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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover picture G. E. Morrison with his two 'adopted' children, sons of his head servant, photographed in 1905 in the front courtyard of his house at 98 Wang-fu-ching Ta-chieh, Peking

## THE CHINESE CIVIL SERVICE \*

 *Otto P. N. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel*

“The king hath begun the raising of the standing army ye suggested to him; one regiment is complete and officered.”

“The mischief! I wanted a main hand in that, myself . . . . Why, this makes me uneasy. Who were chosen, and what was the method? Competitive examination?”

“Indeed I know naught of the method. I but know this—these officers be all of noble family, and are born—what is it you call it?—chuckleheads.”

“There’s something wrong, Clarence.”

—Mark Twain (1889)<sup>1</sup>

When, some months ago, I was asked by the Australian National University to deliver the Morrison Oration for 1957, I decided to take as my theme the Chinese civil service. My reasons for choosing this subject were three. In the first place, George Morrison himself, who was by turns traveller, explorer, and one of the most eminent members of the great line of foreign correspondents who served *The Times* newspaper in different parts of the world, towards the end of his career, in 1912, entered the service of the newly-established Chinese Republic as Political Adviser to the President. It seemed fitting therefore that at least one in the series of lectures founded to do honour to the memory of this great Australian should concern itself with the Chinese civil service in which, though briefly, he held so responsible a post. I felt, in the second place, that my choice of subject was not inappropriate for an address delivered in the Australian national capital, which today already houses a large part of the civil service of the Commonwealth. Thirdly there was, for the student of China, the intrinsic interest and obvious importance of the subject itself: for the traditional Chinese civil service, with its origins going back, possibly to the Age of the Warring States in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, and certainly to the time of the Han (from 206 BC to AD 220), is

\* The 19th George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology, delivered on 4 November 1957 and first published by the ANU, Canberra in 1958. Dr van der Sprenkel (1906-78) was at the time a Reader in the Department of Asian Civilizations, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Australian National University.

The assistance of Professor Liu Ts’un-yan and Dr Lo Hui-min in the preparation of this article for reprinting is gratefully acknowledged. [—Ed.]

<sup>1</sup> *A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*, reprint ed. (London: Zodiac Press, 1957), p.171.

beyond all argument the most important of the institutional supports that underlay the stability and longevity of the millennial Chinese empire.

From the very beginnings of the Western discovery of China, with the accounts of the Spanish and Portuguese travellers of the sixteenth century, with the relations of the Jesuit Fathers of the Catholic Mission of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the detailed records of the Dutch and English embassies to Peking, the Chinese imperial bureaucracy, staffed by scholar-officials and recruited through open competitive state examinations, caught and retained the interest of European observers.

Continuing Western contact with China began in the sixteenth century, and the early impressions formed by traders and missionaries of the Mandarins and high officials with whom they came in contact were almost always favourable—sometimes, in view of all the circumstances, surprisingly so. Galeote Pereira for example, a Portuguese who had taken part in several trading (or smuggling) voyages to China from 1539 on, and who was eventually arrested with a number of his companions in 1549 when two junks loaded with contraband were seized by Chinese coastal defence forces, speaks in the highest terms of the impartial administration of Chinese justice and of the officials who administered it. What he has to say is the more impressive as he wrote from personal experience of both courthouse and jail. Some of his companions were summarily executed at the order of the Viceroy Chu Wan 朱紈, who had been appointed over the coastal provinces of Fukien and Chekiang two years before, in 1547, with a commission to suppress piracy and smuggling. During these two years—and fortunately, as it turned out, for the Portuguese—Chu Wan's active measures, which hit peaceful traders as well as pirates, had made him unpopular with the local gentry; and an influential Censor, Ch'en Chiu-te 陳九德, impeached him for having carried out death sentences against several Chinese and Portuguese prisoners without, as the law required, having had the sentences confirmed by the Throne. In the investigation that followed the Supervising Censor Tu Ju-chen 杜汝真 found against the Viceroy, who was declared guilty of executing traders without cause, of embezzling their goods and hiding his crimes from the Court. Chu Wan committed suicide, some of his subordinates were executed and others sentenced to terms of imprisonment or reduced to the status of commoners (i.e. excluded from the Service). The most serious of the charges against the Portuguese were dismissed, and Pereira and his compatriots were sent into easy exile in the south-western province of Kwangsi, from which most of them were later able to make their way to an island off the Kwangtung coast where the Portuguese had a trading station, and from whence they could easily find ship to India or home.

Pereira's summing up on the subject of Chinese justice, though clearly coloured by the happy outcome of his own case, deserves quotation:

As for [the Chinese] being heathen, I do not know a better proof of praising their justice than the fact that they respected ours, we being prisoners and foreigners. For wheresoever in any town of Christendom should be accused unknown men as we were, I know not what end the very Innocents' cause

would have; but we in a heathen country, having for our great enemies two of the chiefest men in a whole town, wanting an interpreter, ignorant of that country language, did in the end see our great adversaries cast into prison for our sake, and deprived of their offices and honour for not doing justice, yea not to escape death, for as the rumour goeth, they shall be beheaded,—now see if they do justice or no?<sup>2</sup>

Galeote Pereira's evidence is important, not only because it is one of the very earliest eye-witness accounts of modern China, but also because of its influence on later Western compilers and historians. Pereira's narrative was used, for example, by Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza in his *Historia de las cosas más notables... del gran Reyno de la China*, a book whose popularity was attested by no less than thirty editions in the fifteen years between its publication in 1585 and the end of the century. No less influential was Matteo Ricci's account of China and of the origins of the Christian Mission to Peking, first made available to the European reading public in Trigault's Latin version (Augsburg 1615) and subsequently translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian and English, running through eleven editions in ten years.<sup>3</sup>

