



History of Chinese Imperial Examination

Liu Haifeng
Li Bing

Translated by Chen Xue



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CONTENTS

1	Origins of Imperial Examination	1
1.1	<i>Concept of Talent Selection in Zhou Dynasty—"Regulations of Selecting Talents from County"</i>	1
1.1.1	<i>County Talent Selection in Western Zhou Dynasty</i>	2
1.1.2	<i>Propositions of Talent Governance in Spring–Autumn and Warring States Periods</i>	7
1.2	<i>Chaju Talent Selection in Han Dynasty—A New Era in History of Chinese Civilization</i>	13
1.2.1	<i>Imperial Talent Selection Through Xianliang and Other Subjects</i>	14
1.2.2	<i>Annual Talent Selection Through Xiaolian and Xiucai Subjects</i>	35
1.2.3	<i>Merits and Demerits of Chaju Talent Selection in Han Dynasty</i>	53
1.3	<i>Chaju Talent Selection in Wei, Jin, and North–South Dynasties—Talent Selection from Xiucai Subject in State, and from Xiaolian in County</i>	66
1.3.1	<i>Chaju Talent Selection in Wei Dynasty: "Prioritizing Confucian Classics"</i>	67
1.3.2	<i>Rise and Fall of Chaju Talent Selection in Western and Eastern Jin Dynasties</i>	70

1.3.3	<i>Development of Chaju Talent Selection in Southern Dynasty</i>	77
1.3.4	<i>Evolution of Chaju Talent Selection in Northern Dynasty</i>	83
2	Building of Imperial Examination Era	95
2.1	<i>Talent Selection in Sui Dynasty—Jinshi Subject Initiated by Emperor Yang</i>	95
2.1.1	<i>Talent Selection Through Various Subjects by Emperor Wen</i>	96
2.1.2	<i>Imperial Examination Age Created by Emperor Yang</i>	102
2.2	<i>Imperial Examination in Tang Dynasty—"Embracing Spring Breeze Jubilantly and Galloping Triumphantly"</i>	114
2.2.1	<i>Pattern of Imperial Examination in Early Tang Dynasty</i>	114
2.2.2	<i>Feature in Imperial Examination Hall in Prosperous Tang Dynasty</i>	146
2.2.3	<i>Events in Imperial Examination Hall in Middle Tang Dynasty</i>	173
2.2.4	<i>Phenomenon in Imperial Examination Hall in Late Tang Dynasty</i>	214
2.3	<i>Imperial Examination in Five Dynasties—"Surviving Amid Turmoil and Chaos"</i>	237
2.3.1	<i>Succession of Imperial Examination in Five Dynasties</i>	237
2.3.2	<i>Implementation and Fade of Imperial Examination in Ten Kingdoms</i>	256
3	Emergence of Imperial Examination Society	269
3.1	<i>Imperial Examination in Northern Song Dynasty—"Being as Righteous as Fate, and as Fair as Weight"</i>	271
3.1.1	<i>Regularization and Objectification of Imperial Examinations</i>	271
3.1.2	<i>"Driving Authority with Absolute Justice, and Treating All People Without Discrimination"</i>	288

3.1.3	<i>Debate Between Imperial Examination and Institute</i>	321
3.2	<i>Imperial Examination in Southern Song Dynasty—Administering Country Through Classics and Cultivating Talents Through Wenxue Subject</i>	332
3.2.1	<i>Extensive Imperial Examination Policy</i>	333
3.2.2	<i>Continuation of Debate Between Classics and Poetry</i>	348
3.2.3	<i>Development of Imperial Examination System</i>	357
3.2.4	<i>Neo-Confucianism Prohibition and Imperial Examination</i>	383
4	Magic of Imperial Examination	395
4.1	<i>Imperial Examination in Liao Dynasty—Different Governances between Khitan and Han People</i>	395
4.1.1	<i>Imperial Examination Spread to Whole Territory</i>	396
4.1.2	<i>Imperial Examination Declined from Flourishment</i>	406
4.1.3	<i>Systems and Principles of Imperial Examination</i>	410
4.2	<i>Imperial Examination in Jin Dynasty—Talent Selection from Division to Integration of North and South Examinations</i>	420
4.2.1	<i>North and South Examinations</i>	421
4.2.2	<i>Creation of Jurchen Jinshi Subject</i>	429
4.2.3	<i>Subjects, Systems and Principles</i>	445
4.3	<i>Imperial Examination in Yuan Dynasty—Left Rank List and Right Rank List</i>	458
4.3.1	<i>Disputes on Restoring Imperial Examination</i>	459
4.3.2	<i>Alternation Between Adoption and Suspension of Imperial Examination</i>	473
4.3.3	<i>Imperial Examination by Division of North and South Rank List</i>	490
5	Formation of Imperial Examination System	509
5.1	<i>Imperial Examination in Early Ming Dynasty—"Officials Awarded Only Through Imperial Examination"</i>	510

