

# TESTING THE SCHOLARS

How do you choose who runs a dynasty?

Why do people seek power?

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Cyrus Tang Hall of



CHINA

## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Students will explore the classical Chinese civil servants exam system, compare it to their current exam systems, and construct their own ideas of what it means to be qualified for a role and how to prove qualification.

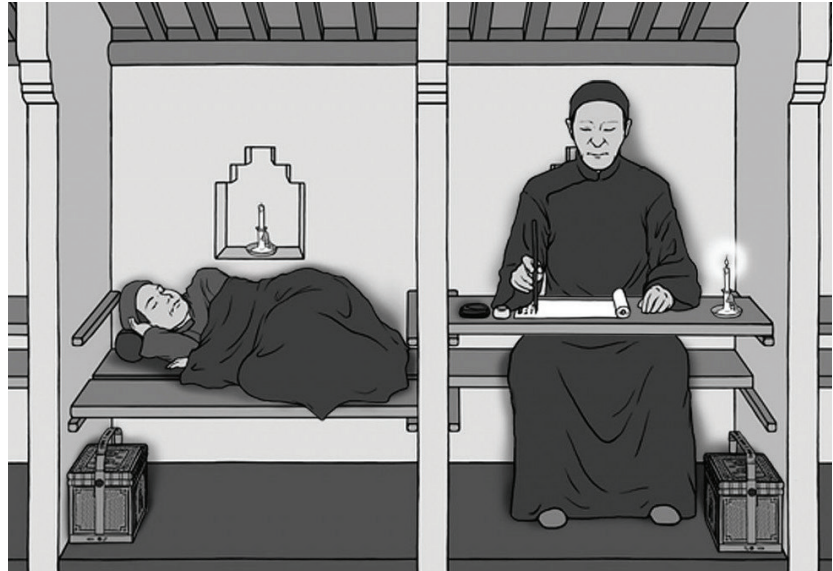
If you are planning to use this as part of a visit to The Field Museum, see the field trip guide on page 7.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Running an empire required a network of dedicated and well-educated officials. The men who governed the empire had to pass a grueling exam. For roughly 1,300 years, China's emperors used the civil service examination system to identify talented men for government service. Stationed throughout the empire, scholar-officials maintained order and reported back to the emperor on local events. This system was so effective, even foreign dynasties like the Manchus embraced it during the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644-1911).

Taking the exams was an arduous process. Candidates packed the supplies they would need for three days and two nights, including food, water, and writing materials. They worked on the exam all day, converted their desks to beds overnight, and were not permitted to leave for any reason during the process.

The exams were extremely competitive (Only 0.01% passed every level in AD 1850), and cheating was a concern. To prevent the use of books or other aids, scholars taking the civil service exam were frisked from head to



*Image: During the Qing Dynasty, students took the civil service examination in door-less cells. The only furniture was a set of boards that could be arranged as a desk and bench or a bed. Illustration by Sayaka Isowa for The Field Museum.*

toe, twice. Their supplies, carried in baskets like the ones in the drawing above, were searched. It's said that guards even checked inside dumplings. Yet some test-takers found ways to smuggle in help. The museum holds examples of silk cloth covered in writing, cheat sheets that could have been sewn into the linings of a robe or disguised as a handkerchief. The miniature text covering both sides of the cloth includes more than 20 sample essays and prompts for typical exam questions.

For many families, the examination system held the promise of social mobility. Students were judged on merit, not pedigree, and the brightest earned careers that brought respect and wealth. In theory, men (but not women) from all walks of life were eligible. In reality, though, many commoners couldn't afford the decades of studying and test-taking.

**Keywords:** 6-8, 9-12, object-based learning, maps, discussion, world history, geography, cultural empathy, social empathy

**Lens:** Civics, History

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## COMPELLING QUESTIONS

How do you choose who runs a government?  
What does it take to be qualified?  
How does the Civil Service Exam system compare to the systems we use today?  
Why do people seek power?  
Why then was achieving Mandarin status, or successfully becoming a government official, so desirable?

## OBJECTIVES

Students will create a method to define and measure qualifications of what it means to rule a country.  
Students will analyze the Chinese civil service exam system.  
Students will compare the classical Chinese system to modern day methods.

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## STANDARDS

### C3 Framework

**D2.Civ.6** Describe the roles of political, civil, and economic organizations in shaping people's lives.  
**D2.Civ.13** Analyze the purposes, implementation, and consequences of public policies in multiple settings.  
**D2.His.2** Classify series of historical events and developments as examples of change and/or continuity.