The flattering, but in its essentials not inaccurate, picture of the Chinese Empire presented in the works of Mendoza and Ricci did not remain confined within the covers of works dealing particularly with China and East Asia, but was insensibly diffused in the writings of other and less specialized authors, with the result that some knowledge of the institutions and mores of the Middle Kingdom was installed as part of the intellectual furniture of an educated Western man. To take but a single example, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which went to five editions during the lifetime of its author, abounds in references to China. The speed of the process of diffusion to which I have referred is borne out by the fact that Burton's book, which first appeared in 1621, relies mainly on "Ricci's" (i.e. on Trigault's Latin translation of 1615), which antedates it by only six years.

Burton pays Imperial China the high compliment of coupling it with "Italy in the time of Augustus": these being the only two examples he offers of realms that were "free from melancholy." What Burton means by this phrase can be seen from his description, in a characteristic passage, of its opposite: a country where you shall find

many discontents, common grievances, complaints, poverty, barbarism, beggary, plagues, wars, rebellions, seditions, mutinies, contentions, idleness, riot, epicurism, the land lie untilled, waste, full of bogs, fens, deserts, etc., cities decayed, base and poor towns, villages depopulated, the people squalid, ugly, uncivil; that kingdom, that country, must needs be discontent, melancholy, hath a sick body, and had need to be reformed.

The contrary of all this, it seems, was true of China.<sup>4</sup>

But how came China to be thus favoured? Burton suggests at least a part of the answer in his Second Partition on *The Cure of Melancholy* where he praises the Ragusian Commonwealth, the Switzers and the Dutch United Provinces for excluding from their political arrangements all degrees of hereditary honours, and admitting "none to bear office but such as are

<sup>2</sup> See C. R. Boxer, ed., *South China in the sixteenth century*, Hakluyt Society, Series 2, vol.106 (London, 1953), pp.20–1.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation, of a small part of the work only, appeared in *Hakluytus Postumas or Purchas his Pilgrimes*. Ricci's original MS lay lost and forgotten in the Jesuit archives at Rome for three centuries, until its discovery by Prof. Pietro Tacchi Venturi, who published it as vol.1 of the *Opere Storiche del P. Matteo Ricci* (Macerata 1910). A new and definitive edition of Ricci's *Storia dell'introduzione del cristianesimo in Cina*, with sinological notes, was published by Prof. Pasquale M. d'Elia in 1942 (Rome, Librerio della Stato).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Burton, *The anatomy of melancholy*, ed. F. Dell and P. Jordan-Smith (New York, 1938), p.65.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of melancholy*, p.503.

learned, like those Athenian Areopagites, wise, discreet and well brought up.” He continues:

The Chinenses observe the same custom, no man among them Noble by birth; out of their Philosophers and Doctors they choose Magistrates, their politick Nobles are taken from such as be virtuous noble: nobility is from office, not from birth . . . Their Lau-sie, Mandarins, Literates, Licentiates, and such as have raised themselves by their worth, are their noblemen only, thought fit to govern a state.<sup>5</sup>

He was also clearly impressed by what he had read of the Chinese examination system, for he throws out the suggestion, in another part of his book, that “Rectors of Benefices” in the Anglican Church should “be chosen out of the Universities, examined and approved, as the Literati in China.”

To seventeenth-century scholars like Burton, and still more to the eighteenth-century *philosophes* who had read the much fuller accounts of China given in the *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses* of the Jesuits, in du Halde’s *Description Géographique et Historique de la Chine*, and in the embassy relations of Dapper, Nieuhof and van Braam, China was an ancient and still flourishing civilization, unaffected in its essential features by the revolutions which, in the course of millennia, it had suffered and survived. It provided Europe with the model of a most excellent government, whose quality was mainly attributable to a scholarly bureaucracy, non-hereditary, chosen from amongst the country’s best-educated sons by a refined and just technique of examination, an élite which corporately enjoyed privileges commensurate with its responsibilities, and whose members could confidently expect advancement in the service whenever this had been honestly earned by meritorious performance.

Such a picture, especially when it was beautified by Western writers who were less concerned to give a faithful representation of the Chinese scene than to criticize by implication the inefficient and unenlightened despotisms of their own countries, certainly flattered the reality. China was neither as well, nor as much, governed as they claimed. Few Chinese Emperors were of the kind depicted by the Abbé Raynal: frugal, modest and wise, encouraging the rational pursuits of agriculture by example as well as precept. The privileged members of the ruling class of Mandarins were seldom completely disinterested servants of the public, were often corrupt, and occasionally rapacious.

On the other hand the Chinese civil service, though far from perfect either in organization or personnel, was nevertheless an impressive and formidable machine. By the eighteenth century it already had a tradition of some two thousand years behind it. It was informed by a rigorously maintained orthodoxy, an eclectic Confucianism which drew equally on the authoritarian principles of the School of Laws and on the Mencian teachings that the family was the basic model for society, that the material welfare of the people was a primary concern of government, and that effective performance was the only ground on which any government could properly demand the continuing allegiance of the governed. This orthodox Confucianism, systematized and



rigidified in the eleventh century by the great philosopher Chu Hsi 朱熹, was successfully imposed on the bureaucracy by the state examinations which controlled entrance into the ranks of the Mandarinate, and which could only be passed by candidates who had mastered the officially received doctrine and were at least outwardly conformist.