5.1.1	<i>Transition from Recommendation-Predominated Selection to Exclusive Imperial Examination Selection</i>	510
5.1.2	<i>Suspension of Imperial Examination and Restoration of Recommendation</i>	517
5.1.3	<i>Combination of Imperial Examination and Recommendation</i>	523
5.2	<i>Imperial Examination in Middle Ming Dynasty—Institutionalization of “Perpetual System”</i>	529
5.2.1	<i>Preliminary Examination</i>	530
5.2.2	<i>Provincial Examination</i>	550
5.2.3	<i>Metropolitan Examination</i>	584
5.2.4	<i>Talent Selection from South and North Rank List to South and North Examinations</i>	595
5.2.5	<i>Palace Examination</i>	606
5.2.6	<i>Military Examination</i>	621
5.3	<i>Imperial Examination in Late Ming Dynasty—“Fairness of Imperial Examination”</i>	635
5.3.1	<i>Bagu Stereotyped Writing: “A Stepping Stone” to Officials</i>	636
5.3.2	<i>Talent Selection by Bagu Stereotyped Writing: Fixed Essay Pattern and Assessment</i>	656
5.3.3	<i>Rules and Regulations of Imperial Examination Halls</i>	664
6	End of Imperial Examination	677
6.1	<i>Imperial Examination in Early and Middle Qing Dynasty—“National Ceremony on Talent Selection”</i>	678
6.1.1	<i>Talent Selection by Adopting Imperial Examination</i>	678
6.1.2	<i>Application</i>	684
6.1.3	<i>Preliminary Examination</i>	689
6.1.4	<i>Provincial Examination and Metropolitan Examination</i>	715
6.1.5	<i>Palace Examination</i>	792
6.2	<i>Imperial Examination in Middle and Late Qing Dynasty—“Transformation of Imperial Examination as Principal Task”</i>	821

6.2.1	<i>Drawback of Ingrained and Chronic Problems</i>	821
6.2.2	<i>Criticism toward Talent Selection by Bagu Stereotyped Writing</i>	833
6.2.3	<i>Reform Preparation</i>	846
6.2.4	<i>Transformation Trial</i>	855
6.3	<i>Imperial Examination in Late Qing Dynasty—"A Great Change of Imperial Examination"</i>	866
6.3.1	<i>"New Policy"</i>	866
6.3.2	<i>Gradual Decline and Halt</i>	872
6.3.3	<i>Remedial Work and Residual Response</i>	879
Appendix I: Results Table Throughout Dynasties		897
Appendix II: Chronology of Chinese Imperial Examinations		971
Postscript		985

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Origins of Imperial Examination

Any important system has its roots in ideology and culture at the very start of founding. With a long history, imperial examination (Keju) in the narrow sense based on the establishment of Jinshi subject was originated from the Sui Dynasty, while the one in the broad sense was traced back to the Han Dynasty, and could even be dated from Xiangjulichuan (the county talent selection) in pre-Qin period.

1.1 CONCEPT OF TALENT SELECTION IN ZHOU DYNASTY—"REGULATIONS OF SELECTING TALENTS FROM COUNTY"

Early before the Western Zhou dynasty, the concept of "talent selection and appointment" and the practice of dismissing and promoting officials based on the performance had emerged in China. In later primitive society, tribal leaders were elected democratically. As the ninth passage, "Li Yun (development, evolution, and application of etiquette)" in volume 4 of the *Book of Rites* goes, "Common good should be pursued, virtuous and talented people should be selected, and integrity and harmony should be strived." In the slave society during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, "Shiqingshilu", the hereditary system of "family-governed monarchic country", which was one system of father handing down to son, or elder brother handing down to younger one, began. However, during the Western Zhou period, in order to meet the

needs of the ruling class, one selection for ruling stage from the bottom up, called Xiangjulixuan (the county talent selection), was implemented.

1.1.1 *County Talent Selection in Western Zhou Dynasty*

The prosperity of a country only depends on talents. As the passage “Wenwang (King Wen)” in part “Major Odes” of the *Book of Songs* goes, “With numerous talents gathered together, King Wen can be at ease and peace”, which implied that the China’s rulers at that time had recognized the importance of talents in administering state affairs and ensuring national security.

Started from around eleventh century BC, the remote and ancient Zhou dynasty was a highly hierarchical and archaistic society, which was expired in 771 BC. Due to the lack of full and accurate historical records, the actual details of many systems in the Western Zhou dynasty are not very clear today, leaving much room for imagination and inference to later generations. It is said that at that time, the unified land state ownership system was implemented. Thus, the passage “Beishan (North Mountain)” in part “Minor Odes” of the *Book of Songs* mentions, “Everywhere under the sky is the king’s dominion; To the uttermost ends of the earth, all men are his servants.” In terms of talent selection, “Gongju” examination system was also established, which promoted talents from all levels upwards. As the passage “Zongxu (General Preface)” in *Cefu Yuangui* (*Big Turtle in library of the palace*), the largest Leishu (encyclopedia), which was the last of *Four Great Books of Song*, said, “The examination system of three dynasties began with Qing and Dafu (the local officials) at that time.” As the king of the Western Zhou divided and granted the land to the relatives and meritorious officials, the feudal lords also did it to Qing and Dafu in their own states according to the principle of feudatory system. “Gongju” talent selection is “Xiangjulixuan (the county talent selection)”. That is, talents are promoted and selected from the grassroots level upwards.

