

ORIAS Appendix: on bureaucratic selection, Confucianism, and the examination system (Handout)

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The Han bureaucracy had three tracks for entry, with the highest reserved for the prestigious candidates from good families who tended to be appointed immediately to advisory positions after their nomination by local recommenders as "Filially Pious and Incorrupt", "Flourishing Talent" (*maocai* 茂才), and so on; a second reserved for the middle-ranking functionaries qualified through birth and an aptitude for test-taking (perhaps Academy qualifications were most important here?); and the lowest for low-level functionaries needing minimal literacy. Official tests, so far as we know, allowed candidates already qualified *by their father's occupation and rank* to demonstrate their ability to read and write. Thus the sons of scribes were eligible to be trained as scribes, just as sons of diviners were expected to continue in the family profession. **It was not until the late Tang period that the civil service examination system began, and only in the Song that the system became blind (i.e., open to candidates, regardless of family background).**

In general, promising candidates for Han offices were to "take up their studies in the study hall" (*xueshi* 學室), beginning their apprenticeships at the age of seventeen *sui*, with a requirement for annual testing of skills after that. Once they had gained the attention of members of the imperial bureaucracy, candidates with demonstrated expertise then faced additional tests, both formal and informal, relating to particular areas of competence. Many of the post-entry level tests were not regularly scheduled, but rather held in connection with extraordinary events, including court conferences devoted to interpretation of the Classics, and not all candidates faced the same sorts of tests. How little book-learning counted in this selection process can be seen from the Han court's belated requirement, in 132 AD (or three centuries into Han), that nominees for the prestigious title of "Filial and Incorrupt" (*xiaolian* 孝廉) should demonstrate, via a written examination, knowledge of classical texts and an ability to draft documents. As the two Han dynasties had no meritocratic civil service examination system based on the Classics, the conflation of the Han bureaucratic qualifying exams with the examination system after 1313 AD is very odd – but no odder than talk of "equality before the law" as a bedrock principle or even a vague desideratum. The laws worked in tandem with a system of honors, and status and rank distinctions were thought to be so rooted in the natural order that they persisted into the afterlife.

One question is, to what degree did advanced cultural literacy beyond such "elementary education" classics as the *Xiaojing*, *Cang Jie*, or *Lunyu* increase social standing or political authority? A few made classical learning the "family business" (*jia ye* 家業), as they managed to produce high-ranking officials who were recognized experts generation after generation. But this does not mean that we can then conclude that most men of learning, *by virtue of their erudition*, qualified for consideration as "men of worth." Historians of Europe routinely observe that before the seventeenth century the only persons deemed "worthy" to serve as expert witnesses were gentlemen of breeding who enjoyed high status. Much the same valence clings to the term *xian* 賢 in the pre-Song era, though the term is apt to be (mis)translated in ways that cast virtuous conduct and classical erudition as the two most important criteria for inclusion within the ranks. Almost always "worth" in Qin and Han was measured by office-holding, and "sage" was so synonymous with "ruler" or "minister" that Kongzi [Confucius] himself had to be crowned as king and defended against charges of *lèse majesté* because he had dared to judge his superiors. "Dignity" also was firmly associated with display. While our sources seldom allow us to glimpse changes in the way worth was fashioned, they do point to such

continuities. Thus it speaks volumes that men of classical learning were analogized, on the one hand, to skilled craftsmen, and to aristocrats (i.e., *junzi*), on the other, depending upon their rank.

Given the current evidence at our disposal, it seems that knowledge of a classic or a Classic added little to a person's status at court, since advanced cultural literacy was relatively common among members of the political elite. At the same time, it may well have conferred an extra measure of unofficial authority in the society at large, in part because so few people in a pre-printing era could read, let alone interpret difficult texts, and mastery of a *jing* implied a surplus of wealth and leisure.