The size of the civil service was surprisingly small, especially in view of the vast extent of the empire it administered and the wide variety of its functions. Under the Sung, in the middle of the eleventh century, the total number of serving officials was probably under 13,000. For the heyday of the Ming, in Galeote Pereira's time for example, a contemporary source puts the establishment at 24,683 officials: of whom 1,416 staffed the ministries at the northern capital, Peking; another 558 those of the southern capital, Nanking; while the rest, amounting to 22,709, served in various capacities in the provinces, prefectures and districts into which the Empire was administratively divided.<sup>6</sup> These figures should not be taken to imply that any distinction was made between the civil servants who worked in the capital and those whose posts were in the provinces. There were never two services. On the contrary, every civil service career included both provincial and capital postings, and usually several of each. From early times the service was hierarchically ordered into ranks. During the T'ang dynasty (618 to 907) there were nine of these, each including two or four subdivisions. Later the nine ranks were restricted to an upper and lower division only, making effectively 18 grades in all. Rank always attached to the man, and an official, holding at a particular stage in his career a certain rank, was liable to be assigned to any post whose established ranking was the equivalent of his own.

Entry into the civil service in traditional China was, in the fullest sense, entry into the ruling class; for the 25,000 or so officials who staffed the administrative machine were the whole government of the Empire. The titular head was the Emperor, who in theory announced his decisions to the highest officers of state at imperial audiences. In practice the Emperor's role was normally restricted to the selection of his chief ministers from among the upper bureaucrats. These ministers, forming a collegium of from two or three to perhaps as many as ten persons (though usually swayed by only one or two powerful personalities) were, as long as they enjoyed the sustaining support of the monarch, the real architects of policy and controllers of the governing apparatus.

There was therefore, in the Chinese system, no real distinction, either in terms of status or of function, between what we should call 'higher civil servants' and 'politicians'. The great officials, the heads of the Imperial Chancellery and the Imperial Secretariat, the Presidents of the various Ministries, both were, and behaved as if they were, politicians. They had their organized cliques of supporters; they promoted their friends and did what they could to embarrass their enemies; made political alliances with and against other civil service cliques; advocated and opposed particular policies. Even when the reigning Son of Heaven was an energetic and dominating personality, like Han Wu-ti 漢武帝 or T'ai-tung 太宗 of the T'ang, the

<sup>6</sup> For the Sung see E. A. Kracke, *Civil service in early Sung China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, no.13 (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p.55. The Ming figures are given in Wang Ch'i, *Hsü wen hsien t'ung k'ao*, ch.84, 46b.

position was not so much changed as simplified by the descent into the arena of the First Civil Servant of them all. In more usual times—and Chinese imperial families were not much more prolific of great men than the royal families of other countries—the Chinese system had the interesting and instructive result that a high official who had advocated and successfully secured the adoption of a political programme would normally find himself charged with the responsibility of putting it into operation—with the fate of his own career dependent on the outcome. To bolder spirits, to men like Wang An-shih 王安石 of the Sung for example, this was both a stimulus and a challenge: more often its effect was to discourage innovation and reinforce the compulsion of precedent.

The functions undertaken by governments in traditional China in some fields exceeded, in others fell short of, those normally performed by governments in the West. Chinese rulers, though always paternalist, have usually taken the view that well brought up children can for the most part be trusted to behave themselves without too much policing, and that parental intervention should be used sparingly and only when the circumstances genuinely warrant it. It is a mistake—perhaps a Western mistake—to think that because the Chinese people have for so long been governed by a bureaucracy, they have therefore been governed too much. “Governing a country,” to quote an ancient Chinese philosopher, “is like cooking a small fish: neither should be over-done.” Confucianism, though in Han times it came to terms with the Legalist doctrine of rewards and punishments, still laid major emphasis on education by example and on the power of moral exhortation and persuasion. China was never a police state in the sense that the Mauryan Empire in India as revealed to us in the Arthashastra, or the Tokugawa state in Japan with its ubiquitous *metsuke* 目付, were police states. Local self-government was encouraged at the village level; and the Empire was essentially a vast aggregation of villages. No centrally appointed officials were ever provided for any local government area smaller than a *hsien* 縣, a county with perhaps several tens of thousands of inhabitants. Civil disputes were as far as possible left to be arbitrated and settled by the families concerned or by the larger kinship group of the clan. Recourse to the courts was discouraged. Commercial cases were more often decided by private tribunals established by craft guilds and merchant associations than by the courts, which indeed often referred such cases, when brought before them, back to these extra-constitutional bodies for decision. For the common people it was both easier, cheaper and less dangerous to use a middleman or go-between to arbitrate a dispute than to invoke the majesty of the law. As a general rule the courts, presided over with awe-inspiring ceremony by the local Mandarins in their special capacity as judges, were reserved for major crimes against public order and for cases which had proved recalcitrant to less formal modes of treatment.