Later generations believed that imperial examination originated from county talent selection in the Western Zhou dynasty. The passage “Xuexiao (Schools)” in volume 78 of the *Code of Great Ming Dynasty* states, “imperial examination system was originally the method of selecting talents from local areas in ancient times.” Indeed, from the historical materials recorded in the *Rites of Zhou* and the *Book of Rites*, it

seemed that there was already a relatively complete method of selecting talents during the Western Zhou dynasty.

The passage “Dasitu (official title)” in part “Diguan (official title)” of the *Rites of Zhou* recorded that the “Dabi” examination, with the aim of examining the test-takers’ virtue and literacy, knowledge, and ability, was held every three years in the county, to promote those talents with good virtue and high capability and then recommend to the king. After conferring, they would be registered and recorded, and afterwards tested in the local archery ceremony. Only those who passed the test would be appointed as the local officials. The passage “Sheyi (Meaning of Archery)” in volume 10 of the *Book of Rites*, also stated that “in ancient time, this rule and system dawned up by the king was that the talents were recommended by feudal lords and were tested in the archery test field”. Zhengxuan noted that “previously, every three years, three talents would be elected and recommended to the central government from the major feudatory state, two from the medium feudatory state, and one from the minor feudatory state”. If this system was indeed implemented, it could be considered as not only the origin of Xiaolian and Xiucai talents being elected by Chaju talent selection in the Han dynasty according to the population ratio, but also the initial form of Gongshi talents being elected by imperial examination (Keju) after the Tang dynasty in accordance with state and county population scale. Held every three years in the *Rites of Zhou*, the “Dabi” examination provided the theoretical basis for the three-year imperial examination (Keju) after the Song dynasty.

The most detailed record of a complete and rigorous talent selection system in the Western Zhou dynasty is the passage “Wangzhi (governance system of the king)” in the *Book of Rites*.

It was stipulated that Xiushi talents selected from the county, after being recommended to Situ (official title), were called Xuanshi talents. Those excellent Xuanshi talents became Junshi talents after being recommended to Daxue (official title) by Situ. Xuanshi and Junshi may be exempted from provincial and state corvee respectively... Dalezheng (also called Dasile, the master of dance and music) inspected and evaluated the outstanding graduates, and reported them to the king. After being recommended to Sima (official title), they were regarded as Jinshi talents. Sima was responsible for evaluating the abilities of Jinshi talents and reporting to the king before their appointment. Once confirmed, they were offered an official position; Once held the post, they were ranked and granted; Once settled, they were given the salary.

This is a very important record about the origin of the imperial examination system. Regardless of its authenticity, it is the earliest Chinese classic, in which the names “Junshi” and “Jinshi” were mentioned. The above record in the passage “Wang Zhi” of the *Book of Rites* was the fundamental basis for the establishment of the Jinshi subject in the Sui dynasty. In addition to building Guoxue (the highest education institution) in the king’s city and the capitals of the feudal lords, Xiangxue schools at the local level was set up in the Western Zhou dynasty. The above-mentioned passage described the practice of selecting talented scholars from Xiangxue through examinations, sending them to Guoxue institutions for further study, and then appointing them to official positions after graduation, which represented a fairly rigorous process for talents cultivation, selection, and appointment.

According to the above records, there were two levels of selection from Xiangxue schools to Guoxue institutions in the Western Zhou dynasty, namely “selecting Xiushi talents from the county” and “recommending excellent Xuanshi talents by Situ (official title)”. The specific steps were as follows: First, the local official “Xiangdafa” presided over the examination, selected outstanding students from Xiangxue, and reported to Situ, the education minister of royal family in the Western Zhou dynasty, and they were called “Xuanshi”. In fact, “Xiushi” and “Xuanshi” were the talent titles at different stages of the same level. Second, Situ presided over another examination, and the outstanding ones among Xuanshi were promoted to Guoxue institutions, called “Junshi” and “Zaoshi”, which were also the talent titles at different stages of the same level. Namely, the talents selected by Situ were called Junshi. And after being promoted to Guoxue, the people who entered the education institution for further study were called Zaoshi. Xuanshi who was nominated by Situ can be exempted from conscription in their villages, and Zaoshi who was promoted to Guoxue can be exempted from the forced labor in their countries.

After being admitted to Guoxue institutions, Zaoshi talents were taught the “four subjects” of poetry, history, rites, and music from the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Music* by “Lezheng” officials. In spring and autumn, rites and music were taught, while in summer and winter, poetry and history were instructed. During the study period, those who did not follow the instructions would be eliminated or exiled, and not be selected again. After nine years’ study, they reached “Dacheng”, which meant making great achievement at

school. Then the official “Dalezheng” presided over an examination, and the outstanding candidates among Zaoshi talents who were nominated to Sima official were titled “Jinshi”. After Sima presided over another examination, he judged the participants’ virtue and capability, reported the excellent ones among Jinshi to the emperor in the Zhou dynasty, appointed them to official positions, and offered them noble titles and salaries. The above actually was the process of cultivating students and selecting graduates in higher education institutions at that time. Together with the previous stages of talent selection in county and talents recommendation by Situ, it formed a complete system of talents cultivation and selection. This was quite similar to Keju educational system in the Sui and Tang dynasties, and the practice of promoting Junshi to Jinshi through Guozixue (the education management agency and top institution) in the Sui and Tang dynasties was just based on the concept from the passage “Wangzhi” in the *Book of Rites*.

