During the last thousand years of imperial history, scholar-officials (shidafu) were the most prominent elite group. Members of this class varied in their geographic and family backgrounds as well as political and intellectual inclinations. What they shared was participation in the civil service examinations. Instituted at the end of the sixth century as a way to counteract the influences of the great families and military nobility, the examination system was expanded and institutionalized in subsequent dynasties as the major method of recruiting men for government service. Successful candidates earned degrees and eligibility for office-holding, and they and their families gained social prestige, tax exemptions, and gentry status in local society. The civil service examinations continued to attract the most ambitious and intelligent men from well-off families until the system was abolished in 1905.

The specific policies and procedures of the examinations were changed many times, but much also stayed the same: preparation took many years;
candidates had to be qualified in their native regions to be able to take the exams in the capital; and the jinsbi (Advanced Scholar) degree enjoyed the most esteem due to its requirement that candidates demonstrate proficiency in the classics and literary and analytical abilities.

Over time, the examinations became increasingly competitive, especially at the local and provincial levels. By the twelfth and thirteen centuries, hundreds of thousands of students were contesting for a few hundred spots. While some lucky candidates passed on their first try—a tiny number in their late teens—most took the examinations multiple times well into their thirties or even beyond. For these repeat takers, examination participation became a career in itself.

The narrative below, by Ai Nanying, provides us with the perspective of a seasoned candidate. Ai was an accomplished writer and literary critic in the late Ming, but he failed to earn the jinsbi degree despite multiple attempts, giving him a great deal to say about the hardships of examination preparation. His anxieties and frustrations were condensed into one sentence that he repeated several times: “Alas! In terms of experiencing the miseries of examination preparation, no one has suffered more than I have.” It is interesting to note that Ai was not at all against the examinations as an institution and encouraged his son to take the exams. Moreover, he thought that his unsuccessful examination essays might be of interest to future candidates. His preface to that collection tells his story in a way that helps us understand a key element in the life experience of literati in late imperial China.

Preface to A Collection of Examination Essays

I passed the county-level exam for youths at seventeen, when Mr. Li Yangbai was the magistrate, and enrolled in the county school at Dongxiang [Jiangxi] the next spring, which was the gengzi year of the Wanli reign period [1600]. By the yiwei year of the Wanli reign period [1619], I had been a student for twenty years, had taken the provincial examinations seven times, and for fourteen years had enjoyed a stipend provided by the county government. I had the good fortune of being selected as an examination candidate by two county magistrates, three prefects, and six education commissioners. Over the years, I have accumulated several volumes of examination essays. After discarding the inadequate ones, I assembled and published those that were worth preserving. I have done this not only because I worried that, if they
were lost, I would have nothing for future reference, but also because these essays were the product of hard work, misery, terror, and physical duress. Besides, they remind me to be grateful to those who understood me. I hereby write this preface to express these thoughts.

Alas! In terms of experiencing the miseries of examination preparation, no one has suffered more than I have. Old policies stipulated that students were tested at the prefectural and county schools each season, called the “Seasonal Exams.” When the censors arrived, they would inspect one-tenth of the exams, called “Observing the Common Practice.” Because neither procedure impacted my status as a student and because I was habitually lazy, I never participated in either exam. The education commissioner’s exam, however, was crucial to maintaining my candidacy status. Its annual licensing exam affected a student’s promotion or demotion. Unless one was ill or in mourning, no one would miss it. The qualifying examination took place every three years; through it, the county recommended its talents to the prefecture, the prefecture to the education commissioner, and the commissioner to the Provincial Examinations. Those who did not make it might still be recommended to participate in two forms of special exams. There is no other path for advancement. If Confucius and Mencius lived in my time, they would not have had any other way to distinguish themselves. All the essays included in this collection were written for these two types of exams.