Among the tasks which Chinese governments, in common with those of other countries, were regularly called upon to discharge were internal security and external defence, and the assessment, collection and disbursement

of the public revenue. To ascertain the country's taxable capacity, since the Chinese economy was predominantly agricultural, it was necessary for the Board of Revenue (the Hu-pu 戶部) to carry out periodic cadastral surveys, mapping the cultivated land and classifying the fields according to their productivity. The main source of the government's income was the land tax which, until comparatively recent times, was paid in kind. Since this 'tribute grain' was delivered locally, the government was obliged to erect and maintain storage facilities, and make arrangements for its transport, often over considerable distances, to nourish the seat of government and the defence forces on the frontiers. The further existence of the poll tax and the corvée, which were taxes on people rather than on produce, meant that the Board of Revenue was also charged with the taking of censuses. The first Chinese census for which we have detailed figures was taken in AD 2. In its institution of decennial censuses China antedates the West by several centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Of considerably greater importance for the light it throws on the formation and development of the Chinese bureaucratic state is another governmental function, typical for China, though with little, if any, parallel in the practice of the West. I refer to the government planning and implementation of large-scale public works, especially in the fields of flood control and irrigation.

It is important that the nature, and also the social and political repercussions, of this characteristic Chinese institution should be made clear. The sinologist who has done most to explore and illuminate the determining role of large-scale public works in the history of Chinese society is K. A. Wittfogel, who, in a series of publications, extending from his magistral *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas*<sup>8</sup> to his recently published volume on *Oriental Despotism*,<sup>9</sup> has conclusively demonstrated the connection between bureaucratic political forms and what he calls the "hydraulic agricultural" economy.

Wittfogel distinguishes three kinds of agriculture: firstly *rainfall agriculture*, which calls for no particular explanation or description here as it is the type most familiar to Europeans and Americans; secondly *hydroagriculture*, which is farming based on small-scale irrigation, and which, though increasing the food supply, "does not involve the patterns of organization and social control that characterize hydraulic agriculture"; and thirdly *hydraulic agriculture*, which is agriculture involving the control of water on a large scale. The three main features of hydraulic agriculture are: that it both permits and demands very intensive cultivation; that it rests upon a specific type of division of labour (namely between "preparatory and protective" operations on the one hand and "productive" operations on the other) on a wide territorial basis; and that it involves social co-operation on a massive scale.

The terrain which saw the birth and early growth of Chinese civilization, if it did not absolutely determine, at least powerfully favoured, the rise of an hydraulic type of agriculture. The Wei River valley, the great bend and lower course of the Yellow River, the North China Plain, with 17 inches of annual rainfall, with summer floods and periodic river silting, provided a semi-arid environment whose productive potentialities could only be adequately

<sup>7</sup> See H. Bielenstein, "The census of China during the period AD 2 to 742," in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 20 (1947): 125–63. See also the present author's "Population statistics of Ming China," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 (1953): 289–326.

<sup>8</sup> Published in Leipzig in 1931.

<sup>9</sup> Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> The importance of hydraulic operations in China was even noted by Burton (in his reading of Ricci). He writes: "Admirable cost and charge is bestowed" in China on "conduct and navigable rivers... and so likewise about corrivations of waters to moisten and refresh barren grounds." *Anatomy of melancholy*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism*, p.27.

<sup>12</sup> My italics.

<sup>13</sup> Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism*, pp.17–18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

realized with the help of great public works for water-control, designed at once to give protection against the danger of flood and to provide the fields with irrigation water.<sup>10</sup>

Wittfogel's thesis here—and in the Chinese context it is unanswerable—is that "the resulting regime [is] decisively shaped by the leadership and social control required by hydraulic agriculture."<sup>11</sup> He writes:

Irrigation farming always requires more physical effort than rainfall farming performed under comparable conditions . . . If irrigation farming depends on the effective handling of a *major* supply of water,<sup>12</sup> the distinctive quality of water—its tendency to gather in bulk—becomes institutionally decisive. A large quantity of water can be channeled and kept within bounds only by the use of mass labor; and this mass labor must be coordinated, disciplined, and led. Thus a number of farmers eager to conquer arid lowlands and plains are forced to invoke the organizational devices which—on the basis of premachine technology—offer the one chance of success: they must work in cooperation with their fellows and subordinate themselves to a directing authority.<sup>13</sup>

But must this directing authority necessarily take the form of a state disposing of a complex bureaucratic apparatus? A little consideration of what the planning and performance of large-scale public works entails is enough to give the answer.

Most writers who mention the cooperative aspect of hydraulic agriculture think in the main of digging, dredging, and damming; and the organizational tasks involved in these labors [are] certainly considerable. But the planners of a major hydraulic enterprise are confronted with problems of a much more complex kind. How many persons are needed? And where can such persons be found? ●n the basis of previously made registers, the planners must determine the quota and criteria of selection. Notification follows selection, and mobilization notification. The assembled groups frequently proceed in quasimilitary columns. Having reached their destination, the . . . privates of the hydraulic army must be distributed in proper numbers and according to whatever division of operations (spading, carrying of mud, etc.) is customary. If raw materials such as straw, faggots, lumber, or stone have to be procured, auxiliary operations are organized: and if the work teams—in toto or in part—must be provided with food and drink, still other ways of appropriation, transport, and distribution have to be developed. Even in its simplest form, agrohydraulic operations necessitate substantial integrative action. In their more elaborate variations, they involve extensive and complex organizational planning.<sup>14</sup>

Without a highly trained civil service these tasks could neither be planned nor carried out.

The existence of hydraulic public works, themselves required by the geographical setting of early Chinese civilization, was then the main factor determining the appearance and growth of the Mandarinate. The particular form which this finely tempered instrument finally took must be accredited both to historical circumstances, such as the suppression in the third century

BC of the feudal aristocracy and its replacement by a gentry class whose members eventually formed the social reservoir from which the bureaucracy was drawn; and to the inventive genius of the Chinese, illustrated in the ingenious institutional devices by which their officials were selected, trained and controlled.

