

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY
MING EDUCATION SYSTEM

On a stormy night in 1487, a Korean ship carrying a distinguished Korean scholar lost sight of the Korean coastline and was shipwrecked off the Chinese coast. The survivors were immediately surrounded by a band of pirates who tried to figure out who were these shipwrecked people. None of the survivors could speak Chinese, but the Korean scholar had received an exquisite Confucian education and he could write Chinese. His pirate captors were poor and in rags, but they understood his written message and wrote in turn an answer to it. Elsewhere, being able to read and write was certainly not a trait expected of 15th century pirates.

So, how is it that in Ming China even the lowest strata of society were not totally illiterate? At the beginning of his reign, Emperor Hongwu had looked at scholars and examinations with the utmost suspicion. But in order to have an educated and effective civil service he had to put in place a basic education system providing elementary schooling even at the lowest level. By the end of his reign, public and private schools had been established in each one of the prefectures, sub-prefectures and counties, and Hongwu had issued a series of edicts exhorting even villages and urban wards to establish community schools. **And that's why the pirates could exchange written messages following the Korean shipwreck.**

Examinations were held on a very regular basis at the three levels of prefecture, province and the capital. The state financed county and prefectural schools for those who had already attained the first degree. This extended to more or less half a million people or, to be more precise, half a million men, because women were excluded from the education system. Competition was fierce because *numerus clausus* was the norm at all levels, and only 300 at a time could pass the highest level of the metropolitan exams and obtain the much coveted higher degree, the *jinshi*: only 24,000 attained it during the whole dynasty. The *jinshi* were the select few who passed the three levels of exams, and were then successful in the final imperial examinations. Certainly a few of the *jinshi*, once they had the coveted degree in their pocket, settled into a leisurely life of honours and privileges not so different from those of the 18th century English gentlemen that appear in Jane Austen's novels.

They spent their lives at banquets and gatherings with other cultivated gentlemen like themselves, where they painted, enjoyed nature and discussed cultural matters. But the great majority of the jinshi received public appointments and made a career in the civil service. They were the laohu ban, the tigers of the country. China was a very hierarchical society, but achieving the highest status **didn't depend** directly on wealth or birth: success in the examinations was the key. Examinations were open to all men, whatever their background because the state wanted the most talented to fill the ranks of its bureaucracy. Of course, the rich had better opportunities, and so had the sons of educated scholars, but social mobility existed.

Schools were very widespread and even a small community could join efforts to push its most brilliant youngster up the social ladder, in the hope that once at the top he would protect them. The social mobility ensured by these examinations was especially significant at the beginning of the dynasty, when 75% of the candidates came from families without any previous connection to the scholarly world, while those coming from scholarly families amounted to only 25%. Situation, which shows a high degree of social mobility and opens real opportunities for talent, will last for more than a century, and the promotional ladder will still be available to common people until the end of the 16th century. Another significant difference from previous dynasties was that now the successful candidates came mainly from the south. Three centuries of turmoil in the north, and its successive occupation by foreign peoples, had caused a continuous emigration of the literati families to the south, where they hoped to find better opportunities.

Furthermore, the maritime expansion of south-east China had brought important wealth to the coastal provinces. This is why the provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and even Jiangxi had the highest rates of jinshi in all China. It is worth remembering that all our European travellers will enter China from the southeast, where success in the examinations was a popular topic of conversation that undoubtedly aroused their interest. Those who failed the exams, on the other hand, were equally important because they provided teachers for the hundreds of thousands of communal schools. Some became private tutors or went into the cultural enterprises, like book printing, that thrived under the Ming. Those who passed the inferior examination levels but failed the jinshi exam, still retained certain privileges, like tax exemptions, and could accomplish minor or technical tasks in the local public offices. But they did so on a contractual basis, without enjoying a permanent position. And this is how the Ming was able to maintain a restricted officialdom even with high population growth. The proceedings of the examinations were extremely accurate: the candidates were completely isolated in individual cells where they ate and slept when the tests went on for some days.

To ensure the jury's impartiality, the examination sheets had a number on them rather than the candidate's name and their answers were recopied by clerks in a standard calligraphy. But with the exams being so highly competitive, cheating was unavoidable and cheat sheets despite being severely punished by the penal law, were not unusual. But the examinations also had their drawbacks. Given the power and prestige conferred by official status, it attracted the most talented of the country, to the detriment of other careers they might have pursued. Furthermore, the curriculum of the exams had been rigidly fixed by the Yongle emperor and required rigid adherence to the established orthodoxy of the neo-Confucian school.

What was tested was in fact their loyalty to the system, and innovation was banned. The system provided excellent bureaucrats for centuries, but proved a barrier to modernization in the long run. Japan, by way of comparison, never accepted the examination system and so the talents of its youngsters were channeled in more diverse ways. By the 19th century this will allow a much smoother incorporation of Japan into the modern world.