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A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China

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In the next chapters, I turn from the external, institutional, social, and political analysis of civil examinations in practice, which I engaged in in Chapters 3 to 5, to the internal, popular, literary and classical forms of knowledge that informed the examination curriculum and late imperial literati culture. The next object of analysis will be those cultural dimensions that existed outside the precincts of late imperial civil examinations. The cultural forms and popular images we will specify were not mere epiphenomena, hollow rhetoric, or superstitious belief that grew out of an autocratic political regime wedded to a savvy literati elite. Had they been empty cultural forms, the examination process would not have lasted very long, nor would it have voluntarily drawn into its “cultural prisons” the best and brightest of the empire.

CHAPTER SIX

Emotional Anxiety, Dreams of Success, and the Examination Life

Because the young and the old competed "equally" in the examination market, youths and old men brought different personal experiences into the examination compound. The rituals of success looked alluring to the young, while the tortures of failure were the common denominator of older men still seeking an elusive degree. For all, however, their emotional tensions, based on years of preparation for young boys, and even more years of defeat for old men, were the human response to the 'dynasty' examination regime. Its venues were places of opportunity for the young who succeeded and "cultural prisons" for the old who never made it out. The pressure to succeed molded their individual characters. For most persistence, symbolized by the career of *optimus* Chang Chien 張騫 (see Chapter 5), became a way of life. Others sublimated their frustrations into cultural symbols of elite and popular expression and, occasionally, political resistance to the cultural prisons that tormented them.

The institutional mechanisms of the civil examinations mediated between elite intellectual discourse and the everyday lives of literati. Emotional tensions, which brought a few fame and fortune but left most dealing with despair or disappointment, were the catalysts in their lives. This chapter documents how often literati turned to religion and the manastic arts in their efforts to channel their emotional responses to the classical

¹. See Fang I-chih's 方以智 (1611-71) account of "Seven Solutions" ("Chi'i-chieh" 七解), written in 1637, which presented options for a young man from a family of means, one of them being the "examination man"; translated in Willard Peterson, *Bitter Gourd*, pp. 44-47.

² See Nivison, "Protest against Conventions and Conventions of Protest," pp. 177-200. Cf. Walter Abell, *The Collective Dream in Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 57-66.

regime of competitive local, provincial, and metropolitan examinations. Shang Yen-liu 商衍鑒, the last Ch'ing *tertius*, on the 1904 civil palace examination, wrote about his examination experiences: "In 1891 at the age of twenty, my [brilliant] cousin passed the provincial examination and became a *chü-jen*. However, upon his return the following year to Kuang-chou [Canton], from the metropolitan examination in Peking, he fell ill and died soon after. My mother said to me, 'Too much intelligence shortens one's life—better be a bit stupid like you.'"³

Popular novels such as Wu Ching-tzu's (1701–54) *The Scholars* and stories by P'u Sung-ling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) were usually written in the vernacular by those who failed classical examinations and therefore mocked the selection process in a popular idiom. Such fictional accounts were not "transparent texts." Their narratives must be read as cultural constructions that frame the examination process from the point of view of the failures. Because such works appealed to both elites and non-elites as a "popular" audience, I intentionally problematize the "popular-elite" dichotomy below and show the complex and fluid interaction between both poles.⁴ Recorded dreams and auspicious events were manifest, nonofficial accounts of the underlying, collective mental tensions of the examination candidates that publicly explained their individual success or failure.⁵

Hence, the anxiety produced by examinations was a historical phenomenon, which was experienced most personally and deeply by boys and men, given the gender ideology of their patriarchal society. Fathers and mothers, sisters and extended relatives, were not immune to this anxiety. They shared in the experience and offered comfort, solace, and encour-

3. Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, "Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System," p. 52. My thanks to Tom Metzger for telling me about this source.

4. See Robert Hegel, "Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Ch'ing Vernacular Literature: A Case Study," in David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp. 125–26; and Ropp, *Dissent in Early Modern China*, pp. 18–32. Cf. Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, pp. 58–60. Because an exclusive dichotomy between "popular culture" and "elite discourse" will not explain adequately how the civil examination regime penetrated both elite and non-elite cultural life, I use "popular" to mean "nonofficial" rather than "non-elite." Hence, I mean by "popular" those techniques that elites and non-elites used to mediate fate and invoke religion to deal with their lives. My thanks to Eugenia Lean for her advice on this question.

5. See Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 132–81, on the use of dreams in late Ming literature. For Sung examinations and literati dreams of success, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, pp. 177–81.

agement, but the direct, personal experience of examination success or failure belonged to the millions of male examination candidates who, as we have seen, competed with each other against increasingly difficult odds. A deep chasm of social and political making separated the official classical standards of the examiners (see Chapter 8) from the religious strategies candidates were willing to appropriate therapeutically to assuage their fears and emotions.

The frustration of literati in civil examinations was a common theme since Sui and T'ang times.⁶ The required levels of memorizing characters, wide reading in classical works, and years of training needed to write classical essays (and regulated verse after 1756) entailed a childhood and young adulthood that sons of elites shared over time across generations and empirewide across linguistic and geographic barriers. Those who short-circuited the educational regime by mastering model examination essays and leaving the task of memorization to others were nonetheless classically literate if they hoped to get beyond the local licensing and qualifying examinations and enter officialdom.

Classical illiteracy was common in local tests, as we saw in the account of *tung-sheng* and *sheng-yuan* in Chapter 4, but the classically illiterate were generally weeded out in provincial examinations, where corruption inside the examination compound and examiner bribery were more telling alternate routes for classical literates to gain *chü-jen* and *chin-shih* degrees. In a triennial provincial examination market with 50 to 75 thousand candidates in Ming times, and 100 to 150 thousand in the Qing, the challenge was not to demonstrate classical literacy, which was the cultural divider for boys in local examinations, but to write elegant eight-legged essays that would stand out in a sea of essays by youths and old men who had honed their writing skills for decades. An attempt by a classically illiterate candidate to buy a lower degree was exposed quickly enough when such a young man bribed his way into office and was found out. The Ch'ing court in particular was always on the watch for such consequences.⁷

Examination success usually meant career success, although the terms of such success changed dramatically from Ming to Ch'ing (see Chapter 3). All but *chin-shih* degree-holders were downclassed by the late Ming, and in the Ch'ing even *chin-shih* degree-holders frequently had to wait years to gain appointment as a magistrate or prefect if they finished in the bottom

6. *Tang-Sung k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu* 唐宋科場異聞錄 (Recording unusual matters heard in the T'ang and Sung examination grounds), Wei-ching-t'ang shu-fang 味經堂書坊 edition (reprint, Canton: Ch'ien-t'ang, 1873). See also Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, pp. 169–77.

7. See *Ch'in-ting mo-k'an t'iao-li*, 1.1a–19b.

tier of graduates. Enough local social prestige, legal privileges, and corvée labor exemptions continued to accrue to both *sheng-yuan* and *chü-jen*, however, to keep most young and old men from elite families competing in the examination market. The diminishing opportunities for success via civil examinations by the nineteenth century, however, severely exacerbated the human tensions that had been autochthonous to the market since the expansion of civil examinations during the T'ang and Sung dynasties. No dynasty had faced a demographic expansion of elites commensurate with the Ch'ing.⁸

Growing up as a male member of an elite family in Ming and Ch'ing times presupposed long-standing patterns of socialization. Adults defined childhood for millions of young men in terms of a regimen for daily examination preparation. Male anxiety and literati frustrations went hand in hand. What I call "male anxiety" was an elite social and intellectual phenomenon generated by the historical experiences of men in individual and family life. Indeed, as Judith Zeitlin has noted, Ming doctors had diagnosed a particular form of "emotional stasis" (*yü* 鬱), whose discernible symptoms of anxiety (*ssu-yü* 思鬱) they associated with failed examination candidates continually frustrated in their quest for success. There was no single response to this emotional pressure any more than there was an autonomous gentry-merchant elite to dictate that response. There were, however, discernible patterns in how Chinese elites dealt with the historical reality of male anxiety in the examination life, its relentless institutional machinery, and the diverse mental tensions the process engendered.⁹

8. In this regard, see the career of Chang Hsueh-ch'eng in the late eighteenth century, described by David Nivison in *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsueh-ch'eng (1738-1801)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966); and my *From Philosophy to Philology*, pp. 130-31. See also David Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China," pp. 50-67.

9. For earlier use of the concept of "male anxiety," see T'ien Ju-k'ang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp. 83-89, which usefully links the frustrations of Ming scholars to the prohibitive level of competition in civil examinations. T'ien, however, delimits "male anxiety" to a single, unmediated response common to all literati in the Yangtzu delta and thereby overdetermines its scope as the only explanation for the rise of the ideal of female chastity in the late empire. For a critical review of *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity*, see Ropp, pp. 605-06, in *Journal of Asian Studies* 48, 3 (August 1989). See also Martin Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 26-27, for an account of the "problematic literati self," which usefully describes the intellectual tensions reflected in mid-Ch'ing novels. For the illness associated with examination candidates, see Chang Chieh-pin 張介賓, *Ching-yueh ch'üan-shu* 景岳全書 (Complete works of physician Chang) (Shanghai: Science and Technology Press, 1984), pp. 357-59. Women with unfulfilled sexual longing were also likely victims of such "emotional stasis." My thanks to Judith Zeitlin for photocopying and sending

RELIGION AND THE POPULAR VALORIZATION OF EXAMINATIONS

In the popular imagination, "fate" (*ming* 命) typically was used to explain away the inherent social and cultural inequalities at the heart of the selection process. Many accepted their success or failure because they believed that the gods had determined the final ranks beforehand.¹⁰ Members of the elite, when unsuccessful in the examination competition themselves, could therapeutically invoke fate to explain why others succeeded when in fact they were not superior in any way.¹¹ Faced with the uncertainties of daily life, many Chinese, whether elite or peasant, had turned to gods, temples, and local religious practices to negotiate the terms of their normality. One of the ironies of literati life was that an educational regime that tested the generally areligious classical canon of the Four Books and Five Classics, and had forbidden Taoist and Buddhist monks from entering the examination hall and their patrologies from inclusion in the official curriculum, was imbued with so many outside religious sensibilities that there were no clear markers between religious and examination life (see also Chapter 8). In the T'ang dynasty, for instance, an imperial decree commanded that official examination candidates should be lodged at the Kuang-chai Temple 光宅寺 if they were unable to return home after an examination that lasted into the evening. During the Sung dynasty, literati temples honoring Confucius may have been venues of prayer before examinations.¹²

ing this source to me. She discusses "stasis" as an illness in her forthcoming article entitled "Making the Invisible Visible: Images of Desire and Constructions of the Female Body in Chinese Literature, Medicine, and Art."

10. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 265-68. For a late Ming example of fate deciding rank, see *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-ven-lu*, B.31a. On the belief in the futility of bribery because fate determined success, see B.53a-b. Miyazaki Ichisada relied on this and similar sources for the many anecdotes in his *China's Examination Hell*, translated by Schirokauer, but unfortunately Miyazaki did not subject the stories to systematic analysis. For the Sung, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, pp. 177ff.

11. Ropp, *Dissent in Early Modern China*, pp. 91-119; and Barr, "Pu Songling [P'u Sung-ling] and the Qing [Ch'ing] Examination System," pp. 103-9. When compared with the "fatalistic" ideologies common among Buddhist or Hindu peasants in South and Southeast Asia, for example, the Chinese ideology of social mobility through examination success did affect peasant beliefs in the usefulness of education and created a climate of rising expectations among low-level licentiates who dreamed of examination glory but frequently rebelled politically when their hopes were repeatedly dashed.