With the experience acquired in mobilizing and organizing vast labour forces for hydraulic public works it was possible for Chinese governments to extend the range of their enterprises into other fields with only a peripheral relation, or no relation at all, to water control. Such were, for example, defence structures like the Great Wall, and navigation canals like the 800-mile long Yün-ho 運河, connecting the political centres of the North with the fertile rice-producing provinces of the lower Yangtse. This canal, on which a million workers at a time are said to have been employed, if superimposed on a map of Europe, would reach from Hamburg to Rome; in American terms it would link New Orleans with Chicago; in Australian, Darwin with Alice Springs. Other enterprises included the construction and embellishment of a number of capital cities: magnificent and spacious examples of town-planning whose influence is traceable in many lesser cities all over China and in foreign capitals such as Nara and Heian in Japan. The establishment and maintenance of a network of imperial highways, and of a posting system with its necessary horses, relay stations and rest houses, are further examples.

Large-scale works for irrigation, flood control and transportation already represented a massive intervention by government in the economic life of the community; and, the precedent once set, it is not surprising that the Chinese civil service found itself to an ever increasing extent involved in economic activities which in the West, at least until very recently, have commonly been regarded as falling within the proper province of private enterprise. The so-called 'ever-normal granaries', designed both to facilitate the control of agricultural prices and provide emergency stocks for the relief of local famines; government monopolies such as those controlling the production and sale of salt, iron, and tea; government operated factories, especially for the manufacture of military supplies; government printing and publishing, as of the official almanacs which told the farmer the proper dates for beginning and ending the various operations of the agricultural year, and of simply-written illustrated handbooks on rice-cultivation, sericulture, spinning and weaving: these were but some of the tasks which tradition and the received Confucian orthodoxy prescribed as the rightful concern of the bureaucracy.

The personal quality of the civil service was necessarily a matter of the first importance to the Empire, and successive dynasties were unremitting in their efforts to secure and maintain a high standard in their administrative personnel. At least as early as the Han, officials serving in the provinces were required to recommend likely candidates for the public service, and these were then given an oral examination at the capital to test their suitability for office. From such beginnings grew up the system of open competitive state examinations as we find it, already well developed, under the T'ang in the seventh century.

<sup>15</sup> See Wolfram Eberhard, *Das Toba-Reich Nordchinas: ein soziologische Untersuchung* (Leiden, 1949), pp.138–40.

Two strongly opposed views have been canvassed about the effect of the examination system on the character of the Chinese civil service. Both state extreme positions, and neither can be fully justified. One sees the examination system as throwing wide the doors of the civil service to merit—wherever it might be found. The other, in full reaction against this, denies any vestige of democracy to the Chinese system: and claims that in practice it was virtually impossible for other than members of well-established gentry families to enter the service. A classical education was a necessary condition of examination success, and only wealthy families could provide a classical education for their children. Although state schools existed in most periods of Chinese history, they catered to only a very small fraction of the population. Wolfram Eberhard in his *Toba-Reich Nordchinas* instances the Wei dynasty law of 466 which called for the establishment of a school in every district (*chün* 郡) of the empire. The schools in large districts were to accommodate up to 100

pupils, in medium districts up to 60, in small districts 40. At this time Ch'ang-shan *chün* 常山郡, in Hopei, which would rank as a large district, had a population of 56,890 families. Less than one family in 500, therefore, would have been able to send a child to the district school; and as if this in itself were not enough to rule out poor families, the law actually laid it down that pupils should, wherever possible, be taken from *kao men* 高門, i.e. wealthy upper-class families. Private tutors, who played by far the most important role in gentry education, were usually themselves of good family, and seldom took pupils whose family connections were inferior to their own. Eberhard, in the study already referred to, also points out that of the 135 *po-shih* 博士 ('scholars of wide learning') mentioned by name in the *Wei History* 魏書 about whose family relationships something is known, 107 (or 80 per cent) belonged to 'Great Families' of the upper gentry, and the rest, with one exception (and he was a Professor of Geomancy) to other well-to-do gentry families.<sup>15</sup>

While these figures are correct, their relevance to other and later periods of Chinese history is open to doubt. The Toba Wei 拓跋魏 was a barbarian dynasty which ruled (387–557) during the Age of Division, before the reunification of the Empire under the Sui and T'ang, and before the effective establishment of the examination system. Though the gentry class continued to provide the overwhelming majority of civil service examination candidates, it was both a numerous class and an expanding one. Information on social mobility in China is difficult to obtain and even more difficult to evaluate; but the gentry was never a completely closed group. There was always a seepage of families into and out of it. The gradual integration of the southern provinces into the Chinese culture

### Figure 1

Cover of the Record of the Chiang-nan 江南 Provincial Examinations held at Nanking in the 17th year of the Ch'ien-lung 乾隆 reign (1753)



complex immediately before and during the T'ang significantly enlarged the ranks of the gentry. Moreover the higher reaches of the bureaucracy, which at first were almost the private preserve of the great upper gentry families, were increasingly invaded by 'new men' drawn from the middle and lower layers of the gentry class. It is clear, for example, during the Northern Sung, when printing came into general use, making education easier and less expensive, that the social reservoir from which the bureaucracy was recruited underwent considerable growth. This process, interrupted under the alien rule of the Mongol Yüan 元, went forward once more, and at an accelerated rate, in the Ming period, and again in the Ch'ing 清. The Chinese Mandarinate, therefore, although it had a strongly marked class character, was never an hereditary Corporation. Its techniques of selection, posting and promotion were indeed incompatible with the hereditary principle, as was shown by the failure of Japanese attempts, in the Taika 大化 Reforms of the seventh century, to introduce a Chinese-style bureaucratic administration while simultaneously retaining within it privileged status for a class of hereditary aristocrats.

