of the examination system in the latter part of the Qing Dynasty were deeply criticized, and nobody could deny its shortcomings. But when we examine it carefully and coldly we often find these deficiencies are not caused by the system itself, but by the subjects used in the examination (especially the Eight Legs Literature), and the laxity of the rule by which it should be carried out, moreover, due to the ‘buying official’ system which betrayed the value and trust of the examination. So, regarding the examination as a system itself, it is still a just and scientific method of government administration, and more efficient than any other. It is the tendency in the Western nations to begin to look up the Chinese examination system and try to adopt it in the civil service. Who can tell but that this system which has just been uprooted in China will not be transplanted in Europe or America? It is also likely, as in many other cases, that after its seeds have been sown and flourish in foreign lands, it will be brought back again to its native soil, China.