12. See Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, p. 226. Liao Hsien-huei is currently preparing a Ph.D. dissertation in History at UCLA, tentatively entitled "Praying for a Revelation:

To cope with the educational and examination pressures, candidates since the T'ang and Sung dynasties had appealed to local deities for moral support. Such forms of religious practice were designed to redirect the candidate's anxieties about success and to help him in the examination market. The Taoist cult of Wen-ch'ang 文昌, the patron deity of the literary arts in medieval times, had by the Southern Sung dynasty become an object of veneration associated with the deity's predictions of examination success. Official recognition came to the cult under the Yuan. Yü Chi 虞集 (1272–1348), who had supported the Mongol reestablishment of civil examinations in 1314–15 (see Chapter 1), described Wen-ch'ang's appeal to literati:

When the Sung perished, Shu [Ssu-ch'uan province] was ravaged and not one of the inhabitants survived. The offerings to the gods were suspended. After the examination had been abolished for more than forty years we heard of no supernatural feats from Wen-ch'ang. In 1314, when the Son of Heaven made an especially sagacious decision and, clearly summoning all within the empire, selected officials through the examinations, the people of Shu gradually began to offer sacrifice to Wen-ch'ang again.¹³

The "Cinnamon Record" (*Kuei-chi* 桂籍) in the deity's 1181 revelation of the *Hua-shu* (Book of transformations) stipulated Wen-ch'ang's spiritual influence in civil examinations:

The Cinnamon Record of scholars is administered by the Heavenly Bureau. Success or failure, glory or decline, none escape their fate. Dreams reveal the examination topic according to the degree of one's sincerity.

Hidden Merit determines one's position on the placard of successful candidates.

A man of humble heritage may bring his wife enfeoffment and his son an assured office;

An official trailing purple, a golden seal at his waist, begins as a white-robed candidate.

To repay the student who works sleepless nights in the study
I have strived in literary and moral refinement, not recoiling at toil!

The Mental Universe of the Song Examination Candidates, 960–1276," which investigates the Sung aspects of civil examinations and popular religion. See also Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China*, passim; and Julia K. Murray, "The Temple of Confucius and Pictorial Biographies of the Sage," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 2 (May 1996): 269–300.

¹³. See Terry Kleeman, "Introduction," pp. 49, 73–75, in Kleeman, trans., *A God's Own Tale*.

Because of my unstinting devotion to the classics through many incarnations as a scholar, the Thearch commanded me to take charge of the Cinnamon Record in the Heavenly Bureau. All local and national examinations, rankings, colors of clothing, salaries, and enfeoffments were memorialized to me and even promotions and demotions within the civil and military bureaucracies were under my supervision.¹⁴

Wen-ch'ang's efficacy was concretely demonstrated in a story included in the 1194 continuation of the *Hua-shu* about Li Teng 李登, a talented candidate who had consulted with a Taoist priest to find out why after four decades he had still not gotten the *chin-shih* degree. The priest checked with Wen-ch'ang and learned:

When Li Teng was first born he was bestowed a jade seal and was fated to place first on the district examinations at eighteen and be *optimus* at the palace examinations at age nineteen. At thirty-three he should have reached the rank of chancellor of the right. After being selected he spied on a neighbor woman, Chang Yen-niang. Although the affair had not been resolved, he had her father, Chang Ch'eng, bound and thrown into jail. For this crime his success was postponed ten years, and he was demoted to the second group of successful examinees. After being selected at the age of twenty-eight, he encroached upon and seized the dwelling of his elder brother, Li Feng, and this resulted in litigation. For this his success was postponed another ten years, and he was demoted to the third group of graduates. After being selected at the age of thirty-eight, he violated in his room in Ch'ang-an Madame née Cheng, the wife of a commoner, then framed her husband, Pai Yuan, for a crime. For this his success was postponed a further ten years, and his standing was demoted to the fourth group. After being selected at the age of forty-eight, he stole Ch'ing-niang, the maiden daughter of his neighbor Wang Chi. As an unrepentant evil-doer, he has already been erased from the records. He will never pass.

Such moral rigor in religious discourse about the examinations attached an easily understood level of popular meaning and ethical significance to the literary examinations, which rationalized and explained the examiners' rankings in light of cosmological justice, not classical essay content or technique.¹⁵

In the Ming dynasty, the Wen-ch'ang cult flourished as never before. Fifteenth-century accounts of examination candidates frequently mentioned their visits to Wen-ch'ang temples (*Wen-ch'ang she* 文昌社) in their community or on their way to the provincial or metropolitan examina-

¹⁴. Kleeman, trans., *A God's Own Tale*, pp. 290–91.

¹⁵. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 270–71.

tions in larger cities. Licentiates, for example, paid a group visit to a T'ai-yuan 太原, Shan-hsi, Wen-ch'ang temple in 1441. In 1454 the heralded Ming scholar-official Ch'iu Chün was still preparing for the metropolitan examinations ten years after he had finished first on the Kuang-tung provincial examination. In a dream Ch'iu spoke with Wen-ch'ang, who praised Ch'iu for his sincerity in studies and promised that Ch'iu would pass the upcoming examination and receive his *chin-shih* degree ranked one of the top graduates. It became de rigueur for Ming candidates, such as the Wang Yang-ming follower Yang Ch'i-yuan 楊起元 (1547-99), who was known to insert Ch'an doctrine into his examination essays (see Chapter 7), to claim that they passed only after consulting the "Divine Lord Wen-ch'ang" (文昌帝君).¹⁶

An example of a religious cult for a deified historical figure frequently invoked by Ming and Ch'ing examination candidates was that of Kuan-ti 關帝, the god of war and sometimes wealth. Kuan-ti had been apotheosized in medieval times from the loyal warrior-official Kuan Yu 關羽, who was romanticized in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to Lord Kuan 關公, a deity who took pity on humans and granted merchants economic wealth and literati examination success.¹⁷ His empirewide cult "glorified the loyal and rewarded the good" by measuring human acts according to the "standards of merit and evil." Under the Ch'ing, the Yung-cheng emperor organized the Kuan-ti cult into a hierarchy of temples throughout the empire that the court appropriated as official guardians of the dynasty.¹⁸

In 1547, for example, it was noted that Kuan-ti repaid an examination candidate, Chang Ch'un 張春, with provincial and metropolitan success, after he asked Chang in the latter's dream to treat his ear illness. Chang was staying in a temple that had an image of Kuan-ti, and after awakening, Chang discovered that the ear on the image was plugged with honey, which he removed. The next night Chang again dreamed that Kuan-ti had thanked him for his cure and that he would not forget Chang's kind act. In the late Ming, a chronically ill licentiate dreamed that Kuan-ti had

16. See *Ch'en-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, A.14a, for the visit of licentiates to the T'ai-yuan temple, A.17a-b, on Ch'iu Chün, and B.13a, on Yang Ch'i-yuan. For discussion, see Angela Leung (Liang Ch'i-tzu 梁其姿), *Shih-shan yü chiao-hua: Ming-Ch'ing te tz'u-shan tsu-chih* 施善與教化：明清的慈善組織 (Performing merit and transforming through culture: charitable institutions in Ming and Ch'ing) (Taipei: Lien-ching Press, 1997), pp. 132-34.

17. Kuan Yu was honored first as a "lord" (*kung* 公), before later becoming a "king" (*wang* 王), and then in late Ming times he became an "emperor" (*ti* 帝).

18. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 159-61; and Prasenjit Duara, "Supercribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, 4 (November 1988): 783-85.

told him he would recover and pass the next examination, but later, because of his avarice after recovering, he failed, according to Kuan-ti, in order that "heaven's principles" (*tien-li* 天理) would not be harmed. Kuan-ti explained himself when the candidate came to the temple and used bamboo sticks (*ch'iu-ch'ien* 求籤) to divine why he had failed the examination. In 1619 eight graduates of that year's metropolitan examination were said to have been on a list of graduates that Kuan-ti had presented in a dream.¹⁹

Another prominent late imperial examination cult to a historical figure was devoted to the early Ming official Yü Ch'ien 于謙 (1398-1457). During the Oirat campaign and T'u-mu debacle, Yü and others in the court had replaced the Cheng-tung emperor (r. 1436-49), when he was ransomed by the Oirats, with his younger brother (see Chapter 1). The new Ching-tai emperor (r. 1450-56) then led the successful defense of Peking. After returning and spending several years as a prince, the former emperor retook the throne in 1457 in a coup d'état, after which Yü Ch'ien and other officials, who had sacrificed their emperor in 1449, were accused of treason and executed. Yü Ch'ien's name was rehabilitated in 1466, and his son petitioned in 1489 to establish a memorial shrine for his father in his native Hang-chou near Ch'ien's grave site. Yü Ch'ien's posthumous title was later, in 1590, changed to Chung-su 忠肅, which became the name for his shrine. Another shrine was erected in Peking.²⁰

Yü Ch'ien's grave site and shrine, known as the "Yü Chung-su tz'u" 于忠肅祠, became in late Ming and Ch'ing times a popular venue for Che-chiang examination candidates to stop on their way to the provincial and metropolitan examinations, where they would implore the spirit of Yü Ch'ien for guidance and signs of future examination success. As with Kuan-ti, Yü Ch'ien represented a historical figure whose loyal acts had transcended his times and whose pure spirit could affect the fates of others, but the Yü Ch'ien cult was localized and not empirewide. Many candidates associated their subsequent successes with dreams while staying in the Hang-chou shrine. The 1652 *optimus*, Tsou Chung-i 鄒忠倚, for example, although he was from Wu-hsi in Chiang-su province, conjoined his success with a visit to the Yü Chung-su shrine as a boy; there he had dreamed of seeing Yü Ch'ien, who told him his future ranking.²¹

19. *Ch'en-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, A.46a, B.30a-31a, and B.32b-33a.

20. *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, pp. 1608-11.

21. See *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ai*, 74.91-92, 74.95. See also *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu* 國朝科場異聞錄 (Recording unusual matters heard in the Ch'ing examination grounds), Wei-ching-t'ang shu-fang 味經堂書坊 edition (reprint, Canton: Ch'ien-t'ang, 1873), 1.15b-16a. The Yü Ch'ien Shrine in Hang-chou is now under repair. When I visited it in August 1995, it was closed to the public, but Professor Wu Kuang 吳光 of the Che-chiang Academy of Social Science and I were permitted to walk through it.

Popular Lore and Religion

These religious cults were honored in Ch'ing times with visits by countless numbers of examination candidates. Many of their experiences in seeking the intervention of Wen-ch'ang, Kuan-ti, and Yü Ch'i'en were published in two collections of *I-wen lu* 異聞錄 (Records of unusual matters heard in the examination grounds), which were based on accounts of Ming and Ch'ing examination candidates and emphasized the otherworldly and mysterious aspects of the examination market. As a subgenre of the *chih-kuai* 志怪 (records of anomalies) collections that had proliferated since medieval times, the Ming and Ch'ing *I-wen lu* were continuations of earlier T'ang and Sung records of unusual events in the civil examinations, and they represented the popular perceptions of Chinese that reverberated inside and outside the examination compounds.²² But given the expansion of the examinations to counties, departments, and prefectures on a regular basis, and the increase in the number of candidates empirewide, the numbers of such accounts increased dramatically during the Ming, so much so that, as we shall see, examiners made such anomalies a frequent object of questioning in the examinations themselves.²³

In addition to such late imperial cults, both Buddhist and Taoist temples served as spiritual sites to help literati cope with the mental and emotional demands of the civil examinations. Usually, the temples overlapped with the empirewide Wen-ch'ang and Kuan-ti shrines. Kuan-ti, for example, had already been appropriated as a Buddhist deity in the T'ang, and during the late empire Kuan-ti's forbidding statue stood guard at the gate of most Buddhist temples.²⁴ In 1550, for instance, a Buddhist monk used the technique of physiognomy (*hsiang* 相) to predict the success of Hsu Chung-hsing 徐中行 (1517-78) in the forthcoming 1550 metropolitan examination. The monk told Hsu that he was destined to remain a *chu-jen* degree-holder for the rest of his life and never hold a higher office than county magistrate. When Hsu indicated displeasure with his fate, the

22. See Kenneth DeWoskin, "The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction," in Andrew Plaks, ed., *Chinese Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 21-52; and Glen Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 64. For discussion of how popular culture "reverberated" in elite society, see Paul Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats: The Cult of Marshall Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 113-15.

23. See the *Ch'en-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu* and *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, both cited above.