The social role of the examination system in traditional China was extremely complex. Its first and most obvious function was to ensure a supply of highly-trained candidates for the public service. Through the establishment of provincial quotas for the *chin-shih* 進士 or doctoral degree it was also used to secure an acceptable regional balance in the civil service establishment, since it was held undesirable that any province should be either grossly over- or under-represented in the governing apparatus. That this danger existed was due to the fact that certain provinces, like Kiangsu and Chekiang in the south-east, had for hundreds of years been centres of learning, had a deeply-rooted scholastic tradition, and were much better provided with libraries, literary academies and private teachers than, for example, the provinces of the west and south-west. These regional advantages were inevitably reflected in the examination results, as Etienne Zi's analysis of the local provenance of the scholars winning the first three places in the successive doctoral examinations of the Ch'ing period brings out.<sup>16</sup> Out of a total of 321 first, second and third places, scholars from Kiangsu gained 116, or over a third of the whole, and scholars from Chekiang 74: while the western provinces of Shansi, Shensi, Szechwan, Kweichow, Kwangsi and Yünnan could only muster 13 successes between them. The adoption of provincial quotas in the examinations offered a simple way of reducing the effect of these regional differences.



**Figure 2**

*The approach to what remains of the renowned Chiang-nan examination compound in Nanking (a rare historical survivor) in the Ch'in-huai bo 秦淮河 district of the city*

<sup>16</sup> Etienne Zi, *Pratique des examens littéraires en Chine*, Variétés Sinologiques, no.5 (Shanghai, 1894), Appendix 2.

Another and extremely persistent type of regionalism which, as it affected postings and promotions within the service rather than entrance to it, was less easy to control, arose from the tendency of high officials to favour the careers of members of their own kinship group or of persons who, though not related to them, were fellow provincials and came from their native district. For example, out of the 350 highest ranking officials in 1893, the province of Hunan, with considerably less than the provincial average of examination successes, accounted for 58, almost double the total of any other province. This is a striking testimony to the influence of the Hunanese Tseng 曾 family, and in particular to the prestige of the great statesman Tseng Kuo-fan 曾國藩. It may be added, as a notable example of continuity in Chinese political practice, that at the present moment 7 out of the 17 members of the

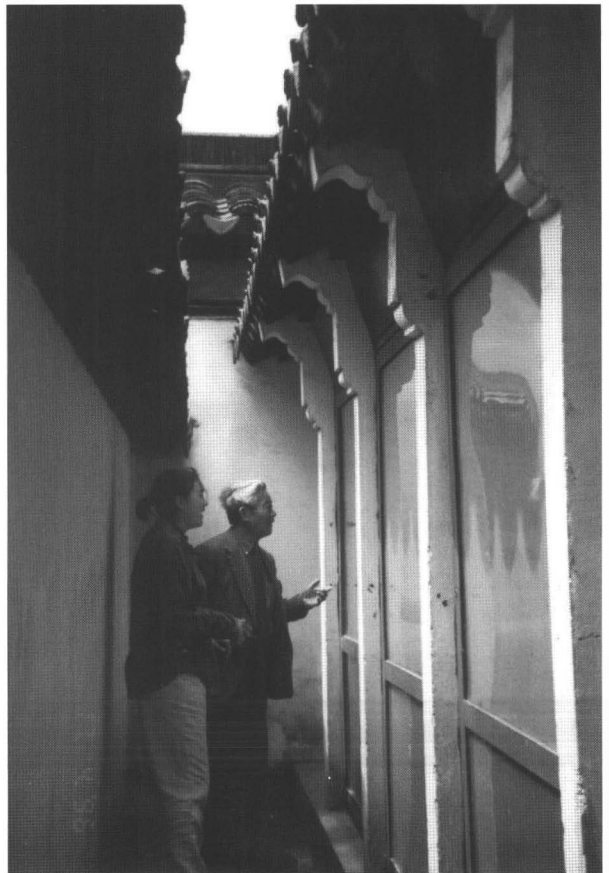
**Figure 3**

● *One of the inner courtyards of the Nanking examination compound, as preserved today, giving access to rows of cell-corridors—a small part of what was originally a vast and labyrinthine establishment*



**Figure 4**

*Visitors in one of the corridors of lock-up examination cells, entertained by models of candidates hard at work wearing costumes in styles spanning many centuries and displaying a variety of emotions associated with their ordeal*





Communist Party Political Bureau, and 27 out of the 97 members of the Central Committee, are natives of Hunan. This province, with about seven and a half per cent of the population, has almost four times its proportionate share in the supreme directing organs of the Party and the People's Republic: a situation which is not unconnected with the fact that the Head of the State, Mao Tse-tung 毛澤東, is himself a Hunanese.<sup>17</sup>

In traditional China the examination system, apart from its main task of selecting from the educated gentry an élite of scholar-officials, also functioned as an efficient instrument of social control over the gentry class itself. Since status, power and prebend were the prizes of examination success, the social goals of the gentry group were inevitably set by the examination system; while the classical Confucianist curriculum which the candidates had to prepare just as certainly determined the content of gentry education. Preoccupation with successive examinations to enter the bureaucracy, and then with the further written tests on which promotion within the service largely depended, effectively checked the expression of non-conformist ideas. Through the examination system the conservative acceptance of an orthodox ideology was institutionalized; and the *literati*, so often a potential source of danger to the established order, became instead its prop, and a principal support of 'things as they were'. This happy result was not, of course, achieved without price paid: the price being the discouragement of original thinking. In its favour it can be said that the ideal inculcated by the official Confucianism of the Empire, that of the 'moral man', was no mean one.