The system of selecting and cultivating talents during the Western Zhou dynasty was quite rigorous and complete. If this system did exist and be implemented, it is amazing that such a strict and scientific talents cultivation and selection program emerged in the early stages of Chinese civilization. However, in the past, many scholars had doubts about this talent selection system. They either believed that the passage “Wang Zhi” in the *Book of Rites* was written during the Qin and Han dynasties, or claimed that it was written by Boshi (court academician) officials and their students commanded by Emperor Wen in the Han dynasty. In the Republican period, Chen Qingzhi, the author of the *History of Chinese Education* stated that these descriptions were only the speculation and fabrication of Han Confucian scholars. But Chen Dongyuan held that the Zhou dynasty was extremely imperial, and all officials and officers were appointed by the approaches of enfeoffment or hereditary succession, instead of a populist selection method. Besides, this method was not mentioned by anyone in the Zhou dynasty, and Confucius and his students, Laozi, Guanxi, and other predecessors and successors did not undergo the process of “Xuanshi” or “Jinshi” talent selection. According to the separation of the 1,773 feudal states in the Zhou dynasty, it would be difficult to put this method into practice. Therefore, Chen Dongyuan believed that the idea of selecting and promoting talents in the Zhou

Dynasty was entirely the ideal of later generations, and there was no talent selection system in the Zhou dynasty.¹

Indeed, it is doubtful whether such a method of selecting officials existed during the Western Zhou period. Even if it's true, it is worth questioning whether it was detailed as described in the *Book of Rites* and whether it was implemented permanently. However, Chinese culture is a precocious culture, as Liang Shuming mentioned in his book the *Substance of Chinese Culture* that Chinese culture was "precocity of human culture". Some scholars held the same views and analyzed it through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. They believed that the Spring–Autumn and Warring States Periods, which were the embryonic period of Chinese culture, could be compared to the juvenile or at most the youth stage, but they had reflected their needs at a higher level or even partially the highest level, indicating the precocity of Chinese culture.² Some institutional civilizations and ideological theories that only emerged in the modern Western society, had already taken shape in China during the pre-Qin period. For example, the method of selecting talents through examinations and competitions that was only imitated by the West in the nineteenth century, "had existed in China since ancient times". Additionally, artifact civilizations, diplomatic theories of alliances, the art of war by Sun Tzu, and Confucian philosophy of dealing with the world in the Western Zhou dynasty, and Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, are still impressive and have practical significance today. Therefore, even if the method of talent selection during the Western Zhou dynasty was only a modification and perfunctory work of the Han Confucian scholars, it was a creative and imaginative idea reflecting the hope of ancestors of the Chinese nation to select talented and capable people and give them opportunities for further education, and make them become the ideal talents for national management. Moreover, this idea, to a great extent, was realized by the later imperial examination system.

¹ Chen Dongyuan: "Chinese Education History (Part 2)", *Xuefeng*, Volume 2, Issue 7, 1932

² Li Zonggui: *Introduction to Chinese Culture*, Sun Yat-sen University Press, 1988 Edition, Pages 290–293

1.1.2 *Propositions of Talent Governance in Spring–Autumn and Warring States Periods*

After King You was killed at the bottom of the Lishan Mountain, and the Western Zhou dynasty was ended in 771 BC, the chaotic Eastern Zhou period of the feudal states, including the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) and the Warring States period (475–221 BC), began. During this time, the government of the Zhou dynasty lost its control over the whole country. And in order to both enlarge their force and power, and expand their land and territory, all the feudal states fought with each other, leading to frequent warfare. In this eventful time filled with wars and conflicts, and discolored of mountains and rivers, the kings were overthrown, and the territories of the feudal states were constantly shifting. The officials schemed and plotted in the critical, fickle, and unexpected situation, without knowing what would happen in the future. Some were loyal to their rulers and willing to die for them, while others switched sides and played both ends against the middle. The turbulent and troublous country needs more talents. It is in the time of chaos and upheaval that the importance of talents became increasingly apparent. The feudal lords competed to win over and designate the emerging scholars who could give advice and suggestion on state affairs, and help deliver them. Accordingly, the concept of “talent selection” began to spread widely. The system of hereditary aristocracy gradually loosened.

With the rise of the emerging scholar class, many emperors realized the truth of “prosperity with scholars, but decline without scholars”, and thus the trend of providing for scholars emerged. Respecting and valuing talents and treating scholars with courtesy had become a strategy for the talent competition among various feudal states. During the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, with one hundred contending schools and free thought, many ideologists have discussed the relationship between talent selection and country governance.

