

Name: _____

Date: _____ Block: _____

Civil Service Exam

Training

Training for the civil service exam began for Chinese boys at the age of four (sometimes even at the age of three.) Students had to learn thousands of characters. They studied history, literature, law and the teachings of Confucius, many of which they had to memorize. Wealthy families were able to afford to send their children to school to learn what they needed. Calligraphy was also very important; students had to be able to write their characters in calligraphy very neatly or the exams would not be graded. During the Ming dynasty, students had to take entrance exams to determine if they were eligible to take the civil service exams. These pre-exams had very strict rules. For example, students were only allowed to leave their seat one time, so many of them kept pots under their desks as toilets. Students were not allowed to do any physical labor or play sports, as it would interfere with their preparation for the exam.

Where the exam took place

Once every three years in September the exams were held in the provincial capitals. Exam candidates entered through a main gate to many small lanes lined with rooms called “cells.” Candidates were assigned a certain cell number. These cells were three sided; there were no doors, no furniture, and a dirt floor. Three long boards were in the cell, the highest to use as a shelf, the second highest as a desk, and the last as a seat/bed. The facilities were in bad shape since they were only used once every three years.

Entering for the exam

Candidates were thoroughly searched upon entering the compound. They carried with them writing materials, a water pitcher, a cooking pot, food, bedding, and a curtain for the front of their cell. Four soldiers searched a candidate at once, looking for banned materials such as books and papers with writing. They would go so far as cutting open dumplings (a food – thin dough surrounding meat and/or vegetables; can be fried or boiled.) to look for contraband. Soldiers earned three ounces of silver for finding banned materials, so a thorough search was worth their while. It took all day for the 10,000 to 20,000 candidates to be searched and to enter the compound. Once all were in, the gate was closed and sealed. Candidates spent the night alone in their cells with nothing to do but wait for the exam to begin early the next morning. It could be quite cold and the beds were uncomfortable; the boards were not long enough for them to stretch out.

The exam

On the first morning candidates receive their questions and began their work. They had until the evening of the next day to finish. They completed a rough draft and a final draft. If they got hungry, they ate the food they’d brought with them. If it rained, they did their best they could to shield the exam from getting wet, even if it meant that they got soaked. At night they were allowed to light a candle but they had to be careful not to burn their papers. They could sleep during the night if they got tired but that was usually tough to do with the pressure of completing the exam.

It was forbidden to cut miswritten characters off the page and paste them on another; you couldn’t leave blank spaces or blank pages. If this happened, your name was posted outside the gate and you were barred from future exams. Those who had the first part of their exams accepted received exit passes. They packed up and left the compound, returning two days later for the second round of questions. As part of the second exam section, candidates had to rewrite from the first part of the exam (from memory.) They did this to prove the papers were written by the same person. They exited once more and returned for the third session.

Examination review

Ten to twenty thousand papers to review was a lot of work. Candidate responses were written in black ink. Several thousand clerks recopied all the candidates' work. They did not include personal information so the graders would not show bias towards names or handwritings they recognized. Both copies of the exam were given to proofreaders to make sure the copies were the same. Several hundred proofreaders were used and they made corrections in yellow. Those responsible for copying mistakes were punished.

Associate examiners read the first copy and commented in blue ink. On the top of the paper they would write a comment such as "mediocre," "without merit," or "recommended." If it was recommended, the paper was given to the chief and deputy examiners who graded the three parts of the exam together to determine if the candidate passed or failed.

And the winners...

About ninety candidates were allowed to pass for large provinces and about forty for small. This was about one in every five candidates passing. Candidates who passed (except the top five) had their names posted in public. Candidates were relieved to see their name on that list. However, there was small hope for those who did not find their name on the list that they were one of the top five. Finally, the top five were posted, the crowd cheered, the supervisor inspected the list and affixed his seal to finalize the results.

Life in the exam system

Once candidates passed the exam they were allowed to work as government officials. There was even one higher level of exam that allowed for even higher government positions. These officials advised the emperor, kept records, and supervised government projects such as roads, dams and canals. Candidates who failed often became assistants to government officials or taught school.

There was no fee to take the exam, but it was expensive to go to school, pay for travel and lodging, buy gifts for the examiners and give tips to the exam staff. Even though the point of the civil service exam was so that government positions were not just inherited, it often happened that sons of scholars also became scholars.

The civil service exam system lasted well over one thousand years. The last exams were given in 1904.

Directions: Create a comic strip summarizing the civil service exam.

1. Fold the blank paper into eight boxes.
2. Use a ruler to draw lines to separate the boxes.
3. Put your name, date, block and title in the first box.
4. Put a heading in each box (use the ones from the reading)
5. For each section of the reading, choose a way to illustrate part(s) of the information from the reading. Put your illustration and a caption in the box – *in your own words-do not copy from reading.*
6. Use color. No stick figures. Fill space.
7. Check your work for spelling or grammar errors. ½ point off for each error, maximum 3 points off.

Rubric:

13.5-15 (A): All directions are followed. Illustrations and captions demonstrate an excellent understanding of the civil service exam. No more than one minor error.

12-13 (B): All directions are followed. Illustrations and captions demonstrate a good understanding of the civil service exam. No more than three minor errors.

10.5-11.5 (C): Directions are mostly followed. Illustrations and captions demonstrate adequate understanding of civil service exam.

9-10 (D): Directions are partly followed. Illustrations and captions demonstrate minimal understanding of civil service exam.

8.5 or less (F): Directions are not followed and illustrations/captions are less than half complete.