The examination life of the typical gentry member began in earliest childhood with the study of the Classics in Chu Hsi's commentaries, and of the Histories. A variegated and pedestrian literature of handbooks, abridgements, model examination essays, books of classified quotations, rhyming dictionaries and the like, catered to the requirements of the student. The examinations themselves were taken at three levels. The first tier, held in the district cities and presided over by the local Magistrate, did little more than qualify the successful candidates, known as *hsiu-ts'ai* 秀才, to compete in the examinations of the next level. These were held in the capital cities of the various provinces, and were conducted by specially appointed Provincial Examiners. Those who passed them were awarded the title of *chü-jen* 舉人, and were already eligible for appointment to the lower ranks of the civil service. More commonly the *chü-jen* proceeded directly to the third round of the examinations, which were held every third year at the imperial capital.

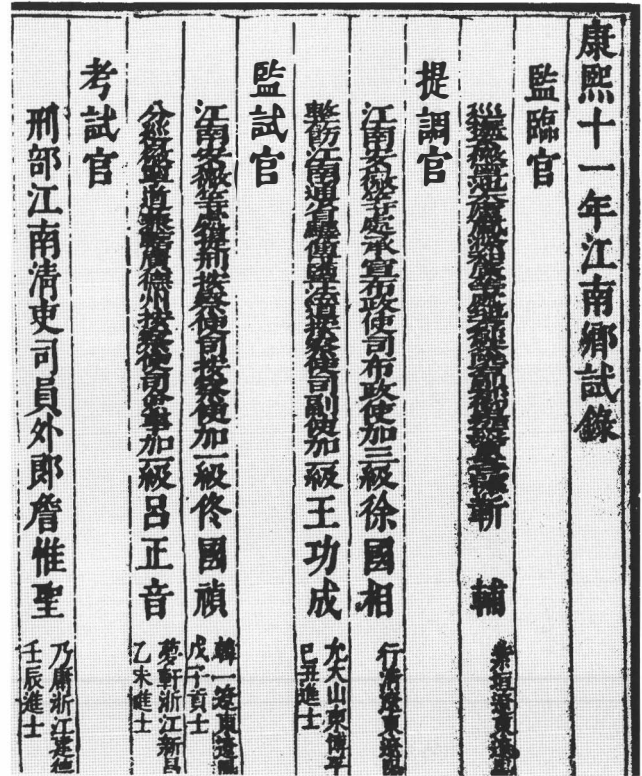


Figure 5

First page of the Record of the Provincial Examination held in Nanking in the 11th year of K'ang-hsi (1673), giving the credentials of the supervising officials

<sup>17</sup> See Franklin W. Houn, "The Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: a study of an elite," in *American Political Science Review* 51 (1957): 392-404. I owe this reference to the kindness of my colleague, Mr S. Encel.

<sup>18</sup> *The scholars (Ju-lin wai-shih)*, by Wu Ching-tzu (1701–54), translated by Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-i (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1957). [—Ed.]

Success in this metropolitan examination was crowned with the award of the coveted *chin-shih* or doctoral degree. In most settled dynastic periods the possession of a *chin-shih* degree was almost indispensable to anyone wishing to embark on an official career.

Every precaution was taken to ensure that the examinations were fairly conducted. The questions were set and marked by officials of the Board of Rites (the Li-pu 禮部), a different ministry from the one that supervised the civil service and was responsible for appointments to it. At the end of the tenth century the Sung revived and extended the practice, briefly experimented with under the T'ang, of ensuring the anonymity of candidates by substituting a number for the candidate's name on the examination paper. In order to exclude the possibility of a candidate being identified from his calligraphy, all papers were recopied in the Bureau of Copyists before being submitted to the examiners. Every examination paper was read independently by two examiners and a third examiner received their sealed reports, verified them, and if necessary reconciled their marks. That in spite of these measures abuses sometimes occurred is clear, both from the accounts in satirical novels like Wu Ching-tzu's 吳敬梓 *Ju-lin wai-shih* 儒林外史 (recently translated into English under the title of *The Scholars*<sup>18</sup>) and from the scandals, court cases and severe punishments that followed when flagrant breaches of the regulations were discovered. These last, however, at least underline the honesty of purpose that informed the administration, and it is perhaps also relevant that Wu Ching-tzu, himself an able scholar, had been embittered by repeated failure to pass the examinations he ridiculed.

Competition in the examinations was severe. The number of those who passed was seldom as high as ten per cent—and often a much lower fraction—of those who sat. There was no limit of age, and no restriction on the number of times a candidate could present himself for the same examination. The number of doctoral degrees awarded bore, of course, some relation to the needs of the service; though many holders of the *chin-shih* degree, either from their own volition or from some other cause, failed to enter upon a civil service career. During the first century of the Northern Sung 18,125 *chin-shih* degrees were given at an annual rate of 181. During the Ming the annual rate rose gradually from about 50 to 140. In the Ch'ing the annual average for the whole dynastic period was 118.