24. See Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 1993), pp. 288-90.

monk told him that "hidden virtue" (*yin-te* 隱德) was required to escape the "fixed regularities" (*ting-shu* 定數) of his physiognomy. Hsu nodded in agreement, and although he was very poor, he collected thirty taels of gold from his writing talents and secretly dropped the gold into Lake T'ai for the fish. When the monk saw Hsu again, he immediately saw hidden virtue in Hsu's countenance, and declared that he would become a *chin-shih* the next year.

Because Hsu Chung-hsing also became a high court official, the story of his changing his fate was a parable about the examination market in the silver age.²⁵ This clear moral inversion of the corrupt uses of gold and silver to buy examination success by paying off examiners could also take the form of "spirit-money" used in temples and shrines to honor the dead and to redeem one's moral debts. In Hsu's documented case of karmic "good deeds," the gold, like spirit-money, translated into a spiritual "payment" that yielded worldly success. Just as cultural resources invested in a classical education were the linguistic key to a candidate's examination success, so too the investments in shrines and temples and faith in spiritual matters brought with them peace of mind, hope, and solace in the face of likely examination failure.²⁶

Similarly in 1594, a Taoist scolded Chang Wei-yen 張畏巖, who, after seeing the results posted, attacked the civil examiners for failing him on a 1594 provincial examination. The Taoist priest had laughed at Chang and claimed that he could tell from Chang's physiognomy that his essays were not outstanding enough. When Chang angrily asked the priest how he knew his essays were inadequate, the Taoist replied that essay writing required spiritual peace and equanimity (作文貴心氣和平). Chang's commotion over his failure demonstrated that his mind was not at peace, the priest added.

Chang then asked for guidance, and the Taoist told him that heaven established one's fate based on good works. Chang replied that he was a poor literatus and could not afford to practice good deeds, to which the Taoist appealed to a notion of "hidden merit" (*yin-kung* 隱功) that emanated from the mind. Such unlimited merit was not based on wealth but on emotional maturity and spiritual peace, the Taoist contended, and Chang had simply wasted his energies by attacking his examiners. At this, Chang became enlightened. Later, in 1597, Chang dreamed that the

25. See Richard von Glahn, "The Enchantment of Wealth: The God Wutong in the Social History of Jiangnan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, 2 (December 1991): 695-704.

26. *Ch'en-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, A.47a-b. For the roots of Buddhist soothsayers in the Sui and T'ang, see Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, pp. 250-53, 286-97.

provincial examination roster for that year was still missing one name for someone who could accumulate virtue and avoid error. Chang fulfilled the requirement and passed the 1597 provincial examination ranked number 105.²⁷

Internal, mental well-being was the spiritual correlate to the external pressures and educational requirements to succeed in late imperial examinations. In this episode, the Taoist ideals of spiritual enlightenment were made available in passing to a high-strung candidate who clearly had spent years preparing for the provincial examination and could not accept his failure when he saw the final list of graduates. Again, not only were religion and morality the proper way to deal with failure without blaming the examinations themselves, but success was ultimately tied to spiritual enlightenment and emotional maturity. Religion and literati life had together created a remarkably healthy psychological haven from the cruel realities of the examination compound.

Morality was the typical ad hoc measure of examination success. Before the 1481 metropolitan examination, for example, Wang Yang-ming's father, Wang Hua 王華, was staying with a wealthy family, whose master was sonless although he had many concubines. One evening the master sent one of the concubines to Wang's room with a note saying that this was his idea so that he might have an heir. Wang refused the liaison, writing in reply that this would "alarm the heavens" (*k'ung-ching t'ien-hsia* 恐驚天下). The next day a Taoist was invited into the house to pray for the ancestors, but he fell into a deep sleep in the middle. On awakening, the priest related that he had attended an examination in heaven, where the *chuang-yuan* was announced. The Taoist, upon questioning, didn't dare divulge the name of the *optimus*, but he remembered that in the dream the procession in front of the man was carrying a banner that read "alarm the heavens."²⁸

Karma and retribution were also cultural constructs used in late imperial times to elucidate the examination market. Yuan Huang 袁黃 (1533–1606), one of the leaders of late Ming efforts to link Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (*san-chiao* 三教), encouraged the use of morality books (*shan-shu* 善書) to measure an individual's societal status and worth. Yuan contended that "success in the examinations depends entirely on secret virtue." He also maintained that examination success did not rest on a candidate's ability but rather on his ancestors' store of merit. "Ledgers of merit and demerit," as Yuan Huang and his moral bookkeep-

ing followers called them, became literati equivalents to the popular religious notions of good works, moral rebirth, and worldly success.²⁹

In an examination market in which most candidates for the *chü-jen* and *chin-shih* degrees in particular regarded their levels of classical literacy and memory as roughly equivalent (they rarely blamed themselves for their failures), most sought the explanation for why one failed while another passed in religious terms. The impact of Buddhism and Taoism in the mental life of literati who mastered Ch'eng-Chu learning for the examinations was widespread.³⁰ At times, such as the late Ming, the doctrines of Chinese religion, particularly those of Ch'an Buddhism, entered the actual content of the examination essays (see Chapter 7), but for the most part, the candidates were able to keep to the required Tao Learning curriculum in their classical essays at the same time that their mental lives betrayed much wider sources of personal inspiration and moral support.

Many literati believed in reincarnation. In the 1642 provincial examinations, a candidate received prior information about the questions from an auspicious woman who appeared in his dreams and turned out to have died the day the candidate was born.³¹ Some claimed that certain coincidences in the life of the 1659 metropolitan *hui-yuan* Chu Chin 朱錦, for instance, indicated that he was reincarnated from a century earlier.³² As a young boy of three and four, Ch'en Yuan-lung 陳元龍 had dreamt of Buddhist chants, but his mother urged him toward literati studies (*ju-hsueh* 儒學) instead, claiming that the teachings of Buddhism were not worth following. When she passed away, Ch'en refused to take any examinations due to her death. The head of the 1679 special *po-hsueh hung-tz'u* examination encouraged Ch'en to accept an invitation to participate, but to no avail. Ch'en subsequently finished third on the 1685 palace examination and held high office. The tensions of Buddhism versus an official life had taken Ch'en Yuan-lung several decades to resolve.³³

Despite the obvious advantages seen in the life of an official, Ming-Ch'ing religious literature also offered young men a distinct path separate from the examination life. In the values spread through *pao-chüan* 寶卷

²⁹. For discussion, see Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 17–27, 68, 231–32.

³⁰. See the account of a 1595 dream that the *optimus* must come from a family that for three generations has not eaten beef (三代不食牛肉), in *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.24a. See also Hsu K'o, *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74–99, which relates how in 1750 Kuan-yin 觀音 predicted examination success.

³¹. *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 3.97–98.

³². *Ibid.*, 4.119–20.

³³. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 21.91–92.

²⁷. *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.24b–25a.

²⁸. See *ibid.*, A.24b. See also Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, pp. 96–97, although the translation strays from the original.

(precious scrolls) scriptures dating from the early Ming, which recorded the efforts of moral persons who attain salvation, the combination of popular Buddhist notions of karma and literati aspirations for enlightenment sometimes presented the examination road to fame and fortune as the way to perdition. The contest between this-worldly success and other-worldly enlightenment could also challenge the family values of daily life. Buddhist and Taoist clergy were also models encouraging men and women to steer clear of social entanglements and follow a life of celibacy.³⁴

Even when this religious ideal was compromised, a heroine such as Hsiang-nü 香女 ("Fragrance") in the *Liu Hsiang pao-chüan* 劉香寶卷 (*Liu Hsiang's* precious scroll), first published in the eighteenth century, could dismiss her husband's examination aspirations by saying, "What's the use of reading books?... It's better to study the Way; profit lies therein. To be an official for one life is to gain enemies for ten thousand lifetimes. I am pointing out to you the path to the Western Land. I urge you, husband, to take the earliest opportunity to practice spiritual discipline." Fragrance's mother-in-law, enraged, forbade her son from seeing Fragrance and ordered him to prepare for the examination. Eventually he became an *optimus*, but his and his family's fate was an early death ordained by the Jade Emperor.³⁵ Fragrance, on the other hand, became a sainted religious leader who overcame every worldly obstacle placed in her path.

On the dark side of these uplifting tales of success or escape were the alleged criminal reasons for examination failure. A son dreamed of his dead mother, who told him that his crime of three lives past had come to light. He could not enter school and learn to read until he had expiated his past crimes, which eventually he did. Inside the examination compound, ghosts and apparitions of the past would appear before candidates to remind them of their past transgressions. In the stories, many such young men went crazy or died on the spot.³⁶ In fact, many candidates accepted gossip about a custom that had supposedly developed among examination proctors to unfurl black and red banners after the roll call inside the compound while they called out: "Wrongs will be righted; those aggrieved will take revenge."³⁷

34. See Daniel Overmyer, "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Ch'ing *Pao-chüan*," in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp. 219-54.

35. Ibid., pp. 245-50.

36. *Hsiao-shih i-wen-lu* 小試異聞錄 (Recording unusual matters heard in the local examination grounds), Ch'ien-t'ang, 1873 edition, pp. 3a-4b, 12a-b. See also *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, A.38b-39a.

37. See Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, "Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System," pp. 65-66.

Spirits and ghosts could also play tricks with a candidate's mind, testing his emotional mettle. Wen-ch'ang could just as easily predict that a candidate's papers in the 1640 metropolitan examination would catch fire from the small stove in his cell and would be destroyed, and order him to prepare two copies and keep one in reserve. The candidate obeyed, a fire did burn up his papers, and because of his reserve copy he passed.³⁸ A spirit could give a candidate the wrong questions for an examination in order to ensure that he would be unprepared and that someone else would come out number one.³⁹

Spirits could likewise affect the examiners, as in 1726, when Chang Lei 張壘 allegedly relied on the spirits to ferret out the best paper with "hidden virtue" in the Chiang-nan provincial examination.⁴⁰ In the 1783 Chiang-hsi provincial examination, the examiners were reported to have chosen the top paper based on a dream of one of the examiners. In 1804 a spirit appeared in a provincial examiner's dream and explained the classical merits of a particular essay to him. The spirit pointed out that the candidate had successfully used the *Erh-ya chu-shu* 爾雅注疏 (Scholia to the progress toward correctness) etymological dictionary for one of the sections of his eight-legged essay (see Chapter 5).⁴¹

In 1657 a candidate in the provincial examinations had completed his essays and was waiting in his cell for them to be collected when the god of literature (*k'uei-hsing* 魁星) danced in before his eyes and said that he would be the *chuang-yuan* on this cycle of civil examinations. The spirit asked the candidate to write the two characters for *chuang-yuan* on its own piece of paper. The candidate was elated at this auspicious news and began to write the first character *chuang* 狀, when suddenly the god tipped over his ink-stone and left. Because of the smudges on his official papers, the candidate was disqualified from consideration.⁴²

In an earlier, 1618 provincial examination, the ending was different. A candidate was ill inside the examination compound and fell into a deep sleep without writing any of his essays. After handing in a blank paper to the collection clerks, the candidate assumed he had of course failed, but later he learned that his name was on the final list of graduates. When he looked at his examination papers supplied to him by the examiners, he discovered that the essays had been written in proper, regular script, which he attributed to a helpful spirit in his cell.⁴³

38. *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.45a-b.

39. Ibid., B.54b.

40. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74.124-25.

41. Ibid., 74.102-03, 74.105.

42. *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 4.118.

43. *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.30a.