It’s Confucius who was the philosopher to clearly propose “talent selection and appointment” for the earliest time. From the 13th passage in Chapter Zilu (Confucius’ student) of the *Analects*, Confucius discussed with Zhonggong how to govern the country, and proposed three aspects of “governance, pardon, and talents promotion”. That is, first, laws and regulations should be established, and government institutions should be reformed; Second, minor mistakes of subordinates should be absolved and pardoned; And third, talented individuals with both virtue and ability

should be elected and promoted. As for how to “seek out and select talents”, Confucius believed that “the ones both you know and you don’t know should be selected”. Namely, talents should be selected from those who are either familiar or unfamiliar. Only with wide recommendation, can talented individuals be obtained. On another occasion, Duke Ai of feudal state Lu asked Confucius how the people could obey the obedience. Confucius replied that only by selecting talented individuals, can the people encourage each other to make progress and thus submit to the ruler. From the 19th passage in Chapter Zizhang (Confucius’ student) of the *Analects*, one Confucius’ student, Zixia, said that “a good scholar will make an official, and a good official will make a scholar”, which typically reflects the Confucian’s ideal that one country should be governed by the virtuous and capable talents.

The sentence “a good scholar will make an official” was one of the important propositions in Confucianism. According to the most common interpretation in ancient China, “scholar” referred to the learner who received education, “make” referred to being outstanding, and “official” referred to the one who worked in government. That is, those who learned well could become officials and work in office. Conversely, to become an official, one should receive good education, and vice versa. The standard for judging whether one can or cannot be an official depended on the knowledge one grasped, rather than the background one owned. Combined with another Confucius’ educational ideal of “education without distinction”, it laid a solid theoretical foundation for the implementation of imperial examination system for later generations. With a humble background, after being a teacher, Confucius himself recruited the students from all levels of society. The idea “education without distinction” he advocated meant that everyone could obtain education and emphasized that education should be available to all sorts of people. Since all people could receive education, and the good learners should be competent for being officials, it proved that the lower class of society had the chance to get the official position. The passage, “Duke Ling of feudal state Wei”, in the *Analects* also recorded Confucius’ another famous saying about learning and becoming an official, “Those who study hard could get salary.” The outstanding talents who worked heart and soul would be accorded the official positions. Traditional Chinese society regards Confucianism as a classic and venerates Confucius as a saint. Imperial examination system is the result of putting the

Confucian political ideology that “a good scholar will make an official” into practice.

Mencius, who inherited and followed Confucius, continued to carry forward the talent governance. He believed that without talent selection, a country would be fragile, but with it, a country would be prosperous and the people would be secure as well. He advocated that those who were princes and dukes should respect and value talents. “If you value talents, but neither appoint nor support them, can this be the right way to treasure them?”³ One sentence from ancient annotation of the passage “King Hui” of feudal state Liang in part 2 from the *Mencius*, showed that Mencius attached high importance on talent selection, “If the ruler of a country appoints the disqualified person, the inferior would surpass the superior, and the distant would surpass the close. Can rulers not be cautious? Even if some virtuous and capable individuals could be sought out by any junior or senior officials, they still cannot be appointed. Only if people all over the country believe their talents, can they be appointed after tests.” Mencius realized that talent selection would accelerate social mobility and surpass the formers, which would make changes in the original relationship between the superior and the inferior, or between the close and the distant. People at the bottom of society may enter the upper class because of their talents. Therefore, talents appointments should be made after a thorough examination. He believed that talents should be appointed with important positions after receiving cultivation and finishing tests, which reflected the reality that many scholars who had no decent family background had the chance to be recommended as officials, and that the system of hereditary aristocracy was gradually collapsed.

Xunzi, who had studied at the Jixia Academy in the state of Qi for a long time, was also one of the Confucian representatives who advocated official appointment based on one’s virtue and ability during the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods. In terms of the principles of selecting talents, he put forward the view of respecting and valuing the virtuous and capable individuals. He believed that respecting the capable and employing the talented was the key to establish a country. Only by “upholding the etiquette, and respecting the talents”, can one become the ruler of a powerful country. He also said, “The king respecting and

³ *Mencius*, “Ancient annotation of Wanzhang (Mencius’ student)” (part two)

valuing the talents can govern the country and become powerful, and the king treasuring the talents can survive, but the one despising the talents will perish. It's the same from the ancient time to the present."⁴ Particularly remarkable is that he advocated breaking the hereditary system during talent selection, and publicly proposed the strategy that "official rank can be confirmed based on different virtues and abilities", and the measure of meritocracy and fair competition. In the passage "Wangba" of the *Xunzi*, he said, "The competent would be appointed regardless of their seniorities, and the incompetent would be dismissed without delay." And "the ruler's scrutiny for the candidates: those without virtue would not be received honor, those without talent would not be received office, those without merit would not be received reward, and those without guilt would not be received punishment." This is a clear explanation and demonstration of talents governance theory. And the views, "Even if those descendants of the nobles and officials cannot abide by rules and principles, they would be relegated or dismissed; Even if those descendants of the common people can learn and act well, and comply with rules and principles, they would be promoted or appointed," explicitly advocated the openness of political power and mobility of social class, which was actually the precursor for the later generations to implement the imperial examination system.