There were, as well as the road which led by way of the examinations, other ways of entry into the bureaucracy. The two most important of these 'irregular' routes were: first, by transfer, either from the military establishment or from the subordinate and 'unclassified' clerical services; and second, through the so-called *yin* 蔭 privilege. This, which already existed under the T'ang, empowered certain categories of high officials to nominate for entrance into the civil service one or more of their sons, and, on occasion, even dependants not related by blood. Though entrants under the *yin* privilege were not particularly numerous, and did not share the prestige of their degree-holding colleagues, the practice was nevertheless contrary to the

### Figure 6

*Trying out' a sparsely-furnished cell. The desk-top when lowered to seat-level served as a sleeping platform during the period of incarceration*



spirit of the merit system and probably harmful to the morale of the service as a whole. Recruitment by transfer on the other hand had this to be said of it, that it gave men who had neither a technical education in the classics nor the advantages of wealth and family influence a chance of entering the service which they otherwise would not have had. In the main, however, it was the officials who had won entrance through the hard test of the open competitive examinations who formed the mainstay, and set the tone, of the Chinese civil service.

The importance and practical advantages of the Chinese examination system were quickly recognized by Western missionaries and government servants with China experience; and a strong case can be made out for the view that, when a similar system was introduced in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the various countries of the West, the practice of Imperial China was both the model and inspiration of the change.

Among the advocates of the adoption by Britain of the Chinese examination system, the most persistent and influential was certainly Thomas Taylor Meadows, who went to China as an Interpreter in Her Majesty's Consulate in Canton in 1842, and remained in that country, finally with the rank of Consul, until 1854. In 1847 he published his *Desultory Notes on the Government and People of China*, "one of the main objects of which," he later wrote, "was to urge the institution of Public Service Competitive Examinations for all British subjects, with a view to the Improvement of the British Executive and the Union of the British Empire."<sup>19</sup> It was his strong conviction that "England will certainly lose every colony she possesses unless she adopts some system of impartial elevation of colonists to the posts and honours at the disposal of the crown,"<sup>20</sup> In his later and better known work, *The Chinese and Their Rebellions*, a centenary reprint of which was issued in 1956, he returned to the charge, suggesting the setting up of a "well-digested system of local and metropolitan examinations, for all British subjects, like that which has existed in China for the last thousand years, but in more useful matters, and followed by special metropolitan examinations to be passed before admission to the various subdivisions of the three branches of the executive."

Already in Meadows's day the examination principle was gradually gaining recognition in the machinery established by the Honourable East India Company for the recruitment of its servants in the Orient. The East India College at Haileybury, giving Indian civil service probationers a two-year course in general subjects and Oriental Studies, had been set up in 1806, though examinations were not introduced at the College until some seven or eight years later. In 1833 an Act of Parliament provided that in future four candidates were to be nominated for each vacancy at Haileybury and were then to compete in "an examination in such branches of knowledge and by such examiners as the Board (of Control) of the Company shall direct."<sup>21</sup> Two years later Robert Ingles, in an article for the *Chinese Repository* on China's examination system, prophetically wrote:

<sup>19</sup> T. T. Meadows, *The Chinese and their rebellions* (London, 1856), Preface, p.xxii.

<sup>20</sup> T. T. Meadows, *Desultory Notes* (London, 1847), p.246. See also his plan for an "examination system" for the British Empire, printed on pp.xxii–xlvi of *The Chinese and their rebellions*.

<sup>21</sup> Sect.105 of the Charter Act of 1833, Quoted in H. Finer, *The British Civil Service* (London, 1937), p.38.

<sup>22</sup> *The Chinese Repository*, July 1835, pp.127–8.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Têng Ssu-yü, "Chinese influence on the Western examination System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 (1942–3): 267–312, espec. p.304. Prof. Teng's article, whose helpfulness I gratefully acknowledge, is the most important contribution that has yet been made to the investigation of this question.

The British East India Company ... have adopted the [examination] principle as far as election to the civil service ... . The full development in India of this Chinese invention is destined one day, perhaps, like those of gunpowder and printing, to work another great change in the states-system even of Europe.<sup>22</sup>

In the following year the Trevelyan Committee on Indian Education recommended that "public examinations should be annually held at each of the great towns in the Bengal and Agra Presidencies" and that "these examinations should be open to all comers." Twenty years later the civil service examination was officially introduced for the Indian civil service. Meanwhile the 1853 Report of the Trevelyan-Northcote Committee on the organization and recruitment of the British civil service paved the way for the gradual extension of the examination system to all branches of the Home Service.

When we look at the discussions and debates which, in England, accompanied the realization of these reforms, we cannot help but be impressed by the way in which advocates and opponents alike of the new system constantly referred to the Chinese model in support of their arguments. Two examples must suffice: Lord Mounteagle held that as China was not an "enlightened country" her system was necessarily a bad one; Lord Granville, taking the opposite side, said that "one of the principal reasons why a small Tatar dynasty has governed the immense empire of China for upwards of two hundred years has been that they had got the talent of the whole Chinese population by opening every official situation to competition."<sup>23</sup>

Our conclusion must be that Dr Sun Yat-sen was guilty of only a permissible degree of exaggeration when he wrote, in his *Chien kuo fang lüeh* 建國方略, or *Plan for the Reconstruction of the Country*, the following passage—with which I will end:

At present, the civil service examinations in the (western) nations are copied largely from England. But when we trace the history further, we find that the civil service of England was copied from China. We have very good reason to believe that the Chinese examination system was the earliest and the most elaborate system in the world.