A profligate life usually led to failure. In 1664 a candidate awaiting the results of the metropolitan examination got drunk and passed out. In his stupor, he recalled his past unfilial behavior toward his mother and father, and of course on awakening discovered he had failed.⁴⁴ During the 1849 Chiang-nan provincial examination, a candidate from the illustrious Hsu family of K'un-shan county, which had garnered several *chin-shih* degrees early in the dynasty, went drinking after the second session, thinking that his high ranking had already been sealed by the essays on the Four Books and Five Classics he had completed. He drank himself drunk and was unable to meet the roll call for entering the compound to complete the third session's required policy questions. The examiners' initially had ranked his eight-legged essays ahead of the eventual *chieh-yuan*, but because his papers for the third session had not been handed in, he was disqualified.⁴⁵

A reformed life, however, would lead to success. In a great turnaround, Chang Chih-tung 張之洞 (1837–1909), gave up his heavy drinking as a youth after one of his elders in his lineage, Chang Chih-wan 張之萬 (1811–97), finished as the empire's *optimus* in 1847. Determined to emulate Chih-wan, Chang finished first on the Shun-t'ien provincial examination in 1852, but only finished third as *t'an-hua* on the 1863 palace examination. Despite his success, Chih-tung's failure to win the coveted status of *optimus* was attributed to his early addiction to drinking.⁴⁶

Sexual promiscuity also loomed large in the popular view of examination success. The candidate who abstained from sex the night before the 1612 Chiang-nan provincial examination, for instance, was rewarded with the highest examination honors, and the one who indulged lost out.⁴⁷ A jilted woman often returned to haunt a candidate in his examination cell, dooming him to eternal failure. Or, if she committed suicide, she could return as a temptress, seduce her tormentor, and leave him for dead.⁴⁸ Another common theme was possession, in which a fox-fairy (*hu* 狐) invaded the candidate's body and took over his mind. In 1879, for instance, a fairy began speaking in a Chiang-hsi dialect through the mouth of a candidate from Hang-chou and had to be appeased with watermelons before she would depart, taking the form of a young wife as she left.⁴⁹

44. *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 4.140–41.

45. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 21.82.

46. Ibid., 21.107.

47. *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.27a.

48. For a 1633 revenge story of a jilted woman, see *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 3.88–89. For another in 1639, see *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.44a 45a. See also Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, pp. 46–47.

49. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74.168. See also Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, pp. 174–81.

These stories and anecdotes reveal how the complex institutional machinery and rigorous curricular content of the civil examinations typically were elided in popular culture as morality tales that fit in with the themes of fairness and justice in government and society. We need not accept the historicity of these entertaining *chih-kuai* collections "recording unusual matters heard in the examination grounds." Such records do reveal, however, a general sense that during the late empire elites and commoners both accepted the civil examinations as a natural part of life and infused them with a religious and cosmological narrative that fully accepted the examination regime and legitimated its place in the emotional life of the candidates and their families.⁵⁰ The therapeutic uses of religion in Ming morality books, which Judith Berling has described as the "management of moral capital," carried over to the examination life. The reorganization of one's emotional experiences as an examination candidate accompanied changes in character ideals to deal with panic and the emptiness of failure. These religious tales of examination success or failure also legitimated the literati examinations as venues for Taoist and Buddhist parables. Popular religion and faith in some compelling symbolic of self-integrating communal purpose helped men cope with their travails and understand themselves better.⁵¹

Techniques for Examination Prediction

To cope better with the pressures of the civil examinations and thereby gain an insight into the nitty-gritty workings of the next examination, candidates and their families also used time-honored techniques of communication with the other world to predict success or failure, to gather clues about the possible quotations from the Four Books that might be selected by examiners, or to divine the riddle that a fortune-teller or dream had elicited from the gods, spirits, and ancestors. "Reading fate" (*k'an-ming* 看命) became an obsession among Ming-Ch'ing examination candidates as they sought some auspicious sign for their prospects in the prohibitive examination market.⁵²

Mantic techniques for analyzing civil examinations took many cultural forms, the chief among them being fate prediction (*suan-ming* 算命) using

50. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 267–68.

51. See Judith Berling, "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital," in *The Romance of the Three Teachings*, in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp. 208–12. See also Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 1–27.

52. Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, p. 173.

the *I-ching*, physiognomy (*k'an-hsiang* 看相),⁵³ spirit-writing (*fu-chi* 扶乩),⁵⁴ deciphering of written words (*ch'ai-tzu* 拆字 or *ts'e-tzu* 測字), dream interpretation (*chan-meng* 占夢), sighting of portents (*chao* 兆), and geomancy (*feng-shui* 風水). Each was practiced in a variety of ways, as Richard Smith's rich account of late imperial fortune-tellers makes clear.⁵⁵ The remarkable degree to which popular culture, Buddhist and Taoist religion, and elite intellectual life interacted in these mantic devices, however, tells us how far off the historical mark our earlier accounts of "Confucian agnosticism" or elite a-religiosity have been.⁵⁶ As we shall see, the late imperial examiners tried to set intellectual limits to such popular techniques. However, even in the policy questions they devised for civil examinations that were designed to show the folly of blindly accepting a strict correlation between earthly and supernatural events, they were trying to influence a world of discourse largely outside their control.

Fate prediction was on the minds of many examination candidates. Based on their acceptance of the Buddhist and Taoist doctrines of karma and moral retribution, which had become an accepted part of Ming examination life, they tried to discern how their "individual fates" (*yuan-fen* 緣分, lit., "karmic allotments") could be calculated using the methods of fate extrapolation (*t'u-suan* 推算), auspicious versus inauspicious day selection (*chi-hsiung* 吉凶), or the eight-characters (*pa-tzu* 八字) of a person's birth. Astrology (*chan-hsing* 占星), complete with Chinese "horoscopes," was widely used by fortune-tellers and Buddhist monks and Taoist priests. It included milfoil divination based on the *Change Classic* (*I-ching*) and numerical systems designed to discern numerological patterns.⁵⁷

53. Chu P'ing-yi 祝平一, *Han-tai te hsiang-jen shu* 漢代的相人術 (The technique of physiognomy in the Han period) (Taipei: Hsueh-sheng Bookstore, 1990), presents the roots of this mantic approach.

54. See Terence Russell, "Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo: A Spirit-writing Cult in Late Ming China," *Asiatische Studien* 44, 1 (1990): 107–40.

55. Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 131–257. See also Wang Ming-hsiung 王明雄, *T'an-t'ien shuo-ming* 談天說命 (On heaven and fate) (Taipei: Huang-kuan Magazine Press, 1988), which presents an overview of all of these techniques as used today.

56. See, for an example, Herrlee Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). For a continuation of this theme, which contends that "Neo-Confucians had much in common with their Puritan contemporaries" and thereby underdetermines the place of cults, gods, and popular culture in literati life, see Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 230. For a more nuanced account, see Martin Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, pp. 143–52.

57. See *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 73.100–19, for Ch'ing examples of reading fate for examination candidates. On the theory behind the practice, see Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, 174–86; and Wang Ming-hsiung, *T'an-t'ien shuo-ming*, pp. 87–102, on specifically Buddhist techniques.

During the Ming dynasty, for example, fate calculations were so common that an illustrated seventeenth-century record of all Ming *chuang-yuan* to 1640 included the eight-character, stem-branch (*t'ien-kan ti-chih* 天干地支, lit., "heavenly stems and earthly branches") combinations for dating each's birth by year, month, day, and hour according to the conventional divination method. The four pairs of stem-branch characters used in the orthodox calendar (*huang-li* 皇曆) and in all almanacs (*t'ung-shu* 通書) were known as the "four pillars" (*ssu-chu* 四柱) of one's fate, and they correlated with one's future official position, wealth, and social standing.⁵⁸ The compilers of the Ming collection added information for each *chuang-yuan*, such as bureaucratic rank, punishments received, and early death, where appropriate, to show the correlations between their birth dates and their fates. The compilers also added a commentary ("Chuang-yuan ming-tsao p'ing-chu" 獻元命造評註) to explain the fate calculations for many of the optimi.⁵⁹

Fortune-tellers also employed star-based techniques for reading fate (*hsing-ming* 星命) to link an individual's personal fate to the heavens and the likelihood of his examination success. These techniques usually incorporated astrological signs, each identified with one of twelve animals (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig), which correlated with the twelve earthly branches. For example, an illustration by Huang Ying-ch'eng 黃應澄 (see Figure 6.1)—included in the Ming collection entitled *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty), initially compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 (1453–1540) and completed by others—shows a diviner pointing out to the 1502 optimus K'ang Hai 康海 (1475–1541) that the southern dipper in the heavens has guaranteed his examination success.⁶⁰

58. On *pa-tzu* methods for reading fate, see Chao Wei-pang, "The Chinese Science of Fate-Calculation," *Folklore Studies* 5 (1946): 313; and Wang Ming-hsiung, pp. 67–72.

59. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 6.38a–42b, 6.43a–48b. See also Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 43, 176–77; and his *Chinese Almanacs* (Hong Kong and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 25–33.

60. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 2.36b–37b. The collection was begun by Ku Ting-ch'en, himself a 1505 optimus (see below), and continued by his grandson Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓 and called *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*. Their version covered Ming *chuang-yuan* from 1371 to 1571. Wu Cheng-en 吳承恩 and Ch'eng I-chen 程一楨 added materials that brought it up to 1604. Materials for 1607–28 were later also added by unknown compilers. We will discuss Ch'ing optimi included in the continuation called *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* and compiled by Ch'en Mei 陳枚 and Chien Hou-fu 簡侯甫, who added materials covering 1631–82 to the Ming collection, below. I have benefited from the research paper on the collection prepared by Chiang Chu-shan 蔣竹山 for my winter 1990 seminar at Tsing Hua University, Hsin-chu, Taiwan. In addition, I have relied on both editions, although I usually cite the Ch'ing version below.



FIGURE 6.1. Pointing to the Little Dipper in 1502. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

The diviner used the positions of the moon and constellations on the ecliptic of the celestial sphere to confirm that the little dipper's location on the lower equatorial was very auspicious for K'ang. According to the diviner, the god of literature was then residing in a place more favorable to a candidate from the northwest, and since K'ang Hai was from Shen-hsi his fortune was more auspicious than that of the metropolitan *hui-yuan* and others who came from the south. The god of literature was associated



FIGURE 6.2. Using Bamboo Sticks to Divine Examination Success in Ch'ing Times. Source: *Tien-shih-chai hua-pao* 點石齋畫報 (The Tien-shih Pavilion's Pictorial), serial 2, vol. 11 (1897), ch'ou 卯, pp. 57b-58a. Reprinted by Yang-chou: Chiang-su Rare Books, 1983.

with the little dipper (*tou-su* 斗宿) in the southern skies, and K'ang Hai's fortune was read in accordance with the traditional mantic view that the southern dipper (*nan-tou* 南斗) guaranteed high official position, reward as a *chin-shih* degree-holder, and a high salary.⁶¹

I-ching divination was widely practiced by fortune-tellers, and candidates often consulted the *Change Classic* for hints about their future success. Frequently such divinations took place in Kuan-*ti* temples (*Kuan-*ti* miao* 關帝廟) where bamboo sticks were used for divination to determine auspicious years for candidates that were related to their eight-character birth information (see Figure 6.2).⁶² Fortune-tellers formed judgments based on

61. Ibid. See also *Chin-shih* (金史), p. 301. My thanks to Chris Cullen for his help in elucidating this figure and the fortune associated with the southern dipper.

62. *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.39a-b.

drawing randomly one of the sixty-four hexagrams and then determining the multivalent symbolism contained in the patterns among the lines, trigrams, and the hexagrams—relationships that were thought to be the keys to making the correct prognostication (*chan 占*). Mantic techniques for divination using the *I-ching* were based on milfoil stalks or their substitutes. Typically bamboo sticks were shaken to select one in fate calculations dealing with examinations.⁶³

The Ch'ing scholar-official Wang Chieh 王杰 (1725–1805), the *optimus* of the 1761 palace examination, for example, had his fate calculated by Ch'en Hung-mou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771) before the 1759 Shen-hsi provincial examination. Ch'en was then governor in Shan-hsi province in the northwest, and Wang was serving on his secretarial staff. Ch'en told Wang that the divination had revealed an auspicious result (*chia-chao 佳兆*) was in store for him.⁶⁴ Ch'en Hung-mou also told Wang Chieh that the bamboo slips (*chu-ch'ien 諸籤*) had revealed Wang's rank, but he wanted to wait until after the Shen-hsi examination to confirm the prediction.