On the day of the examination, the drum at the government office would be struck three times. Even if it was freezing, all the students would stand outside the door. The education commissioner would sit in the hall wearing red robes. Surrounded by lit candles and stoves, he would be warm and comfortable. The students would have to loosen their clothes and bare their feet, holding their brushes and inkstone in their left hand and socks in their right. The prefectural and county officials would call their names, following which the students would line up in the hallway and proceed to stand in front of the commissioner. Each candidate would be searched by two soldiers, who would go thoroughly from the student’s hair to his feet. With our bodies almost naked, the process would take a long time. Even the strongest would shiver from the bitter cold, with their lower bodies numb. If the weather was extremely hot, the education commissioner would sit in a cool place while sipping tea and fanning himself. The students would gather in groups, standing in the dust. The law stipulated that they could not use fans. They also wore heavy cotton robes. By the time they were allowed to sit down,
several hundred people would be gathered together, enduring the steaming hot weather and body odor. All sweated profusely but were not permitted to have drinks of water. Even though tea service was provided, no one dared to ask for it, because if one stopped for water, his exam would be marked with a red stamp, arousing suspicions of cheating. Even if his writing was good, it would be downgraded a level. This was how much examination candidates suffered from the weather.

When we were seated, the questions were read out aloud by a teacher to accommodate the nearsighted. They were also written out on a board for a clerk to hold and show around the hall. This was for the benefit of those who were hard of hearing. Now, questions are no longer read aloud, only written out for students of each school. When several schools were tested in the same location on the same day, several clerks would hold different boards. Since I was nearsighted and couldn’t see things even a few feet away, I had to ask the students sitting next to me what the questions were, keeping my voice down. All this time, the commissioner watched from a terrace, with four soldiers proctoring the entire examination hall. Students did not dare to look up or around, stretch, or talk to their neighbors. If anyone did, his writing would be stamped with a red mark as evidence of violations. Even if his essay was excellent, it would be downgraded one level. For this reason, everyone huddled up at their desks, even hesitating to go to the toilet. This was how much our bodies are constrained during the examinations.

The desks and chairs in the examination hall were procured by the clerks, who misappropriated the majority of the funds for such equipment. Since everything was prepared in a rush, the desks and chairs were often too small to allow even a stretch of the leg. Moreover, the material was thin and the gaps too wide. If one sat down too heavily, one could fall over. There were often a dozen or so students in the same section. The examiner, worrying that they might switch places, linked all their chairs with bamboo sticks. Subsequently, if one of the students moved even slightly, everyone else would feel it. As a result, one could not have a peaceful moment the whole day, causing their writing to be crooked. Furthermore, a few commissioners from Fujian forbade candidates from bringing in any personal items, not even inkstones, which were provided by the clerks. The clerks only prepared blue stones that were hard and slippery and did not absorb ink easily. A minor thing like dealing with the stone was already exhausting. If unfortunately you happened to sit under a leaking roof or near the eaves when it was pouring outside, you had
to cover your exams with your clothes and finish as soon as possible. This was how much examination candidates suffered from the clerks’ irresponsible behavior.

When it came to grading, what usually happened was that the one commissioner read thousands of students’ papers, which varied in terms of style and substance. So did the commissioner’s taste and preferences. He was expected to select the best talents, which terrified even the most knowledgeable students, but I have enjoyed more than my share of good luck. When the assessment process was over, the commissioner again appeared in the hall in his red official robe. Prefectural and county officials waited outside the door while the instructors stood below the stairs. The students, keeping their heads low, walked to the commissioner’s desk, where they knelt and listened to his instructions quietly. Based on their grades, they would leave through the door located on the west corner of the corridor. Their sorry state at the time was beyond their ability to describe even to their wives and children. This was the extent to which they were constrained by the rules of composition and rhetoric. Alas! In terms of experiencing the miseries of examination preparation, no one has suffered more than I have.

