

Song Dynasty Scholars

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The fundamental justification for the Chinese Imperial Exams was that appointees to civil service positions were not to be chosen through special or inherited privilege, but through an individual's own abilities. For centuries, the might of China was established militarily, often by emperors from humble origins who had toppled existing dynasties. However, once in control, these emperors soon realized that the actual governance of China would require the administrative services of thousands of bureaucrats. The civil service examination was thus a means for creating such a body of men, and it became a meritocratic strategy that was emulated by France and Britain in the nineteenth century when these countries began needing public servants for their far-flung imperial outpost.

The Chinese civil service exams began around the sixth century; by 115 CE a set curriculum had already become established for the so-called First Generation of exam takers. They were tested for their proficiency in the so-called *Six Arts* which included music, archery and horsemanship, arithmetic, writing and knowledge of the rituals and ceremonies of both public and private life. Between 200BCE-200CE, the curriculum had expanded to the *Five Studies*. The examinations included military strategies, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography in addition to the Confucian Classics.

By 1370 CE the scope and rigor of these exams were evident: there were examinations lasting twenty-four and even seventy-two hours conducted in spare, isolated examination rooms.

There were generally three levels of exams given at the local, provincial and national levels. District exams included testing the candidate on his knowledge of the classics, the ability compose poetry on given subjects using set poetic forms and calligraphy. At the provincial level examinations candidates were tested on the breadth of their studies in the Classics, and these examinations often last up to seventy-two hours. A candidate who passed the provincial level exam was termed *juren* meaning *recommended man*. Those who had attained the *juren* status were eligible for the national level exams. Passing that level of exams then raised an individual to the highest level possible--that of *jinshi* or the so-called *presented scholar*.

At the national level exams, candidates were examined on the ability to analyze contemporary political problems in addition to the usual examinations based on the Classics. There were also additional highly prestigious special exams that were held occasionally by imperial decree. The less prestigious exams were those that were held to exam candidates in law, calligraphy, state ritual and military skills.

The success rates of these exams were extremely small: During the Tang Dynasty the passing rate was about two percent. The personal suffering that individuals underwent both in the preparation and in the taking of these exams has become part of Chinese lore. Candidates were known to repeatedly fail exams. Some committed suicide because of the disgrace that these failures brought to their families. Others continued taking exams even as very old, grey-haired men. For those who rose through the ranks by passing these exams and being selected for administrative positions, it meant that their clans or families also rose in social prestige and wealth.

The meritocratic nature of these exams has been noted in Chinese history: During the Ming Dynasty nearly half, about 47 percent, of those who passed the highest level examinations were from families with no official connections.

Directions for the backside chart: After the second reading, highlighting the article looking for the big ideas, key points, fill out the chart on the next page. In groups discuss what you think are the most important ideas with why in the box under "ideas to leave in," and then decide which are the less important ideas and the why under "ideas to leave out." Then, do a 5 sentence summary of the whole text followed by a more concise summary focusing on the overall point of the article in the last box.

Leave In, Leave Out Summary

Text: _____

Ideas to Leave In	Ideas to Leave Out
Criteria (reasons)	Criteria (reasons)
Summary of the text 5 sentences	
Condensed Summary of the Text 1-2 sentences	