Surprisingly, Wang did not do well on the 1759 provincial examination and was placed on the *fu-pang* list of supplementary *chü-jen*. Ch'en Hung-mou, it turned out, had correctly seen in the bamboo slips that Wang would be the eighth-ranking *fu-pang*. This ranking did not seem auspicious enough to Wang, and the next year he took the special 1760 Shen-hsi provincial examination. This time Ch'en Hung-mou guaranteed success, and he turned out to be right, as Wang finished seventh. By coincidence, the 1760 *chieh-yuan* had the same given name Chieh as Wang's, which the second divination had also predicted.

When Wang Chieh traveled to Peking to take the metropolitan and palace examinations, he again consulted with the *Change Classic* using bamboo slips and learned that he would not finish in the top ten on the metropolitan examination but that his fortune was unlimited for the palace. Ch'en Hung-mou concurred and told Wang that the calculations confirmed (*yu-shu tsai 有數在*) Wang's likely final rank as *chuang-yuan*. Chao I 趙翼 (1727–1814), a Ch'ang-chou 常州 literatus who would become a distinguished military leader and historian, was Wang's chief competitor for top honors in 1761. Chao finished first in the metropolitan examination, while Wang, as predicted, finished eleventh.

In the palace rankings, the examiners initially ranked Chao number one again and Wang rose to third. The Ch'ien-lung emperor, however, looked over the final list, saw that Wang Chieh was from Shen-hsi,^a

63. See Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 94–119.

64. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 73.77–78. Cf. Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 108–19, for other cases of *I-ching* prognostication.

province that had not produced a single *optimus* under the Ch'ing, while Chao I came from a prefecture in Chiang-su province with a rich tradition of *chuang-yuan*, and he reversed their positions, placing Wang first and Chao third. Based on the dynasty's long tradition of regional quotas, the emperor's intervention made legitimate political sense. But in light of Wang's reliance on the *I-ching* and his mentor's divinations, the reversal of ranks was also viewed by Wang and Ch'en as a legitimate act of fate. The emperor had acted to confirm the prescience of the other world.⁶⁵

Indeed, Chao I's remarkable equanimity in the face of this sudden reversal was also read as a sign of his acceptance of his fate, although Chao himself considered his ties to the Grand Council, where he had clerked, as the political reason he had been demoted. Chao bemoaned the fact that he had been too well connected. He maintained that the Ch'ien-lung emperor had not wanted to show favoritism toward a clerk of the prestigious grand councilors. In 1754 there had been an example of someone who had not so rationalized his fate. Ch'u Li-chiang瞿麗江, whose family also lived in Ch'ang-chou prefecture in Chiang-su province, had ranked third on the metropolitan and was preliminarily named the *optimus* on the palace examination. However, when the chief examiner suddenly switched Ch'u's name with the third name on the palace list, his fellow townsman Chuang P'ei-yin莊培因 (1723–59), Ch'u became so distressed that he died on the spot, allegedly from aggravation. If Ch'u, unlike Chao I, was emotionally unable to accept his sudden reversal of fortune, the Chuangs, also from Ch'ang-chou prefecture, had earlier proven that they had paid their moral dues to the demons of fate in the examination marketplace.⁶⁶

Earlier in the 1745 palace examination, for example, Chuang Ts'un-yü 莊存與 (1719–88) had finished second to his hometown, Wu-chin 武進 county, rival Ch'en Wei-ch'eng 錢維城 (1720–72). Ch'en Wei-ch'eng later was one of the senior examiners in the 1754 palace examination, and it was likely due to Ch'en's intervention that Ts'un-yü's younger brother P'ei-yin finished first that year, in part, according to popular lore, to make up for Ts'un-yü's second-place finish in 1745 (莊存與之胞弟).⁶⁷ The secret, internal examiner politics for ranking candidates in 1754 were thus read publicly in light of earlier events in 1745 and rationalized as an act of retribution for the Chuangs and repayment for their earlier loss. The fact that such an intervention was patently unfair by the allegedly impartial

65. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 73.78. See also Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese*, p. 75.

66. *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 7.32b. On Chao I's ties to the Grand Council, see Man-cheong, "Fair Fraud and Fraudulent Fairness," pp. 66–75.

67. *Hui-shih lu*, 1754; and *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 5.29a–b.

standards of the examinations themselves was overlooked and translated instead into a story of fate and delayed success.

Furthermore, earlier in 1727, Ts'un-yü's and P'ei-yin's father, Chuang Chu 莊柱 (1670–1759), had initially been ranked the *optimus* after the palace examination, but later his name was switched with the tenth-place finisher, P'eng Ch'i-feng 彭啟豐 (1701–84) from Su-chou, who had been the metropolitan *hui-yuan*. The Yung-cheng emperor had directly intervened in the final rankings because on recent palace examinations Chiang-su graduates had dominated the top rankings for *chin-shih*, and he wanted to select an *optimus* from a border province instead. He mistakenly thought that someone with the surname of P'eng was likely from outside the Yangtzu delta. When he discovered that P'eng Ch'i-feng was from Su-chou, the cultural center of the Yangtzu delta, the Yung-cheng emperor declined to make another change and decided he could still use the occasion to honor P'eng as the grandson of an earlier *chuang-yuan*, P'eng Ting-ch'iu 彭定求 (1645–1719), the *optimus* in 1676.⁶⁸

What made Chuang Chu's fate more emotionally tolerable for him and his disappointed family, however, was that his mother had already dreamed of three celestial spirits, who appeared before her and assessed the Chuang lineage's chances of success vis-à-vis the P'engs in the upcoming palace examination. With regard to "hidden virtue," the three spirits found the Chuangs and P'engs to be equal. It was only in their "cherishing of written characters" (*hsı-tzu* 惜字) that the P'engs surpassed the Chuangs. Because the P'eng lineage had properly collected, cleansed, and burned in a special furnace all abandoned paper with written characters that they found, they had properly worshiped the Divine Lord Wen-ch'ang, the patron saint of letters and deserved P'eng Ch'i-feng's elevation to *optimus*. This revelation explained the switch in results for the Chuangs. Thereafter, the P'eng lineage in Su-chou and the Chuang lineage in Ch'ang-chou frequently intermarried, and the Chuangs became avid supporters of "Societies for Cherishing Written Characters," which of course explained Chuang Ts'un-yü's and P'ei-yin's later examination success as *pang-yen* in 1745 and *chuang-yuan* in 1754.⁶⁹

The civil examination success of the P'engs and Chuangs was linked in the popular imagination to their lineages' good works and support of pop-

ular religion, which were deemed more important than the cultural resources they had invested in a classical education for their sons. This tale of good works and moral retribution later carried over to the previously unfortunate Ch'ü lineage in Ch'ang-chou prefecture as well. Before the 1814 metropolitan examination, for instance, Ch'ü Jung 翟溶 (Chi-chien 紿諫), a grandson of the tragic Ch'ü Li-chiang, dreamed that Chuang P'ei-yin had appeared before him and presented Jung with a stem of apricot blossoms saying, "We are returning to your family something that belongs to them." This auspicious offering implied that the Chuangs were repaying Ch'ü Jung for the events of sixty years earlier that had led to his grandfather's unexpected death.⁷⁰ As a result, Ch'ü finished first on the metropolitan and fifth overall on the palace examination. Moral retribution was also served by Ch'ü Jung's finishing ahead of Liu Feng-lu 劉逢祿 (1776–1829), the last important scion by his mother of the distinguished Chuang tradition of New Text (*chin-wen* 今文) classical learning in Ch'ang-chou, who ranked only thirty-sixth. In this cautionary tale of trial and tribulation for the competitive sons of illustrious lineages in Ch'ang-chou, closure had been reached. All their allotments of fate had been spent, and good works had triumphed.⁷¹

The rituals of spirit-writing (*fu-chi* 扶乩), in which a spirit medium passively transmitted spirit messages by means of a divining instrument, had been applied to civil examinations since the T'ang and Sung dynasties. During the Sung, *fu-chi* involved the composition of poetry and other literary forms, which required mediums to be masters of the poetic forms used in the belles lettres portions of the examinations.⁷² By the late Ming, although the civil examinations no longer required poetry, this method of communicating with the other world was also used to produce books of moral teachings authored by the spirits themselves. It was both "natural" and culturally acceptable for examination candidates on their way to a local, provincial, or metropolitan civil examination to visit temples known to be auspicious and to ask the medium there for advance notice of the examination questions. Often the interrogator and the spirit exchanged poetic couplets to demonstrate their classical erudition and poetic flair. It

⁶⁸ See Wolfram Eberhard, *Lexikon chinesischer Symbole* (Cologne: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1983), p. 23.

⁶⁹ *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 7.32b. For discussion, see my *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, pp. 59–73.

⁷⁰ See Hsu Ti-shan 許地山, *Fu-chi mi-hsin te yen-chiu* 扶乩迷信的研究 (Research on spirit-writing superstition) (Ch'ang-sha, 1941), pp. 49–50. Russell, "Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo," pp. 108–16, emphasizes how prevalent *fu-chi* was in popular culture and religious life and the importance of poetry for the mediums.

⁶⁸ *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 4.6a. See also Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese*, pp. 616–17.

⁶⁹ *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 4.6a. See also Liang Chi-tzu 梁其姿 (Angela Leung), "Ch'ing-tai te hsi-tzu 'hui'" 清代的惜字會 (Societies for cherishing written characters during the Ch'ing dynasty), *Hsin shih-hsueh* 新史學 (Taiwan) 5, 2 (June 1994): 83–113; and my *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, pp. 52–59.

was also common for the audience to assume that the spirit who wrote through the planchette was a famous poet or writer from the past.⁷³

For example, a candidate on his way to the 1688 metropolitan examination in Peking stopped to ask a medium to communicate with the “writing spirit” (*pi-shen* 筆神) and ask it to predict the upcoming quotations from the Four Books that would appear on the first session of the examination. The spirit replied via the medium by writing on the planchette the two characters for “I don’t know” (*pu-chih* 不知). The candidate then asked the spirit: “How is it that the spirits and worthies have no way of knowing?” The medium then recorded the spirit’s second reply: “I don’t know. I don’t know. And again I don’t know” (不知，不知，又不知).

Meanwhile, a crowd had gathered in the temple, which probably included other examination candidates. They were all amused at the spirit’s apparent profession of ignorance and remained unenlightened. When the candidate was in his examination cell, however, he suddenly realized that the spirit had indeed correctly predicted what the first quotation from the Four Books would be. It was taken from the last chapter of Confucius’ *Analects*, which included three “I don’t knows” in the quotation: “Confucius said, ‘Not knowing fate, a man has no way of becoming a gentleman; not knowing the rites, he has no way of taking a stand; not knowing words, he has no way of judging people’” (孔子曰，不知命，無以為君子也。不知禮，無以立也。不知言，無以知人。). The required quotation for the first eight-legged essay, of course, included the phrase “*pu-chih*” three times. The failure of the candidate to recognize what the spirit was telling him also demonstrated his deficiencies as a gentleman who did not know his own fate.⁷⁴

Among the interesting cultural developments that set the classical and literary context for sessions of spirit-writing were changes in the actual curriculum of the civil examinations over the centuries. In the turn from T’ang-Sung belles lettres to Ming-Ch’ing classical essays, described in Chapter 1, not only did candidates have to adjust their study of the classical canon, but spirits (particularly their mediums!) also had to keep up with the classical curriculum if they hoped to provide the proper guidance when implored for a prediction of examination questions. Hence, from 1370 until poetry testing was resumed in 1756, it made little linguistic sense for mediums to transmit specific poetry lines when queried about the

73. See *Ch’ing-pai lei-ch’ao*, 73.13–14. See also Overmyer, “Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature,” p. 221; Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 226–28; and Judith Zeitlin, “Spirit-writing and Performance in the Work of You Tong (1618–1704),” November 1995 draft, pp. 1–2.

