

# Analysis of the Fate of Literati in Qing Dynasty Who did not Meet the Imperial Examination: Life Dilemma and Spiritual Pursuit

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**Abstract:** The Qing Dynasty was the last period of Chinese feudal society, during which the imperial examination system played an important role. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the fate of literati who failed to pass the imperial examination in Qing Dynasty, focusing on the analysis of their life difficulties and the spiritual realm they pursued. Firstly, it introduces the historical background and structure of the imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty, and its influence on social mobility and literati status. It then discusses the economic challenges, career opportunities limitations and psychological difficulties faced by literati who failed to pass the exam. At the same time, it analyzes how these literati seek spiritual satisfaction and contribution by cultivating personal interest, engaging in literary and artistic creation, and participating in knowledge exchange and cultural activities. Through case studies of well-known literati who failed the exam, their life paths, dilemmas, and achievements are explored, as well as their philosophical and spiritual legacies. Finally, compare with the literati who passed the examination, reflect on the diversity of literati life in Qing Dynasty. The purpose of this study is to provide a new perspective for understanding the fate of literati in Qing Dynasty, and to provide inspiration and suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** Qing Dynasty; Imperial Examination System; Literati; Spiritual Pursuit; Economic Challenge; Social Status.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview of the Imperial Examination System in Qing Dynasty

The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty was a system for selecting officials in Qing Dynasty, and it was also the last stage of the imperial examination system in ancient China. The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty mainly includes three stages: township examination, national examination and temple examination. The first is the township examination, which is held at the county level. Candidates need to stand out in the township examination in order to obtain the qualification to participate in the examination. Those who pass the examination can be promoted to the Temple examination, which is the last examination held in the capital. Those who pass the Temple examination can become officials. The whole imperial examination system is strictly phased selection, focusing on the examination of candidates' cultural literacy and talent, reflecting a certain selection fairness and competition mechanism. The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty played an important role in the politics of Chinese feudal society and played a key role in the stability of society and the selection of officials.

### 1.2. Historical Background of the Imperial Examination System

As the main system for selecting officials in ancient China, the imperial examination system originated in Sui and Tang dynasties, and was developed and perfected in Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The implementation of the imperial examination system, on the one hand, ensured the fairness and impartiality of the selection of officials, and selected officials through examinations, so that the upper class of society had the opportunity to obtain official positions through hard study,

and promoted social mobility and talent selection. At the same time, the imperial examination system also promoted the prosperity and development of ancient Chinese culture and encouraged people's pursuit of cultural knowledge. In the Qing Dynasty, although the imperial examination system was criticized to some extent, such as bureaucratization, corruption and other problems, it was still the main way to select officials under the Qing Dynasty until the fall of the Qing Dynasty. The historical background of the imperial examination system is the product of the political and cultural development of Chinese feudal society, which is of great significance to the stability and development of ancient Chinese society.

In general, the imperial examination system of the Qing Dynasty played an important role in China's feudal society, which not only influenced the evolution of the official selection system, but also influenced the development of ancient Chinese culture and education system. Its historical background carries the political, social and cultural changes of ancient China, embodies the importance of ancient Chinese society to talents and the exploration of selection mechanism, and has far-reaching influence and inspiration for later generations.

## 2. Imperial Examination System in Qing Dynasty

### 2.1. Historical Background and Significance

The background of the imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty can be traced back to the evolution of the imperial examination system in ancient China. As the main system for selecting officials in ancient China, the imperial examination system originated in the Sui and Tang dynasties and was continuously improved and developed in the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty was of great significance in Chinese

feudal society, not only as the main way to select officials, but also as an important symbol of social mobility and literati status. The implementation of the imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty, on the one hand, ensured the fairness and justice of the selection of officials, on the other hand, it also provided the opportunity for the upper class of society to obtain official posts through the examination, and promoted the social mobility and development [1].