### Common Core

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### CPS Framework Alignment:

Grade 6, Unit 7: Rise of Asia

Grade 9, Unit 3: Defining Power

## APPROXIMATE TIME

2-3 class periods

## PREPARATION NOTES

Students will be working in groups

## OBJECTS OF FOCUS

Scholar's objects:

<http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306/>

## OTHER MATERIALS

Access to museum content in the exhibit or the online exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>

Graphic organizers

Clipboards (in exhibit)

## PROCEDURES

### › Engage

Ask students, "What qualities do you need to run a country?"

This can be an opening journal entry, or a small/large group discussion. As students share their ideas, create a public record of the qualities required to run a country.

### › Explore (Questions and Inquiry)

Introduce the topic of Chinese Scholar Officials. Like any big territory, the Emperor of China needed local officials to help run the empire. You can support students in connecting this information using questions like the following:

- What forms of government play that role today?
- Before elections, how were local leaders chosen?
- If they were chosen because they were rich and/or well-connected, does that seem fair?

Explain that Chinese emperors wanted a way to ensure that their officials were qualified. They didn't require them to be from the most important families or have a lot of wealth. Instead, they created an examination system to admit new officials.

Ask students to consider the following prompt.

If you were to make up a challenge to test people to see if they could run the country, what would it involve?

This doesn't necessarily have to be an exam. Encourage students to be creative.

Students can work together in groups to brainstorm and share their ideas using the graphic organizer.

During this time, students can generate a list of questions they have about the Chinese exam system.

During the next section, they will have an opportunity to explore those questions.

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## PROCEDURES (CONTINUED)

### › Explain (Apply Disciplinary Lens)

Working in groups, students will explore the content in the Cyrus Tang Hall of China. Content can be explored in one of two ways:

- Visiting the museum in person
- Using the online exhibition Link: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>

Groups will focus on one of the topics below, and then bring their information back to the whole group to discuss the most interesting and important things about the topic.

- Process of taking the exam
- Content of the exam
- Life of a scholar
- Cheating the system
- Any other questions they generated during the previous section

Students can take notes as their peers are presenting. Ask them to think about the following questions as their peers present.

- How does this relate to exams today?
- How does it compare to the challenge I designed in the beginning of the lesson?

Students will return to their group ideas of what/how candidates should prove their qualifications with the ideas generated in China. Have a discussion, first in their groups, and then whole group addressing the following questions:

- How does the classical Chinese system compare to the system you designed?
- What do you think of the classical Chinese system?
- Would you take the exam? Why or why not?
- Are there any changes you would make to the system you created?
- How does this compare to the exam systems we have today?

Then direct students to work in their group to form an argument to address the following questions.

How would you choose who runs a dynasty? Are exams the best way, then and/or now?

Students can use evidence from the Chinese system, as well as their own ideas for testing qualification.

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## PROCEDURES (CONTINUED)

### ► Elaborate (Gather and Evaluate Evidence)

After reaching initial conclusions about how to choose who runs a dynasty, ask, “Knowing what you know about the exam system, would you choose to take the exam and try to become an official?” Take a poll of the class, and then ask students to share why they would or would not take the exam.

Explain that we know a lot of people did continue to take the exams, even though at times only 0.01% passed. Some even continued to take the exam their entire lives, even if they failed repeatedly. Ask students to think about why so many people put themselves through this.

Direct students’ attention to the scholar’s status objects:

[http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306/g3-6\\_m1\\_b1](http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306/g3-6_m1_b1) and ask:

- What do these objects say about their owners?
- Share that these objects were special and only possessed by a few very privileged people.  
Can students name some things today that fall into that category?  
What are today’s desired possessions?

Have students return to the exhibit to explore the following questions:

- What was the life of a scholar like?
- What special privileges did they have?
- What were the alternatives to being a scholar? What was life like for civilians in rural districts?

Key places of focus include:

- The interactive Qing Ming Scroll: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/interactive/qingming-scroll>
- The scholars alcove in Gallery 3: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306>
- The scholars desk in Gallery 3: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-307>

### ► Evaluate (Develop Claims, Communicate and Critique Conclusions)

Students can either write their own responses to the question, or work in groups to have a debate. You can assign students to roles, either proponents of the civil exam system, or reformers who would want to change the system.

Students can then evaluate each others arguments using the rubric included below or through peer review systems that already exist in your classroom.”

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## ENRICHING THE LESSON

### Background Knowledge Needed:

Students' experiences with their own exam system will benefit their contributions. It may color them in a positive or negative light.