74. *Ch’ing-pai lei-ch’ao*, 73.16. See *Lun-yü yin-te*, 42/20/3. See also Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects*, p. 160.

examinations. Their opinions on most matters, however, still were expressed using poetic forms.⁷⁵

Ironically, one way to trace the changes in the examination curriculum from Sung through Ch’ing times is to follow the changes in the content of the responses spirits “wrote out” on planchettes for candidates. In a local temple, for instance, a candidate once asked the medium there to predict the questions for the upcoming 1843 Che-chiang provincial examination. Suddenly Kuan-ti took hold of the medium and wrote out on the planchette a reply that alluded to the likely questions, but Kuan-ti also added: “I do not read the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. ” The candidate didn’t know what this meant until, while taking the second session of the provincial examination, which after 1787 required candidates to master all of the Five Classics (see Chapter 5), he noted that Kuan-ti had successfully predicted the quotations from the *Change*, *Documents*, *Poetry*, and *Rites* classics. Only the quotation from the *Annals* was missing from Kuan-ti’s prediction, which suggested that Kuan-ti (or the medium) had preferred it when the curriculum had allowed candidates to specialize on one of the Classics. Before 1756, few candidates, like Kuan-ti, had mastered the *Annals* because of the length of its commentaries (see Tables 5.16 and 5.17).⁷⁶

As we shall see in Chapter 10, the period after 1740 was replete with changes in the civil examination curriculum, including the addition of a required poetry question in T’ang regulated verse in 1756. Judith Zeitlin has described, for example, the bafflement of the Han Learning scholar Chi Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) when he and a group of scholars consulted a spirit-writing medium near West Lake in Hang-chou in the late eighteenth century. The poem that appeared through the medium alluded to a famous medieval courtesan and poet whose grave site was nearby and who they thought was probably the actual spirit writing the poem.⁷⁷

What troubled Chi Yun was that the poem the spirit composed was written in T’ang regulated verse (*liü-shih* 律詩), a form that had not been invented during the Southern Ch’i dynasty (479–502), when the spirit had actually lived. “How is it you are able to compose regulated verse?” Chi Yun asked. The spirit-poet replied that spirits also kept up with the times even though they lived in the other world. Chi Yun then asked the spirit-poet to compose lines in the Southern Ch’i dynasty style, which she successfully did via the medium. Still not convinced that the spirit they were communicating with was the actual Six Dynasties courtesan “Little Su” (蘇小小), Chi Yun concluded, curiously, that it was more likely that she

75. Russell, “Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo,” p. 123.

76. *Ch’ing-pai lei-ch’ao*, 73.22.

77. Zeitlin, “Spirit-writing and Performance,” p. 3.

was being impersonated by an unknown ghost from a later period, one who knew T'ang regulated verse very well. And, we might add, one who could provide late eighteenth-century examination candidates with predictions of the lines of T'ang verse needed for the new poetry question.⁷⁸

Similar to spirit-writing, the technique known as “deciphering written words” (*ch'ai-tzu* 拆字 or *ts'e-tzu* 測字), which came from a medium or appeared in a dream, replicated the six paleographical rules of written graph formation. In use in China since the *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu* 說文解字 (Analysis of characters as an explanation of writing) by Hsu Shen 許慎 (58–147), the rules had classified almost ten thousand different characters by sound and structure according to 530 radicals (*pu-shou* 部首). Such philologically technical word analysis was appropriated in popular culture by fortune-tellers and diviners to decipher the cryptic messages often received via spirit-writing.⁷⁹

The semantic, radical component of a graph and its complementary, phonetic component, which had been used together by classical scholars to determine the ancient meaning of the graph, could be turned inside out by clever predictors of fate, who broke characters down into their structural components and then recombined them in efforts to fathom the secret message or pun that was being transmitted through them. In 1406, for example, the Fu-chien literatus Lin Huan 林環 dreamed (see Figure 6.3) that when he was about to take the spring metropolitan and palace examinations, his friend sent him some dog meat (*ch'üan-jou* 犬肉). Later, Lin realized that this had been an auspicious omen (*hsien-chao* 先兆) and that he had been destined by fate to become the 1406 *optimus*.

When the character *ch'üan* 犬 for dog was analyzed by Lin and his Hanlin colleagues, they saw first that it was the right side of the character for *chuang* 狀 in *chuang-yuan* 狀元 (*optimus*). Second, the character for dog was itself both the organizing radical and the first character under the radical for *chuang* 狀. These two methods of *ch'ai-tzu* confirmed that Lin Huan had been assured of becoming the *chuang-yuan*. In essence, this approach gave free rein to the imagination to construct plausible, ad hoc “dissections” of characters to suit the immediate needs of the interpreter.⁸⁰

This technique could also be used to predict future success or failure. Chi Yun, for example, approached a famous “word analyst” from Che-

78. See Chi Yun, *Yueh-wei ts'ao-t'ang pi-chi* 閱微草堂筆記 (Note-form writings from the straw hut for reading subtleties) (Shanghai: Ku-chi Press, 1980), 18.451–52.

79. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 73.90–91. See also Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 43, 201; and Wolfgang Bauer, “Chinese Glyphomancy,” in Sarah Allan and Alvin Cohen, eds., *Legend, Lore, and Religion in China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1979), pp. 71–96.

80. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 1.15a–b.

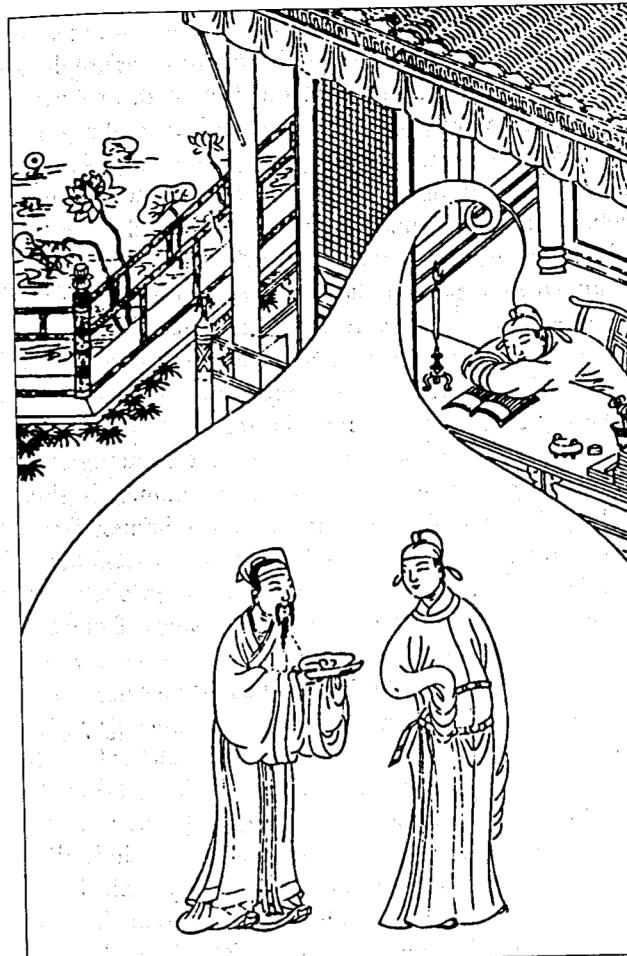


FIGURE 6.3. Sending Dog Meat in 1406. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

chiang province after the 1754 metropolitan examination, which he had passed, but before the palace examination, to find out what his final *chin-shih* rank would be. Chi Yun wrote down the character for black ink (*mo* 墨) for the man to analyze and determine Chi's rank. The Che-chiang man replied that there was no hope for Chi Yun to finish in the top tier (*i-chia* 一甲) of three *chin-shih* graduates because the top part of the character for *mo* was similar to the character *li* 里, which if turned upside down was the equivalent of *erh-chia* 二甲, or the second tier of *chin-shih* graduates.

However, the analyst went on, Chi was destined to enter the Hanlin Academy because the four dots . . . under *li* 里 in the graph *mo* 墨 were the same as the four dots that formed the feet of the character *shu* 庶. The bottom graph of *t'u* 土, also in *mo*, was close to the graph *shih* 士. The latter *shih* was the head for *chi* 吉, and when *shu*, *chi*, and *shih* were put together as *shu-chi-shih* 庶吉士, this was the official title for a Hanlin Academy probationer. Chi Yun finished seventh in the second tier and entered the Hanlin Academy as a *shu-chi-shih*.⁸¹

Because so much in fate calculations depended on one's birth date and identity, another common technique that candidates used was to change their fates or escape an inauspicious spirit-writing session by modifying their names. A name change served candidates as an identity change, which could reconfigure their karmic allotments. Or the change could allow them to take advantage of an auspicious fate awaiting someone who met the criteria of a particular surname or given name. To dream of the "heavenly rankings" (*t'ien-pang* 天榜), as many candidates did, was to see the final earthly rankings in advance.⁸² In many cases, the change of name was simply a strategic decision based on a prophetic dream or a political decision to avoid possible misunderstandings if one's name carried double meanings.

For example, Yuan Huang, who believed that "success in the examinations depends entirely on secret virtue," failed the 1577 metropolitan examination when he registered under his given name of Yuan Liao-fan 袁了凡. Later he dreamed that someone named Yuan Huang 袁黃 was destined to be the *hui-yuan*, so Liao-fan changed his name to Huang. On the 1586 palace examination, as "Yuan Huang," he indeed gained his *chin-shih* degree ranked number 190, but he was only ranked 185th behind the top two finishers on the metropolitan examination, Yuan Tsung-tao 袁宗道 (1560–1600) and Huang Ju-liang 黃汝良. The dream, it turned out, had correctly predicted the surnames of the top two metropolitan finishers, Yuan and Huang. Yuan Tsung-tao, like Yuan Huang, was also a practitioner of Taoist and Buddhist cultivation techniques.⁸³

In 1690 Lu Tsu-yü 陸祖禹 was told by an examiner to change his name if he expected to pass under Manchu rule, because his earlier name, Hsi-man 餌滿 ("present plentiful gifts"), was slightly embarrassing and could imply "to use Manchus for sacrifice." Because of this, Lu's name

81. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 73.92, which mistakenly gives 1748 for the date of the metropolitan examination.

82. For a Ming example of the "heavenly rankings" for the 1619 metropolitan examination, see *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu*, B.30a-b, and *passim*.

83. *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 2.66; and *Hui-shih lu*, 1586: 18a–36b, in *Ming-tai teng-k'o lu hui-pien*, vol. 20.

was not placed on the official *chü-jen* roll, although the examiner had wanted to rank him one of the top five finishers. Lu had also dreamed that someone else had told him to change his name if he hoped to gain a higher degree. As a *fu-pang* alternate, Lu was able to compete in higher examinations successfully after changing his name to Tsu-yü.⁸⁴

In another case, the great-great-grandson of Ch'en Hung-mou, Ch'en Chi-ch'ang 陳繼昌, took his *chü-jen* degree ranked number one under the name Shou-jui 守觀, but for the 1820 metropolitan examination, based on a dream, he changed his name to Chi-ch'ang. The result was that he finished first on both the metropolitan and palace examinations. Based on an auspicious dream, Ch'en became one of only two Ch'ing literati (see Chapter 7) to finish first on all provincial and capital examinations (under the name Chi-ch'ang). He also was ranked number one on his three local examinations (under the name Shou-jui) and thus was known as holder of "greater and lower" (*ta-hsiao* 大小) "three firsts" (*san-yuan* 三元).⁸⁵

For a final example, consider the case of Wei Yun-ko 魏芸閣, who dreamed he saw the heavenly rankings (*t'ien-pang* 天榜) for the 1821 Che-chiang provincial examination. The first name on the roll was a literatus from Hang-chou with the name Wei Shih-lung 魏士龍. After checking to see that there was no one registered from Hang-chou with the name Shih-lung, Wei Yun-ko changed his name to correspond to the heavenly rankings. The heavenly rankings had not indicated what year the roll referred to, however, so, as Wei Shih-lung, Wei Yun-ko failed the 1821 provincial examination. He had to wait until 1844 for the prophecy to come true, and as Wei Shih-lung he finally finished as the Che-chiang *chieh-yuan* that year. Hsu K'o, as compiler of such records, which he labeled as "*mi-hsin*" 迷信 (confused belief), questioned whether the twenty-four-year wait had been worth it.⁸⁶

Disappearances and replacements were another variation to the theme of changing one's fate. Ann Waltner has related the interesting story of Chou K'o-ch'ang 周克昌, by P'u Sung-ling, in which a young boy disappeared and was secretly replaced by his ghost. Diligent, the ghost Chou grew up and passed the examinations. Although he married, as a ghost he never consummated his marriage and was berated by his mother for not providing the family with an heir. When the "real" Chou reappeared, a second exchange was arranged with the merchant who had adopted him. The real Chou then replaced the ghost and fathered an heir, and the Chou family was thereby granted double success: "success in the examina-

84. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74.84.

