

Lesson Title:

Comparing the Chinese Civil Service Exam to US Educational Exams

Class and Grade level(s):

AP English, 10-12

Goals and Objectives**The student will be able to:**

- Describe some aspects of the history of the Chinese civil service exams
- Compare and contrast the Chinese civil service exam with U.S. educational exams
- See Chinese rank badges that identified the status of the wearer
- Describe how the Chinese exams served as a model for other countries' exams

Time required/class periods needed:

Three class periods

Primary source bibliography:

For background articles on the Imperial and Civil Service Examinations:

- Asia for Educators: Search “Civil Service Exams, China
- <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/>
- Chinese rank badges at: “Rank and Style Dressing in Imperial China” web site which has all badges and status levels at <https://www.sarajo.com/history-chinese-rank-badges/>

Other resources used:

For more detailed background on the Imperial and Civil Service Exams

- “Confucianism” in the Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/132104/Confucianism/25460/The-Confucianization-of-politics#ref=ref391503>
- Any other web site or library materials that give greater understanding to students on this topic

Required materials/supplies:

- Copies of the attached reading materials for each student.
- Computer/SmartBoard for display of web site of Chinese rank badges at: “Rank and Style Dressing in Imperial China” web site which has all badges and status levels at <https://www.sarajo.com/history-chinese-rank-badges/>

Vocabulary

New words and Chinese words in any of the articles are explained within the context of each article.

Procedure

Students in high school are encouraged to learn about other cultures in their various classrooms. One of the aspects in Advanced Placement classes, as well as other high school classrooms, is their background knowledge of their need to achieve on the Duke exam in junior high, on the PSAT, the ACT, the SAT, the AP exams and eventually perhaps taking the GMAT, the LSAT, or the MCAT after college to achieve further professional status in our society.

To acquaint students with the background of the Chinese civil service examinations, to have them learn how countries all over the world have emulated and adopted some form of the Chinese exams, and then to see how these tests were conducted and how they effected the eventual standing and identification of those who passed and did not pass would be fascinating to our students. They would enjoy the comparison to their own examination backgrounds.

1. Day 1: Ask students what they know about how the emperors of China obtained the advisors and other officials who lived at court with them at the Hall of Harmony in the Forbidden City in Beijing. Ask them if they know anything about how Chinese civil servants were chosen.
2. Pass out the article on “Confucianism and the Chinese Scholastic System” (below). After the students have read it, conduct a discussion on the various aspects and what similarities and differences there are between this exam and the various exams they take: State assessments, PSAT, ACT, SAT, AP exams. Use the Asia for Educators website to show students civil service exam timeline.
3. Day 2: Call up the Pacific Asia Museum website and show badges that officials wore to show their rank. Discuss their symbolism and variety.
4. Divide students into two teams to debate this issue: Resolved: The United States should institute a civil service exam like the one used in Ancient China. One team will research and argue for it; the other against it.
5. Day 3: Debate

Assessment/evaluation

Invite other teachers or parents to judge. Award points to each side for their arguments. Ask students who they think won the debate. Then declare a winner based on all judges' and student evaluations.

***"To enrich your family, there is no need to buy good land:
Books hold a thousand measures of grain.
For an easy life, there is no need to build mansion:
In books are found houses of gold.
When you go out, do not be upset if no one follows you:
In books there will be a crowd of horses and carriages.
If you wish to marry, don't be upset if you don't have a go-between:
In books there are girls with faces like jade.
A young man who wishes to be somebody
will devote his time to the Classics.
He will face the window and read."***

by The Song Emperor, Renzong



Mencius, student of Confucius and Confucianism

Confucianism and the Chinese Scholastic System

INTRODUCTION

The historical importance of education in Chinese culture is derived from the teachings of Confucius and philosophers of

the middle and late Chou eras. Fundamentally, these philosophies taught that social harmony could be achieved only if humans were free from deprivation and given proper education. Confucius taught that all people possessed the same potential, and that education was the corrective means to curb any tendencies to stray from ethical behavior.

From the very first, Confucius made education available to students from all classes. Education in China has thus been an equalizing force from ancient times. It became the means by which individuals from even the humblest backgrounds could rise to great heights. Through the ethics of Confucius which informed the traditional curriculum, it was also a powerful mechanism for implementing the ethical and social norms of Chinese society.

We know with some certainty that a state system of education was founded during the Han Period the emperor Wu-ti in 124BCE. Students who were admitted to the *T'ai hsueh* or Great Academy were destined for careers in the civil service after they passed the internal exams and were competitively selected for various positions. Initially only fifty-five students were admitted to the Great Academy. By 8 BCE, the Academy had an enrollment of three thousand students. During the Han Dynasty (202BCE-220CE) provincial schools were established and the Confucian tradition of education was spread across China.

As the Academy developed the connection between scholarship and the personality cult of Confucius also became established. The connection between Confucius and the official Chinese educational system thus became permanently linked right into the present time.

The curriculum at the Great Academy was based on the Confucian *Five Classics* and classes were taught by professors of the Five Classics who were known as *po-shih*. The basis of Chinese education did not change throughout the imperial history till the reign of the last Ch'ing emperors. During the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912) both state and private schools were developed and students were able to buy places into these schools.

In contrast to western education, particularly in regard to the

model of higher education in Medieval and Renaissance universities where students were encouraged to engage in disputation, traditional Chinese education consisted primarily of rote learning and memorization of the Classics. This formula became standardized by the seventh century CE. Candidates for the Civil Service Imperial Exams were required to memorize a vast amount of classical material and were never required to demonstrate the ability to either theorize or challenge a particular premise. The purpose of the scholar class after all was:

“. . .the creation of bureaucratic generalists familiar with an accepted ethical outlook and body of knowledge, not with the growth of knowledge or with academic specialization.” (Merson, John. The Genius that Was China: East and West in the Making of the Modern World, p. 86, Overlook Press, 1990.

The very democratic nature of Chinese education--i.e., that it offered a path of upward mobility to anyone who could survive the rigors of study and examinations--was established from the first by Confucius himself. A traditional saying attributed to him states that "those who work with their heads will rule, while those who work with their hands will serve." To that end, education thus became a strategy for survival in a country where poverty and hardship had challenged the lives of millions for countless millennia.

The Chinese Imperial Examination System



Song Dynasty Scholars

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 and 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: t here were examinations lasting twenty-four and even seventy-two hours conducted in spare, isolated examination rooms.



Reproduction of Cell Used by Students
Taking the Imperial Exams

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.

Taken from Cal Poly Pomona, California web site at <http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/ls201/confucian1.html>

Interesting Additional Sidelight:



Authentic Qing
Chinese Rank Badge
on sale on E Bay for
\$388.00
bid on Nov. 7, 2008.
Age: 1850 to 1899.
Mandarin Official's
Rank Badge
embroidery of a
peacock. Original.
coloured on a deep
blue background with
peacock, red moon,
cloud.
Circa : Qing period.
Height : 27 cm
Width : 27.5 cm
Condition : Good.
Please E mail me.