## **2.2. Structure and Stage of Imperial Examination System**

The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty consists of three stages: township examination, national examination and temple examination. The first is the township examination, which is held at the county level. Candidates need to pass the township examination in order to be promoted to the qualification of the national examination. The examination was held at the provincial level, and those who passed the examination were promoted to the Temple examination, which was the last examination held in the capital. Candidates who pass the exam can eventually become officials. The whole imperial examination system is strictly phased selection, focusing on the examination of candidates' cultural literacy and talent, reflecting a certain selection fairness and competition mechanism. This system not only selects a large number of outstanding talents, but also provides a fair way for the society to promote the stability and development of the society.

## **2.3. Influence on Social Mobility and Literati Status**

The imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty had a profound impact on social mobility and literati status. First of all, the imperial examination system provided the upper class with the opportunity to obtain official positions through hard study, broke the situation of hereditary aristocracy, and promoted social mobility and change. The selection of officials through the examination, regardless of high or low, gives talents from all walks of life a chance to stand out, and provides a broader source of talents for national governance. Secondly, the imperial examination system improved the social status and reputation of literati and became an important way to rise in society. If you pass the exam and become an official, you can not only get awards and treatment, but also enjoy social respect and glory, and become a social figure.

To sum up, the imperial examination system in Qing Dynasty played an important role in China's feudal society, which was not only the main way of official selection, but also an important symbol of social mobility and the status of literati. Its historical background and structure reflect the ancient Chinese society's emphasis on talents and the exploration of selection mechanism, which had a profound impact on the development of ancient Chinese politics, society and culture. The influence of the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty was not only reflected in the selection of officials and social mobility, but also in the cultural inheritance and social stability, which left a valuable historical legacy for the development of ancient Chinese society [2].

## **3. The Plight of Literati Who Failed to Pass the Exam**

Under the imperial examination system of the Qing Dynasty, literati who failed to pass the examination faced many difficulties, including economic challenges, declining social status, limited career opportunities and social discrimination, which not only affected their living conditions, but also had a negative impact on their psychology.

### **3.1. Economic Challenges and Social Status**

Literati who failed the imperial examinations often faced financial challenges. In ancient China, achieving fame was one of the main ways to improve social and economic status. Literati who fail to gain fame and fame often cannot enjoy the treatment and rewards of officials because they cannot become officials, and their economic sources are limited and their lives are difficult. At the same time, due to the worship of fame in ancient society, scholars who failed to obtain fame were also affected in social status, and may lose some social respect and recognition, resulting in psychological discomfort and distress.

### **3.2. Limited Career Opportunities and Social Discrimination**

Another dilemma is that literati who fail to pass the exam face limited career opportunities and social discrimination. In ancient China, officials were the upper class of society, and literati who failed to gain fame could only engage in some ordinary occupations, such as teaching and business, and their career development was limited. In addition, due to society's emphasis on merit, literati who fail to obtain merit may be discriminated and excluded by society, face the risk of being marginalized, and social interaction and interpersonal relationships will be affected.

### **3.3. Psychological Impact and Personal Dilemma**

Literati who fail may also face psychological repercussions and personal difficulties. In ancient China, fame was one of the ultimate goals pursued by literati, and failure to achieve this goal would bring them a great sense of loss and frustration. They may feel powerless and worthless, develop low self-esteem and self-doubt, and affect their emotional and mental health. In the absence of recognition and respect in society, literati who fail to pass the exam may get stuck and feel lonely and lost.

In conclusion, literati who failed to pass the exam faced many difficulties in Qing society, including economic challenges, declining social status, limited career opportunities, social discrimination and psychological influence. These difficulties not only affect their living conditions, but also have a negative impact on their mental health and personal development. For literati who failed to pass the exam, how to deal with these difficulties and find a new way of development is an important challenge and topic [3].

## **4. Spiritual Pursuit and Academic Contribution**

In the imperial examination system of Qing Dynasty, although the literati who failed to pass the examination faced difficulties in life, they did not give up their spiritual pursuit

and academic contribution. These literati adhere to the love of knowledge, through self-study, writing and other ways to deepen knowledge, improve cultivation, maintain the pursuit of academic. In the academic field, they inherited and developed the ancient Chinese cultural tradition by writing poems and essays, and contributed to the prosperity and development of Chinese culture. Although they did not become officials, their works and ideas influenced later generations, becoming a generation of literary masters, calligraphers or ideological pioneers, leaving a valuable spiritual legacy for social and cultural progress. The spiritual pursuit and academic contributions of these literati enriched ancient Chinese culture, and inspired future generations to stick to their faith and pursue their ideals in difficult times, and contribute to social development. Their persistence and contribution have become an indispensable part of Chinese cultural tradition, leaving precious cultural heritage for later generations [4].