Except for the Confucianists, some other philosophers from the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring–Autumn and Warring States Periods also proposed the idea of talent governance, among which the most prominent was Mozi's theory of "exaltation of the virtuous". He believed that in order to rule a chaotic country, it was necessary for a country to own virtuous people to govern it. He said, "When the country is in chaos, the king should be told to respect the virtuous talents."⁵ The passage "Shangxian (exaltation of the virtuous)" in the *Mozi* collected his views on the importance of respecting and valuing the wise and capable talents. Mozi pointed out, "If there are many virtuous and capable talents in a country, the foundation of the national governance is very profound and strong, while if there are few, it's shallow and weak. Therefore, the main task of those officials is to gather the wise and virtuous talents from all over the country." Mozi elevated the importance of talents to the high

⁴ *The Xunzi*, "Junzi (gentlemen)"

⁵ The *Mozi*, "Luwen (Mozi's advice to Lord of feudal state Lu)"

level of national security and stability, and regarded not only recruiting and judging the talents as the primary task of ruler, but also exalting the virtuous as the fundamental mission of governance. He also proposed that the important principle for selecting wise and capable talents depended on their ability instead of their status.

In ancient times, the wise king selected and respected the virtuous talents, and neither favor the close or the wealthy, nor prefer the beauty. Whoever was virtuous, he would be promoted to a higher position, given wealth and made an official, while whoever was unvirtuous, he would be relegated to a lower position, deprived wealth and made a servant. Since all people wanted to get reward, but were afraid to be punished, they competed to become the virtuous talents. As a result, the virtuous were more while the unvirtuous were less. That was called *Jinxian* (promoting the virtuous).

The wise king in ancient times arranged positions for virtuous talents and exalted them. The talents, even if they were farmers, craftsmen, or traders, only with great ability and high virtue, would be selected.⁶

In Mozi's view, the standard for talent selection should not be based on one's background and status. Instead, the talents from humble class can also be promoted into the upper one, and recruited to be the government officials, while those without virtuousness can only be relegated to the lower class. Based on this perspective, Mozi put forward a democratic proposition about exaltation of the virtuous, "There was permanency neither for an official to be noble, nor for a civilian to be humble. With talent, anyone could be selected; without talent, dismissed." This view, which regarded everyone as equal and which considered their ability as standard for social status, directly expressed the idea of talents governance, and reached the peak of expressing the philosophy of exaltation of the virtuous, which served as public opinion guidance, and paved the way for the subsequent implementation of talents governance theory. Later, Chinese society became a relatively open society with frequent social mobility and "without long-lasting fortune for aristocratic families", which to some extent realized Mozi's proposal that "there was permanency neither for an official to be noble, nor for a civilian to be humble."

⁶ The *Mozi*, "Shangxian (exaltation of the virtuous)"

During the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, many philosophers’ proposal of talents governance was the reflection of the social reality in the concept at that time. The rise and fall of the states often depended on whether to exalt and appoint the talents or not, and whether to recruit or dismiss them. Therefore, the passage “Xiaoli (talents’ capability and wisdom)” in *Lunheng* said, “During the Warring States Period, with the talents, the state of Chu would develop strong, but without talents, the state of Qi would become weak; with the help of the talents, the state of Zhao would be protected, but without the help, the state of Wei would be impaired.” Many talented individuals from the lower social classes became influential figures during the turbulent war years. Take Guan Zhong as one example, he was a humble vendor and once was compelled to be a slave, but assisted feudal lord Huan in the state of Qi, and achieved a great cause. For another example, Bailixi had ever exiled in the state of Chu and was also descended to a slave, but was later appreciated by feudal lord Mu in the state of Qin. It’s his devotion and efforts that assisted feudal lord Mu to become one of the Five Hegemons of the Spring and Autumn period. The humble common people had the potential to use their special talents to finish a business, which illustrated that not all people from the lower social classes were ordinary. Because of the emergence of “Jianmin (one from lowered social status than common people)” who entered the ruling class through military exploits and resourcefulness, the objective reality of social mobility was gradually accepted. On the other hand, the theory on talents governance held by various philosophers also helped to break the hereditary aristocratic system. They advocated that people were born with the potential to become officials or civilians and that the king and feudal lords must appoint the talents to govern the country. It’s this theory that laid the theoretical foundation for the imperial examination system on open examinations, fair competition, and optimal selection. It was also the cultural root of the imperial examination system.