It will be helpful to have an understanding of how empires are run through bureaucracy, but in depth knowledge is not required.

### Anticipated Misconceptions:

Students may struggle to understand bureaucracy and the concept that things don't happen just because an emperor (or president) gives a mandate.

### Methods to Build Empathy:

#### Historic Empathy

Students will connect their own experiences to those of Chinese Scholars

#### Social Empathy

Students will engage in group work and discussion. Both will foster listening and building on each others ideas.

### Opportunities for Informed Action and Contemporary Connections:

Students will be analyzing something relevant to their daily lives and forming an argument around it. They may think of a way to share their findings in a public forum on exams today, potentially through a blog post or by joining in on a larger discussion online.

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

"Fox Hunt," by Lensey Namioka,

Ancient China, Eyewitness Books, "A Civil Service Career"

Ancient China, by Charlotte Guillain

## DIFFERENTIATION

### Extensions

For an additional challenge have student research modern Chinese college exams and draw connections to historical exams, and similar exams in the United States. Have students form arguments about the pros and cons of different exam systems.

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## LESSON GLOSSARY

These concepts are embedded in the museum content and may be unfamiliar to students.

*civil service* – the permanent professional branches of the government, not elected

scholar official – civil servants, or bureaucrats, who were appointed by the emperor of China to run daily and local levels of government

*bureaucracy* – a large group of people who are involved in running the government but who are not elected

meritocracy – government based on selecting people according to skill, not family connections or other factors

*dynasty* - a line of hereditary rulers

*province* – an administrative division of countries or empires

*social mobility* – the ability of individuals or families to move between social classes, either by gaining or losing wealth and social standing.

*privilege* – a special right, advantage or immunity given to a particular person or group of people.

## NOTES FOR FIELD TRIP PLANNING

This activity contains two smaller cycles of inquiry. The first has students explore what content they would put on qualifying exams for civic leaders, while the second cycle has students explore what it meant to be a scholar official in terms of social status and privilege. Ultimately, they will form an argument about whether or not they would engage in similar processes, and what they believe should be changed.

Both inquiry cycles would benefit from time in the museum, but each would fill the time of one visit, so you may wish to break it up and have one cycle in the museum, and one cycle outside, using the online exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>. The online exhibition features all of the content of the exhibits, and may be a good introduction to how to use the digital reading rails within the exhibit.

### Before

The “Engage” and “Explore” sections of the activity plan can be used for a pre-activity. Have students generate a list of questions and assign students to topic groups to join in the museum.

### During

While in the museum, students can complete the research described in the first part of “Explain” in Gallery 3. There are three main places of interest regarding the scholars—the Qing Ming Scroll, the small scholars room (designed to replicate the size of exam cells), and the scholars’ desk on the opposite wall. Encourage students to share the content rails so that everyone can have a chance to complete their research.

Alternatively, they could explore the life of the scholars in the exhibit, and complete the exam research as a pre-visit activity.

### After

After visiting the exhibit, students can share what they learned in their topic groups described in the second half of “Explain,” and then work in either the same groups, or new groups to form arguments and complete the further research described in “Elaborate” and “Evaluate.”

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## Graphic Organizer

What does it take to be qualified to run a government?	How would you choose people who were qualified?

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## Rubric

	4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Meets Expectations	2 Approaches Expectations	1 Does not meet Expectations
Make a clear argument relevant to the content	Argument is clear, and illuminates something new about the content	Argument is clear and connected to the content	Argument is either unclear or not connected directly to the content	Argument is neither clear nor connected to the content.
Use evidence from objects or readings	Student uses 3-4 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, describing them fully	Student uses 1-2 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, describing them fully	Student uses 1-2 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, but does not describe them fully	Student does not mention specific objects or readings, or uses unrelated objects/readings
Explain why the evidence supports their argument	Explanation of connection between evidence and argument offers innovative interpretation and illuminates something new about the content.	Explanation of connection between evidence and arguments is clear and convincing	Explanation of connection between evidence and arguments is unclear or disconnected	No explanation of connection between evidence and argument
Listen to others and restate their ideas	In Speaking			
	Clearly restates the ideas of others and incorporates other's ideas into their own argument, whether agreeing or disagreeing	Clearly restates ideas of others before returning to original argument	Incorrectly restates the ideas of others before returning to original argument	Does not restate the ideas of others before returning to original argument
	In Writing			
	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments and uses them to strengthen their argument	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments and clearly explains reasoning for their original argument	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments but does not connect them to original argument	Does not address other perspectives and/or counter arguments.

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