## 5. Case Studies of Well-known Literati

In the history of the Qing Dynasty, there is a well-known and respected literator-Yuan Mei (1716-1797), who was a litterateur, historian, art critic and official. Although Yuan Mei failed repeatedly in the imperial examinations, he made great achievements in the field of literature and became a bright star in the literary circle of the Qing Dynasty.

Yuan Mei is a versatile literati, good at poetry, prose, novels and other styles. His works, full of literary talent and humanistic feelings, were deeply loved and respected by the literati at that time. Yuan Mei's poems are fresh and elegant, smooth and beautiful, known as "Yuan Wen landscape", showing his deep understanding of natural scenery and life philosophy. In addition, he also wrote many essays and novels, such as *Suiyuan Shihua* and *Ziyu*, which are regarded as classic works in the history of Chinese literature.

In addition to his literary achievements, Yuan also made important contributions to the fields of history and art criticism. He wrote *Suiyuan Shihua*, a systematic summary of the evolution and artistic characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry, which had a profound influence on the literary research of later generations. At the same time, he also conducted in-depth research and comments on ancient calligraphy and painting, and put forward many unique opinions, becoming one of the important figures in the history of Chinese art criticism.

Although Yuan Mei failed to pass the imperial examination to become an official, he became a bright star in the literary history of the Qing Dynasty with his outstanding literary talent and profound ideological influence. His works were handed down from generation to generation and had a profound influence on later generations, and he was praised as "the talented man of Qing Dynasty" and "the literary leader". Yuan Mei's life was full of frustrations and bitterness, but he always adhered to the love and pursuit of literature, left a precious cultural heritage, and became one of the indispensable important figures in the history of Chinese literature.

## 6. Conclusion

Under the imperial examination system of the Qing

Dynasty, literati who failed to pass the examination faced many difficulties, including economic challenges, declining social status, limited career opportunities, social discrimination, and psychological influences. However, these difficulties did not prevent them from sticking to their spiritual pursuits and contributing to the social culture. Through the case study of famous literati, such as Yuan Mei, we see a kind of perseverance, the pursuit of excellence of the spiritual power, as well as the love and persistence of literature and art.

Although they failed to pass the imperial examinations, these literati did not give up their pursuit of knowledge and culture. They enrich their knowledge and improve their self-cultivation through self-study and writing, and maintain their enthusiasm for academics. In the academic field, they have made important contributions, inherited and developed ancient Chinese cultural traditions, and contributed to the prosperity and development of Chinese culture. This kind of spiritual pursuit and academic contribution not only enriched the ancient Chinese culture, but also revealed how future generations should stick to their beliefs and pursue their ideals in the face of difficulties, and contribute their own strength to the progress of society and culture.

The life stories of famous literati such as Yuan Mei tell us that the predicament is not the end, but a bumpy road in life. In the face of setbacks and difficulties, the key lies in how to stick to the original heart and forge ahead. The experience of the writers has inspired us that no matter what kind of difficulties and challenges we encounter, we should maintain a positive and optimistic attitude, face them bravely, constantly improve ourselves, and contribute our strength to the progress of society, culture and mankind. Although the literati who failed to pass the examination in the Qing Dynasty did not become officials, their spiritual pursuit and academic contribution shone brightly in the long history. Their persistence and efforts have set an example for future generations and left a valuable legacy for the inheritance of Chinese culture. Their stories tell us that no matter what kind of difficulties we are in, inner perseverance and effort are always the key to overcoming difficulties. In the pursuit of dreams on the road, adhere to the faith, perseverance, will eventually succeed, for their own life to write the most gorgeous chapter.

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