85. *Ibid.*, 74.54. Here the year for the provincial examination is 1813, but later in 74.109, the year 1819 is given for Ch'en's achievement as *chieh-yuan*.

86. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74.111.

tions and bliss in the bedroom" (科第閨樟福). Although studious, the ghost had outlived his usefulness. Such stories reflected the practical uses of identity change, in which the other world was brought into this world as an ally to achieve examination success.⁸⁷

Similarly, the use of geomancy (*feng-shui* 風水) to locate auspicious sites for tombs, houses, and temples was applied to the examination market. Famous geomancers were much sought after because of their success in selecting auspicious ancestral lands. Such grave sites were thought to yield examination success as well, given the carryover between the generations that was assumed in the practice of ancestor worship. We have seen that Yuan Huang, for instance, taught that examination success did not depend on a candidate's ability but rather on his ancestors' store of merit. Clearly, late imperial literati saw many pragmatic and therapeutic reasons to draw on such techniques, which added to the repertoire of popular religion in appealing to Han and non-Han ruling elites.⁸⁸

DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS OF MING CHUANG-YUAN

As shown above, perhaps the most representative form of communication between this and the other world since antiquity in China was the dream.⁸⁹ Dream interpretations (*chan-meng* 占夢) and the sighting of portents (*chao* 兆) in the dreams of examination candidates, common in medieval China,⁹⁰ became sophisticated cultural forms widely reported in Ming times.⁹¹ Even Chu Yuan-chang, the first emperor of the Ming, had recorded one of his own dreams ("Chi-meng" 紀夢), which was collected in his imperial writings. In the dream, Chu relived his life one year before becoming emperor, in which there had been several signs that he was des-

87. See P'u Sung-ling 蒲松齡, *Liao-chai chih-i* 聊齋志異 (Strange tales of Liao-chai) (Shanghai: Ku-chi Press, 1962), 3/1067-68. See also the cover of Ann Waltner's *Getting An Heir: Adoption and the Construction of Kinship in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

88. See Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 131-59.

89. See Yao Wei-chün 姚偉鈞, *Shen-mi te chan-meng* 神秘的占夢 (Mysteries of dreams) (Kuang-hsi: People's Press, 1991), pp. 3-18. On Sung examination dreams, see Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, pp. 179-80.

90. See Liu Wen-ying 劉文英, *Chung-kuo ku-tai te meng-shu* 中國古代的夢書 (Dream books from ancient China) (Peking: Chung-hua Bookstore, 1990), pp. 1-65; and Roberto Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1983), pp. 8-46. See also Carolyn Brown, ed., *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture* (Lantham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988).

91. Lien-che Tu Fang, "Ming Dreams," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, n.s., 10, 1 (June 1973): 61-70.

tined to unite China under his military forces. The signs for his success were laid out in his dream as they were in popular religion and literati life. First a fairy crane sent by the immortals appeared in Chu's dream and led him into visions of Buddhist guardians and Taoist priests. The priests presented him with a crimson robe and a sword. They then told him to move on. The dream in effect legitimated the rags-to-riches tale of a peasant boy who was designated by the other, darker world to become the founder of a new, "bright" (*ming* 明) dynasty in the visible world.⁹²

As spontaneous reflections of the anxiety in their lives, produced under the enormous mental and physical pressures of the civil examination regime and, for them, its "cultural prisons," the visions that late imperial literati projected in dreams provide us with a unique window to gauge their mental world, as they recalled it, through language and visual imagery for interpretation by fortune-tellers, diviners, shamans, and Buddhist and Taoist priests. The dream market for examinations, which involved "sleep meditation" as a religious form, was a faithful replica of the cultural constructions that accompanied the social and political dynamics of the examination market.⁹³ Frequently, these exchanges, which resulted in personal gains and losses, were expressed in humorous terms.

For instance, the poet and calligrapher Ho Shao-chi 何紹基 (1799-1873), some time before the 1820 metropolitan examination in Peking, had a dream in which he reached a market where there were many *man-t'ou* 饅頭 (steamed rolls). After choosing one roll to eat and finishing it, he took another, when suddenly a stranger came by and stole it from him. Later, Ho realized that the *man-t'ou* thief was none other than the 1820 *optimus* Ch'en Chi-ch'ang 陳繼昌, who, as we have seen, changed his name after taking first place in the provincial examination and thereby was assured of finishing first on both the palace and the metropolitan examinations. Ho realized that he had met his match, as the dream had suggested. Ho finished first on the 1835 provincial examination, which counted for the *man-t'ou* he had eaten in the dream, but in the 1836 metropolitan and palace examinations he could not duplicate Ch'en Chi-ch'ang's feat of "three firsts," two under the name Chi-ch'ang. The second *man-t'ou* went to Ch'en.⁹⁴

92. See *Ming Tai-ts'u yü-chih wen-chi*, 16.8a-14b. See also Romeyn Taylor, "Ming T'ai-ts'u's Story of a Dream," *Monumenta Serica* 32 (1976): 1-20.

93. See Michel Strickmann, "Dreamwork of Psycho-Sinologists: Doctors, Taoists, Monks," in Carolyn Brown, ed., *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture*, pp. 25-46; and Russell, "Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo," p. 122. See also Kathleen Kelleher, "Seems Taking a Final Exam Is Everyone's Worst Nightmare," in *Los Angeles Times*, Tuesday, May 28, 1996, E-1 and E-4.

94. *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 74.109. Here the year for the provincial examination that Ch'en passed is 1819, but earlier in 74.54, the year 1813 is given for Ch'en's achievement as *chieh-*

Since antiquity, Han Chinese had regarded the dream as a message from the spirit-world, which complemented fate prediction, spirit-writing, geomancy, physiognomy, and deciphering written words in communicating with that world.⁹⁵ To "pray for dreams" (*ch'i-meng* 祈夢) and engage in "sleep meditation" was a common goal for those who visited temples overnight. Temple dreams invoked by prayer were thought to be the best means to communicate with Wen-ch'ang, Kuan-ti, or other gods and worthies associated with a particular temple. At times, the hypnotic arts (*ts'u-mien-shu* 催眠術) were added to "map out dreams" (*t'u-meng* 圖夢) and lay bare the meanings of what people said they saw in their visions. The Hang-chou temple to the martyred Ming minister, Yü Ch'ien, for instance, became a center for sleep meditation and dream incubation, an examination tradition that lasted into the twentieth century, and one that will likely be revived in the twenty-first when Yü's temple is rebuilt in Hang-chou.⁹⁶

Dreams as a therapeutic device were commonly used outside the examination market as a sign of healing and the restoration of health.⁹⁷ Chang Feng-i 張鳳翼 (1527–1613), for example, compiled a collection entitled *Meng-chan lei-k'ao* 夢占類考 (Classified studies of dream interpretations) after recovering from an unsuccessful trip to Peking in 1565 to pass the metropolitan examination. Despondent and prone to drinking, he remained very ill until late in 1567, when he dreamed of visiting the Eight Immortals of the Ch'üan-chen 全真 sect of Taoism. In the dream, Lü Tung-pin 吕洞賓 took Chang's pulse and gave him a white pill, which eventually helped him to recover. Chang failed the metropolitan examination four times altogether, and retired to a healthier life of leisure and writing operas in his native Su-chou. His collection of dream interpretations was based on his 1565–67 tribulations.⁹⁸

yuan. For a recent collection of strange stories and humorous anecdotes from the civil examinations, see Wang Chih-tung 王志東, *Chung-kuo k'o-chü ku-shih* 中國科舉故事 (Stories about the Chinese civil examinations) (Taipei: Han-hsin Cultural Enterprises, 1993). Pages 212–86 deal with the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties.

95. Yao Wei-chün, *Shen-mi te chan-meng*, pp. 19–35, discusses the chief techniques used in dream interpretation since ancient times in China.

96. *Ch'ing-pai lei-k'ao*, 73–55. See also Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China*, pp. 36–46; and Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 245–46.

97. On the therapeutic role of dreams, see C. G. Jung, *Dreams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 39–41, 73–74. Jung calls this the "processes of psychic compensation."

98. See Chang Feng-i, "Hsu" 序 (Preface), *Meng-chan lei-k'ao*, late Ming edition, pp. 1a–b. See also Lien-che Tu Fang, "Ming Dreams," pp. 59–60; and Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China*, pp. 165–66.

Ch'en Shih-yuan's 陳士元 1562 compilation entitled *Meng-chan i-chih* 夢占逸旨 (Remaining points on dream interpretation) laid out in rich historical detail the two major traditions of dream interpretation in imperial China: (1) the dream as prophecy (*chao* 兆) and (2) the dream as illusion (*huan* 幻). In the examination market, unlike the literary world, the dream functioned mainly as a form of communication with the other world. Although different, dreams and conscious perception (*chueh* 覺) were forms of realization that added to human knowledge (*chih* 知) of fate and prognostication. In Ch'en's view, "there were early auspicious signs for all examination rankings and salary grades" (科甲爵品莫不有前兆). He then traced the written evidence from the T'ang through Ming times for dreams as auspicious signs of examination success.⁹⁹

At least five Ming emperors reputedly relied on dreams to choose the *optimus*, for example, in the palace examination. In 1385 the Hung-wu emperor, whose own famous dream was recorded as an autobiographical account of his fated ascent to power, dreamed of nails (*ting* 釘) and silk thread (*ssu* 絲) and therefore chose Ting Hsien 丁顯 as the *chuang-yuan*. The reasoning was: (1) Ting's surname was the same sound as the character for nails and (2) the character for silk thread formed part of Hsien's name.¹⁰⁰ In 1421, the Yung-lo emperor reportedly dreamed of a crane (*ho* 鶴), a symbol for Taoist immortals, before the palace examination. Based on this omen, he selected Tseng Ho-ling 曾鶴齡 as the *optimus* because Tseng's name included the graph for a crane.

Later in 1448, the Cheng-t'ung emperor dreamed of meeting a literatus, a Taoist, and a Buddhist before the palace examination. He then chose the top three *chin-shih* based on their intellectual backgrounds: The *chuang-yuan* P'eng Shih 彭時 (1416–75) was registered from a hereditary literatus family (*ju-chi* 儒籍); the *pang-yen* Ch'en Chien 陳鑒 (1415–71) had once been a student of music in a Taoist temple; and the *t'an-hua* Yueh Cheng 岳正 (1418–72) had served in a Buddhist temple. In 1544, the Chia-ching emperor chose a candidate with the character "thunder" 雷 in his name because of a dream in which the emperor heard thunder. Ch'in Ming-lei 秦鳴雷 (1518–93, lit., "noise of thunder") from Che-chiang province was the beneficiary of the dream.¹⁰¹

99. See Ch'en Shih-yuan, *Meng-chan i-chih* (Pai-pu ts'ung-shu 百部叢書 reprint, Taipei: I-wen Publishing Co., 1968), 1.1a, 1.5a, 1.6a, 6.1a–7a, 8.9a–11b. The "Hsu" 序 (Preface) dates from 1562.

100. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 1.5b. See also Lien-che Tu Fang, "Ming Dreams," p. 60; and Rudolph Wagner, "Imperial Dreams in China," in Carolyn Brown, ed., *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture*, pp. 11–24.

101. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 1.21a; *Chih-i k'o-so-chi*, 1.39; and *Ch'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu*, 4.45a–b. See also Lien-che Tu Fang, "Ming Dreams," pp. 60–61.