During the Spring–Autumn and Warring States periods, the feudal lords of the states competed to support and employ the talents in different ways, which mainly included recruitment, recommendation, and self-recommendation. It is worth mentioning that the method, “Neizheng Talent selection (one talent selection by officials without examinations)”, proposed by feudal lord Huan in the state of Qi, was the most regulated and procedural among all kinds of selecting and employing methods

at that time. According to *Guoyu* (or the *Discourses of States*, a historical miscellanea), feudal lord Huan (reigned from 685 BC to 643 BC) established regulations in the state Qi:

On the first day of the lunar new year, Xiangzhang (one official) in the court reported their work to feudal lord Huan. He personally asked them, "If someone is famous for his hard work, filial piety, intelligence, virtuousness, and benevolence in your jurisdiction, you should report to the higher authorities. If you fail to report, you will be guilty of hiding talents and will be punished with five penalties." The officials finished reporting and left.

Then feudal lord Huan continued, "If someone is famous for his valiance, bravery, power and strength in your jurisdiction, you should report to the higher authorities. If you fail to report, you will be guilty of hiding talents and will be punished with five penalties." Therefore, the officials went back, developed the virtue strength, and recommended the talents who would be interviewed by feudal lord Huan.

At that time, it was stipulated that all layers of the officials from administrative chiefs of village, county to Wushudafu (the senior commanding officer), should develop the virtue strength, and recommend the talents. It was also regulated that the filial, hardworking, wise and virtuous talents in the jurisdiction should be recommended, otherwise the officials would be punished. This was quite similar to the practice of Chaju talent selection from Han dynasty. Hence, some scholars believed that this was the origin of the imperial examination system in the later generations.⁷

1.2 CHAJU TALENT SELECTION IN HAN DYNASTY—A NEW ERA IN HISTORY OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION

"The moon still shines on mountain passes as of yore. How many guardsmen of the Great Wall are no more!" After experiencing the turmoil of wars in which the first emperor of Qin attacked and destroyed the six states and the wars in which China was reunified during the early Han dynasty, Chinese society finally entered a steady period of great

⁷ Chen Dongyuan: "Chinese Education History", *Xuefeng*, 1932 Edition, Volume 2, Issue 7

governance from chaos of wars. The world can be conquered by force, but cannot be governed with force. Beginning with Liu Bang, Gaozu (the first emperor) of the Han dynasty, the rulers recognized both civil governance that can influence and govern people and military administration that can conquer and suppress people supplemented each other. In addition to expanding the borders and consolidating the western frontier in military defense, the rulers of the Han dynasty also paid attention to the cultural construction. In terms of institutional establishment, they also have the courage of the Han ancestors to conceive some grand plans for consolidating a country. And Chaju talent selection, in the aspect of talent selection and official system construction, opened a new era in the history of Chinese civilization.

Chaju talent selection referred to the practice of recommending and appointing officials after examining their capabilities, and was also known as Jianju talent selection. Chaju talent selection system is the initial form of the imperial examination system.

1.2.1 *Imperial Talent Selection Through Xianliang and Other Subjects*

1.2.1.1 *Xianliang (Virtuousness) and Fangzheng (Righteousness) Subjects*

In the fifth year (202 BC) of Emperor Gaozu in Han dynasty, Liu Bang besieged Xiang Yu, the overlord of Western Chu, who was known for his famous quote, “I could pull down a mountain with my strength”. Under hopeless situation, Xiang Yu was forced to bid farewell sadly to his beloved concubine Yu Ji and later committed suicide. After the establishment of unified Western Han dynasty, Liu Bang followed the advice of his counselors and implemented policies of reducing taxes and duties, nurturing the strength of his people, and revitalizing the economy. In terms of talent selection and appointment, he recognized that civil governance and military administration were different and that it was necessary to select some “wise and intelligent talents” to manage the country’s affairs. According to the passage of “Annals of Emperor Gaozu” in *History of Western Han Dynasty*, in the second lunar month of the eleventh year (196 BC) of Emperor Gaozu in the Han dynasty, the imperial court issued a famous edict about seeking talents: In the past, both King Wen in the state of Zhou and feudal lord Huan in the state of Qi became famous for treating talents warmly and kindly; the “wise and intelligent talents” today were

not inferior to those of ancient times. The problem was that they had no access to selection and promotion. Therefore, the edict was issued to the whole country, “If any talent would be willing to follow me, I will respect and elevate him.” The edict also ordered local officials such as prime ministers, feudal lords, and county governors to recommend the talents in their jurisdiction to the imperial court, and the government would provide them with carriages and send them to the prime minister’s office, and at the same time, the talents would be tested and recorded their conduct, appearance, and age. If there were talents who were not recommended, the local officials would be dismissed from their positions.

This is the first time in Chinese history that an edict was publicly issued to extensively recommend and appoint the talents. The edict also mentioned, there was neither wiser king than King Wen in the state of Zhou, nor wiser feudal lord than Huan in the state of Qi. The reason was that they both valued talents. Perhaps, Emperor Gaozu in the state of Han, Liu Bang, and his counselors issued this edict about seeking talents after being inspired by feudal lord Huan’s “Neizheng Talent selection (one talent selection by officials without examinations)”. The specific subjects of talent selection were not mentioned in this edict, but toward the rule that the feudal states were ordered to recommend the talents, it was a precursor to Chaju talent selection in Western Han dynasty. However, due to the lack of historical records, it was unknown what the actual situation was after the edict was issued. In the second year, Liu Bang drank in his hometown and sang, “A great wind rises, oh! The clouds are driven away. I come to my native land, oh! Now the world is under my sway. Where can I find brave men, oh! To guard my four frontiers today!”⁸ Shortly afterwards, he passed away due to illness. It was estimated that this edict about seeking talents did not make much practical effect, but the significance was that it’s officially the first time in Chinese history that the imperial court sought the talents through an edict.

