

Exam Questions as a Mirror of Chinese Values

The subjects and specific learning tested on the Chinese civil service exams give us insight into the behavior and attitudes expected of the literate, ruling classes of what was perhaps the best-educated preindustrial civilization. Sample questions from these exams can tell us a good deal about what sorts of knowledge were considered important and what kinds of skills were necessary for those who aspired to successful careers in the most prestigious and potentially the most lucrative field open to Chinese youths: administrative service in the imperial bureaucracy. The very fact that such a tiny portion of the Chinese male population could take the exams and very few of those successfully pass them says a lot about gender roles and elitism in Chinese society. In addition, the often decisive role of a student's calligraphy—the skill with which he was able to brush the Chinese characters—reflects the emphasis the Chinese elite placed on a refined sense of aesthetics.

Question 1: Provide the missing phrases and elaborate on the meaning of the following:

The Duke of She observed to Confucius: "Among us there was an upright man called Kung who was so upright that when his father appropriated a sheep, he bore witness against him." Confucius said . . .

[The missing phrases are, "The upright men among us are not like that. A father will screen his son and a son his father . . . yet uprightness is to be found in that."]

Question 2: Write an eight-legged essay [one consisting of eight sections] on the following:

Scrupulous in his own conduct and lenient only in his dealings with the people.

Question 3: First unscramble the following characters and then comment on the significance of this quotation from one of the classic texts:

Beginning, good, mutually, nature, basically, practice, far, near, men's

[The correct answer is, "Men's beginning nature is basically good. Nature mutually near. Practice mutually far."]

QUESTIONS Looking at the content of these questions, what can we learn about Chinese society and attitudes? For example, where do the Chinese look for models to orient their social behavior? What kinds of knowledge are important to the Chinese? Do they stress specialist skills or the sort of learning that we associate with a broad liberal arts education?

