

The Chinese Educational System, c. 1575 CE

Directions: Read the text below ALOUD with a partner. Read the document segment by segment. After each segment note, what you thought as you read the text, what the author was trying to convey, and what the segment was about. Underline and note words/phrases you find that relate to Confucian analects

A Child's First Lessons.**Notes**

No. 1: Men at their birth are by nature radically good; in this all approximate, but in practice widely diverge. If not educated, the natural character is changed; a course of education is made valuable by close attention. That boys should not learn is an improper thing; for if they do not learn in youth, what will they do when old?

No. 2: Formerly Confucius had the young Hiang Toh for his teacher; and Chau too, though high in office, studied assiduously. One copied lessons on reeds, another on slips of bamboo; to conquer sleep one suspended his head by the hair from a beam. One read by the light of glow-worms, another by reflection from the snow; these, though their families were poor, did not omit to study. Yung, when only eight years old, could recite the Odes; and Pi, at the age of seven, understood the game of chess. The silkworm spins silk, the bee gathers honey; if men neglect to learn, they are inferior to brutes. He who learns in youth, and acts when of mature age, extends his influence to the prince, benefits the people; makes his name renowned, renders illustrious his parents, reflects glory on his ancestors, and enriches posterity. Diligence has merit; play yields no profit. Be ever on your guard! Rouse all your energies!

Although the civil service examination system as such is perhaps more aptly categorized under “government” than “religion,” it is discussed in this unit to highlight **the central role that the examination system played in the dissemination of the Confucian worldview throughout traditional Chinese society.**

THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION INSTITUTIONALIZED THROUGH THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

Imperial China was famous for its civil service examination system, which had its beginnings in the Sui dynasty (581-618 CE) but was fully developed during the Qing dynasty. The system continued to play a major role, not only in education and government, but also in society itself, throughout Qing times.

The civil service examination system was squarely based upon the Confucian classics and upon recognized commentaries on those classics. The examination system was the basic support for the ongoing study of the Confucian classics during late-imperial times and could be said to have been the impetus behind the school curriculum that was followed all over China, even at the level of the village school for young boys. (In imperial times educational opportunities were far more restricted for girls and women than were for boys. Some girls did get an education, but this was a minority.)



The Confucian tradition was institutionally upheld by the imperial state in a very direct way. The opening lessons in the curriculum that gave these children basic literacy were the Confucian classics and other approved texts. For a young boy, simply going to school meant beginning the early part of the very curriculum which, if he succeeded at every level, would propel him into the examination system. What this curriculum meant, among other things, was absolute mastery of key Confucian texts.

WHO TOOK THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS?

The vast majority of boys did not participate in the examinations; in fact, a relatively large percentage of boys ended schooling no later than after the first five or six years. Some scholars estimate that as a result, as much as 40 percent of Chinese males at that time were literate. In comparison only around 10 percent of Chinese women were literate (“literate” in the fundamental sense of being able to read basic documents and not in the more advanced sense of being able to read the classical texts themselves). Having achieved this level of education, the vast majority of boys simply left school and went about their lives. This was true of boys from merchant as well as farming families. Only those from wealthier families or showing exceptional promise and having wealthy sponsors who were impressed by their potential could

Posting of the Examination

Results (detail), datable to 1540

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continue their studies and compete in the examination system.

THE LEVELS OF THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

The civil service examinations were conducted at every level of the Chinese administrative hierarchy. The lowest level of the Chinese imperial administration was the county seat, and in the county seat one took the preliminary examination, which, if passed, qualified one to take the examination at the second level, which was at the prefectural (district) seat. The third-level examinations were given in the provincial capitol, and the fourth and highest level of examinations were given in the imperial palace itself. In addition to his many other functions, the emperor was in fact the “grand tutor” of China. Theoretically, he was to proctor the palace exams, although in practice he sent someone to represent him in that capacity.

Those who passed the imperial palace examinations at the highest level (*jinshi*) became the most important people in China’s educated class immediately upon achieving that goal, and went on to become important members of the Chinese bureaucracy. Those who only passed at the provincial-level (*juren*) became part of an important provincial elite and held enormous power at that level. Many of these provincial degree-holders could be called to government service, though this was not automatic. Those who only passed at the prefectural level (*xiucai*) had the most common imperial degree in China. The holders of this degree took positions of leadership in their villages and towns and also became school teachers, maintaining the very educational system in which they themselves had achieved success.

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CURRICULAR UNIFORMITY UNDER THE CONFUCIAN SYSTEM

The civil service examination system was an important vehicle of social mobility in imperial China. Even a youth from the poorest family could theoretically join the ranks of the educated elite by succeeding in the examination system. This assurance of success in the examinations dependent only on one’s ability rather than one’s social position helped circulate the key ideas of Confucianism -- concerning proper behavior, rituals, relationships, etc. -- through all levels of Chinese society. The hope of social mobility through success in this system was the motivation for going to school in the first place, whether one was the son of a scholar or a farmer. But even for the farmer’s son who did not do well enough to take the exams even at the lowest level, going to school had the major payoff of working literacy, and this literacy was acquired through mastery of the same basic texts that others who went on to pass the examinations at the highest level also studied. This curricular uniformity had an extremely powerful effect on Chinese society, and the major impetus for this uniformity was the meritocracy promoted by the civil service examination system.

Source: "Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China." *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2013.

Questions: Why is this one of the most important tests Chinese men took? What did it decide?

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Traditional Chinese Poem

To enrich your family, no need to buy good land:
Books hold a thousand measures of grain.
For an easy life, no need to build a mansion:
In books are found houses of gold....
A boy who wants to become a somebody
Devotes himself to the classics, faces the window, and reads.

After Passing the Examination by Po Chui

FOR ten years I never left my books;
I went up... and won unmerited praise.
My high place I do not much prize;
The joy of my parents will first make me proud.
Fellow students, six or seven men,
See me off as I leave the City gate.
My covered couch is ready to drive away;
Flutes and strings blend their parting tune.
Hopes achieved dull the pains of parting;
Fumes of wine shorten the long road...
Shod with wings is the horse of him who rides
On a Spring day the road that leads to home.

“Urge to Study” poem written by Emperor Zhengzong (986-1022) of the Song dynasty

To be wealthy you need not purchase fertile fields,
Thousands of tons of corn are to be found in the books.
To build a house you need not set up high beams,
Golden mansions are to be found in the books.
To find a wife you need not worry about not having good matchmakers,
Maidens as beautiful as jade are to be found in the books.
To travel you need not worry about not having servants and attendants,
Large entourages of horses and carriages are to be found in the books.
When a man wishes to fulfill the ambition of his life,
He only needs to diligently study the six classics by the window.