It was not until Emperor Wen in the state of Han that Chaju talent selection with the nature of imperial examination appeared. In the eleventh lunar month of the second year (178 BC) during Emperor Wen’s Qianyuan (reign title), a solar eclipse occurred, and an edict was issued,

⁸ *History of Western Han Dynasty*, Volume 1, “Annals of Emperor Gao” (Part 2)

“Those virtuous, righteous, upright, and honest talents should be recommended and selected, and the shortcoming could be modified.” In the ninth lunar month of the fifteenth year (165 BC), an edict was issued “to order the feudal lords, officials, and county governors to recommend the virtuous, righteous, upright, and honest talents. The emperor himself then drafted questions, and the talents elaborated their answers for the emperor to adopt.”⁹ What did “Xianliang Fangzheng (virtuousness and righteousness)” mean? Xianliang referred to those who were good and upright, and righteousness referred to those who were honest and reliable. In the fifteenth year, Cewen (question-and-answer), one kind of examination method, was adopted, which was the earliest examination in the Chinese history. While, the so-called “elaborating their answers for emperor to adopt” meant that the talents responded and presented their opinions for the emperor to use.

It was not recorded whether Zhaoju imperial examination in the second year of Emperor Wen in the state of Han was a written test, but the examination in the fifteenth year was truly designed by Emperor Wen, who formulated Cewen questions himself. According to “the Biography of Chao Cuo” in the *History of Western Han Dynasty*, in this Cewen test, Emperor Wen even instructed the examinees to “write the answers down on bamboo or wooden slips”, and he would “personally read them”. “Writing the answers down on bamboo or wooden slips” meant that examinees should write the answers on bamboo or wooden slips (paper was not yet used at that time) so that the emperor could read personally, which clearly told us that this examination was surely conducted in the form of a written test. Therefore, the fifteenth year (165 BC) of Emperor Han Wen’s Qianyuan (reign title) was a very memorable year in the history of examinations in China and even in the world.

Cewen test, today known as Question-Response, was applied in the first written examination in history, with the answer called “Duice (response and strategy)”. Among over a hundred people participating in the Cewen test, Chao Cuo gave the most satisfactory answer, and won the title of “Gao Di (the top one with the best grades)”. Thus, he was promoted to the position of Zhongdafu (officials in charge of political and military affairs) from Taizijialing (officials in charge of prince’s affairs). It

⁹ *History of Western Han Dynasty*, Volume 4, “Annals of Emperor Wen”

can be seen that the rank of Duice (response and strategy) was evaluated in Zhaoju imperial examination, and the position was granted on the basis of the rank. From then on, in Xianliang Fangzheng talent selection through Zhaoju imperial examination in the Han dynasty, it was the emperor himself who set the questions and assessed whether Duice was superior or inferior. This written examination method, in which the emperor designed the test subjects, local officials recommended candidates, the emperor proposed Cewen questions, the examinees answered, and their answers were evaluated, has been followed ever since and has become an important form of examination in ancient China, which was widely used in Xiucai and Xiaolian imperial examination during the Han and Tang dynasties, Zhike (irregular subjects) examination during the Tang and Song dynasties, and Dianshi imperial examination during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and had existed for over two thousand years.

Zhaoju imperial examination became an important part of the imperial examination during the Tang dynasty, which was used to select “exceptional talents”. If Zhiju was one form of imperial examination, it should be recognized explicitly that Teke (one imperial examination with irregular subjects) had already appeared under the reign of emperor Wen in the Western Han dynasty. Undoubtedly, the term “imperial examination (Keju)” had different meanings in a broad and narrow sense. The narrow one referred to Jinshi imperial examination that was the system of talent selection after establishing the Jinshi subject in the Sui dynasty. While, the broad one referred to the imperial examination to select talents through the different subjects, that was the system of tests issued by the rulers or Chaju talent selection from the Western Han dynasty. However, in a broad sense, the talent selection was mainly based on recommendation, with examination as a supplement. Therefore, Chaju talent selection can be regarded as the predecessor of the imperial examination, and accordingly, imperial examination in a narrow sense was generally used as “Keju”.

In the first lunar month of the first year (140 BC) during Jianyuan (reign title), Emperor Wu ascended the throne in the Han dynasty. In the tenth lunar month of that year, Emperor Wu issued an edict to order the deputy of prime minister, censor, marquis, chief executive, executive, the deputy of feudal lord's prime minister to recommend the virtuous, righteous, upright, and honest talents. Prime Minister Wei Wan submitted a remonstrance, “The talents who researched the opinions of Shen Buhai, Shang Yang, Han Fei, Su Qin, and Zhang Yi and