At the level of the provincial examination, students endured the same body searches, anticheating measures, disheveled appearance, exposure day and night, and hot weather and dust as they did at the annual and qualifying examinations. The only exception was that candidates enjoyed slightly more freedom when it came to food and lodging. More than one person could serve as grader. Because they served as graders in their spare time from drafting documents and adjudicating cases, they were not as attentive as the commissioner, whose main duty was evaluating essays. I took and failed the provincial examination seven times, during which I changed my approach to try to please the graders and made use of every bit of my talent and intelligence. At first, I wrote in the style of Qin and Han philosophers and historians, which was considered by the examiners as uncultivated. Later I changed to the styles of the esteemed scholars Wang Ao [1450–1524] and Tang Shunzhi [1507–1560] of the Chenghua [1465–1487] and Hongzhi [1488–1505] reign periods, but that was criticized as outdated. Recently, I based my essays on the Gongyang and Guliang commentaries on The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing), and the works of Han Yu [768–824], Ouyang Xiu [1007–1072], Su Shi [1037–1101], and Zeng Gong [1019–1083], but the examiners were not impressed.
Following each examination, the successful candidates, even though their writing was empty, inferior, unsophisticated, or shallow, would be treated as equals with the prefectural and county officials. Yet I have studied for over twenty years and thoroughly examined the works of Qian Fu [1461–1504], Wang Ao, and the great scholars of the Hongzhi, Zhengde [1506–1521], Jiajing [1522–1566], and Longqing [1567–1572] reign periods. I have studied everything from the Six Classics, the ancient philosophers and histories, and the works of Zhou Dunyi [1017–1073], Cheng Hao [1032–1085] and Cheng Yi [1033–1101], Zhang Zai [1020–1077], and Zhu Xi [1130–1200], to the Hundred Schools, the Yin-Yang School and military treaties, calendars, geographical books, Buddhism, and Daoism. Yet, I do not get to be equals with those who wrote empty, inferior, unsophisticated, and shallow words. Every time I think of this, I want to abandon my examination pursuit and focus on writing books that explain the rise and fall of the past and present as a way to distinguish myself. Then I admit that I can’t live the life of an independent scholar. Alas! In terms of experiencing the miseries of examination preparation, no one has suffered more than I have.

Accomplished gentlemen of the past all drew lessons from the progress they made and the hard work they put in. Ancient sages, such as Yu the Great, heard helpful advice, accepted it with gratitude, then recounted their challenges and difficulties. Hence the saying, “When in comfort, one can remember past hardships; when stable, one can think about earlier difficulties.” I have not accomplished anything. My examination essays are unsophisticated and of low quality, so hardly worth keeping. But they were the result of hard work, misery, terror, and physical duress. In addition, the scholars that I have benefited from are all today’s men of fame and achievement. I have had the honor of becoming their disciple based on my participation in the examinations. There is a saying: “Someone who really knows you is worth more than someone who can do you favors.” If someone clothes me in silk, feeds me fine food, and entertains me with gardens and music, yet on reading my work doesn’t understand that it is based on the ideas of the sages and offers insight into morality and human nature from the past and present, then I would not exchange my current situation for the comfortable life that he could offer.

Besides, I have been stuck as an examination candidate for quite some time and have no way to pay back those who have appreciated me, especially the few who have passed away. Nor have I achieved anything to face my mentor.
when I die. I am publishing these essays because they were the result of hard work, misery, terror, and physical duress and reflect my gratitude for those who understood me. It is not my intention to criticize the problems with the examinations. Since the world judges people based on their successes and failures, I would not want to contaminate people's minds this way. Publishing this collection might appear a way of bragging about myself or exposing the examiners' strengths and weaknesses. Yet if I hide them, I would not be able to forget their names. My son, Tao'er, could read when he was five. I am going to group the essays and give them to him, telling him, “This is what a certain grader and magistrate dismissed.” This way, I'll be able to remember that name. Tao'er will read the essays, avoid making the same mistakes, and master the trick of following popular trends. This way, he won't be as obtuse as his father.


Further Reading