In a discourse that narrated communications between temporal emperors and the gods and ghosts of the other world, it was impossible to verify accounts of imperial dreams. Many were imperial fabrications; others were imputed to the ruler; but even as fabrications, the dreams represented cultural accounts that drew on historical events and molded them to the morality tale being told. It was reported, for instance, that Yü Ch'ien had appeared as a ghost before his banished wife and asked to borrow her eyes so that he could appear normal before the emperor and plead his case. In the morning Yü's wife became blind, while Yü himself appeared before the emperor as an image in a fire that broke out in the imperial palace. Realizing the injustice done to Yü in 1457, the emperor pardoned his wife. It was patently a false dream, however; the Ch'eng-hua emperor could not have pardoned her, because Yü's wife had passed away years before while in exile. He did rehabilitate the Yü name and allow the son of Wang Wen 王文 (1393–1457), also martyred in 1457, to take the civil examinations in 1465 (see Chapter 8). The fabrication of the dream did, however, explain that policy decision and right the wrong done to Yü Ch'ien, and thus it is useful to us historically as a lie about how things ideally should have appeared.¹⁰²

We also know that dream interpretation played a significant role in the lives of more than half of all *chuang-yuan* during the Ming dynasty.¹⁰³ Dreams were interpreted as human "counterparts" (*hsiang*, 象; see Chapter 9) to the other world that could be diagrammed (*t'u*, 圖) and analyzed to understand a person's character and behavior and divine his fate. The *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty), for example, was a collection that diagrammed and discussed the dreams of *optimi* from 1371 to 1571. Initially compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en, a 1505 *optimus* (see above), and continued by his grandson Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓, it retold the foreordained achievements of all Ming *chuang-yuan*. Wu Ch'eng-en 吳承恩 and Ch'eng I-chen 程一楨 later added materials that brought it up to 1604. This semiofficial work, for which there is a later, 1607 edition was honored with a new preface by the late Ming Hanlin academician and imperial grand secretary Shen I-kuan 沈一貫 (1531–1615), who thereby granted it an imperial imprimatur as an

^{102.} See Lien-che Tu Fang, "Ming Dreams," pp. 69–70; and Hegel, "Heavens and Hells in Chinese Fictional Dreams," pp. 1–10.

^{103.} For a recent collection of dreams, stories, and anecdotes about all *chuang-yuan* in Chinese history, see Tsou Shao-chih 鄒紹志 and Kuei Sheng 桂勝, *Chung-kuo chuang-yuan ch'ü-wen* 中國狀元趣聞 (Interesting things heard about Chinese *optimi*) (Taipei: Han-hsin Cultural Enterprises, 1993). Pages 1–144 cover stories before the Ming.

acceptable biographical record of the dreams of success of great men that was in vogue during the Ming.¹⁰⁴

Such premonitory dreams of success were widely written about and were illustrated in the uniquely Ming woodblock form of portraying dreams graphically as a "vision" of consciousness that emanated from the mind while the body was asleep.¹⁰⁵ Astrological signs such as the southern dipper, auspicious omens such as dog meat, and unusual coincidences fed into the Ming belief that the mind at rest tended to weave a cultural matrix of visual images and symbols whose surface aspects could be studied for the manifest content they implied. These dream-visions may be interpreted as historical constructions and not as actual dreams whose riddles need deciphering. It is likely that all were ad hoc constructions and not manifest dreams, as they were presented. It is worth making the Ming solutions to the riddle of the dreams the object of analysis to see how such dreams and their cultural interpretations functioned in the examination market.¹⁰⁶

For our purposes, the "manifest content" of this cultural matrix was channeled in part by the male anxiety and motivating psychological tensions that the examination life entailed. Although the "latent dream-thoughts" of *chuang-yuan* will never be transparent to us because they were always encoded, transposed, revised, and distorted in the manifest cultural discourse peculiar to Ming China, we can begin to decode some external aspects of the interrelation between the psychological makeup of the men and families who claimed to have had such dreams and their sociohistorical experiences and pressures. Their repressions and sublimations were far different from those we can intuit today because the cultural terms of their conscious acceptance and rejection of their thoughts were defined by their times and not ours. Indeed, to call their mental streams of consciousness "streams," "repressions," or "sublimations" tells us more about ourselves than about Ming literati, given the historical changes that have occurred in the conscious and unconscious internalization of human agency over time and from culture to culture.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, through

^{104.} See the "Fan-li" 凡例 (Overview) in the *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, pp. 1a–b, and Shen I-kuan's preface, pp. 1a–b. See also note 60 above for discussion of the Ch'ing edition called the *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* and discussion of Ming printing in Chapter 7.

^{105.} Judith Zeitlin, in her *Historian of the Strange*, pp. 137, 173, describes this woodblock print technique of illustrating dreams as a "dream bubble."

^{106.} *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, passim.

^{107.} On the historicization of human agency, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1956), passim; and Nietzsche's "Preface" to *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966). See also Jung's discussion of "taking up the context" to determine the associations made in a dream, in *Dreams*, pp. 71–72.



FIGURE 6.4. Three Heads Appear in a 1445 Dream-Vision.
Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

their graphically recorded “dream-visions,” we do get a vivid sense of what preyed on their minds as they lived out the grueling days of the pre-modern examination life in examination cells, which, thankfully, we can never again reproduce verbatim.¹⁰⁸

^{108.} Abell, *The Collective Dream in Art*, pp. 62–70. The classic, if simplistic, examples of dreams as “an attempt at the fulfillment of a wish” are to dream of food while starving or

Figure 6.4 presents a late Ming woodblock illustration prepared by Huang Ying-ch'eng for the *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* in which three heads (*jen-shou san k'o* 人首三顆) appear in a 1445 dream-vision. The print represents a dream, actually a “day-dream,” that Shang Lu 商輅 (1414–86) reportedly had while a young man reading the classics in his family's study (*hsueh-she* 學舍), probably sometime before 1435. The published account of it indicates that his teacher, a man named “literatus Hung” 洪士, had been living with him in his room, helping him prepare for the civil examinations. The elegant setting of the study, his neat reading desk complete with the writing paraphernalia required of all calligraphers (see Chapter 5), and the fact that he had a live-in tutor all indicate that Shang's Che-chiang family was one of substantial means and could provide him the time and cultural resources needed to devote to his classical studies. This was not a rags-to-riches story.¹⁰⁹

In the illustration, however, Shang Lu is not pictured hard at work, which would have been the usual image of his mental preparations on the road to classical literacy and future examination success. Instead, he is portrayed asleep while studying, his teacher is absent, and from Shang's head emanates a dream-vision of a man holding three heads laced together by their hair, which the man presents to Shang. We should explore a little further the cultural overlap between “three heads” and “three firsts,” which in both Chinese and English are homologous. Curiously, the Chinese term for head used in the dream is *shou* 首 and not *t'ou* 頭, the more physical image of the head attached to the body, although both were used to describe notions of coming in first, being on top, or referring to the leader. Accordingly, it is not a gory scene (no blood is depicted, for instance), nor one that would evoke immediate horror, but nonetheless three bodiless heads are being presented as trophies to Shang, who will triumph over many others. Shang Lu rests peacefully, so we are assured that this is a wishful dream, not one driven directly by overt anxiety or punishment.

Clearly, however, the stakes are very high, and some sense of the sacrifice of the body is evoked by the powerful images of the three heads held in one hand by the mysterious man. We might speculate that war-

to dream of water while thirsty. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, translated by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1964), pp. 7–30, particularly pp. 43–44 on Freud's account of curing a student preparing for his doctoral examinations of “mental exhaustion,” which leads Freud to a discussion of “dreams and occultism.”

^{109.} On Shang Lu's life, see *Ming-shih*, 7/4687–91; and *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, pp. 1161–63.

riors in imperial China, not students, typically severed the heads of their enemies and presented them to their leader as a trophy to confirm total victory in battle. Or, we might note that decapitation was a legal measure the Ming dynastic code enforced in capital cases if the crime were determined to be a "heavy" one, as opposed to a "lighter" one, which would entail death by strangulation or slicing. Perhaps the military and legal readings of Shang Lu's dream have some very limited relevance in evoking the examination market, where to compete and win meant that others had to fail. Lacking the detailed information that would tell us more about the dream's latent characteristics, however, we are left with its placid manifest content as pictured by the late Ming compilers. It is by Ming cultural standards definitely not a troubling dream, and we should not read too much blood and gore into it.¹¹⁰

Upon awakening, Shang Lu immediately related the manifest content of the dream to his teacher, who instead of scolding him for falling asleep while studying tells him that it is an "auspicious dream" (*chi-meng* 吉夢). The "three heads" are a vision into the future of Shang's life as a candidate for the civil examinations. With hindsight, of course, the dream at face value is easy enough to decipher. Shang's preordained success was corroborated when, at the age of twenty-one, he passed the 1435 Che-chiang provincial examination ranked first. He followed that up ten years later as the number-one graduate on the metropolitan, and received the final of his "three heads" by being named *chuang-yuan* on the 1445 palace examination. Shang was to that point the only literatus who had achieved "three firsts" (*san-yuan* 三元) on the Ming civil examinations. Because of his own influence as an examiner, Shang would see to it that another aspiring challenger, Wang Ao 王鳌 (1450–1524), would not duplicate the feat, and for the Ming, only Shang Lu attained this exclusive civil examination height (see Chapter 7).

Read with hindsight as ad hoc rationalization, Shang Lu's dream presents his success as a natural outcome of fate. The hard work and classical memory required to achieve such unprecedented success are elided in favor of a smooth path to fame, fortune, and high political office.¹¹¹ Read more historically, however, the placid dream covers up what must have been the considerable worries Shang had when, after passing the 1435 provincial examination, he probably failed the 1436, 1439, and 1442 met-

¹¹⁰. See Bodde and Morris, *Law in Imperial China*, pp. 133–34, 552.

¹¹¹. See Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, "Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System," p. 52, which describes the hard work as follows: "In actuality, as long as one studied everyday without interruption, this [that is, so much memorization] could be achieved—there was nothing strange or miraculous about it."

ropolitan examinations. Given that he was over twenty in 1435, Shang probably also had failed the highly competitive Che-chiang provincial examination a couple of times, in addition to failing the metropolitan examination perhaps three times. Like most candidates (see Chapter 5), then, Shang had to wait until he was in his thirties before he received the coveted *chin-shih* degree and entered the civil service.

The story of preordained success becomes more problematic when the failures are added to the record. Forgotten are the childhood years of memorization (Shang specialized on the *Documents Classic*, for example) and youthful days spent in the study reading widely and practicing examination essays. In fact, the metropolitan record of the 1445 examination indicates that Shang's eight-legged essays were not particularly outstanding. Not one of his three essays on the Four Books was picked as the best. Only one of his four essays on quotations from the *Documents* was selected. Shang made his mark by writing the best discourse and documentary papers on session two, and one of his policy essays on session three was also chosen as the best on that question. For the late Ming audience, the single dream-vision replaced those hours, days, months, and years of hard work and disregarded the closeness of the competition for the high honors that Shang had been very fortunate to win.¹¹²

A similar dream, recorded by the 1583 *optimus* Chu Kuo-tso 朱國祚, is depicted as a dream-vision in Figure 6.5. In their commentary, the late Ming compilers of the *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* noted that as a young candidate Chu had been on his way home from a local examination in T'ung-chou when a friend invited him on his boat, and they began drinking. Later at a stop along the way, the friend dragged Chu into a wine house filled with prostitutes. Alarmed, Chu ran out the door and without stopping walked the twenty *li* back to T'ung-chou. Later, when Chu took the provincial examination, he had a dream in his studio, again a daydream, in which a two-headed horseman appeared before him. Chu thought this strange, and in his dream he urged on the horse he was riding so that he was in front of the two-headed horseman.

The virtuous behavior Chu Kuo-tso had demonstrated was a moral backdrop for the dream-vision he experienced. The real meaning of the dream was not clear until after the rankings for the palace examination. Chu had not finished first on the provincial or metropolitan examination, so his status as *optimus* was equivalent to only "one head." The manifest meaning of the dream became clear, however, when Chu realized that on the palace examination he had finished ahead of Li T'ing-chi 李廷機, who had been first on both the provincial and metropolitan examinations,

¹¹². See *Hui-shih lu*, 1445: 14a, in *Ming-tai teng-k'o lu hui-pien*, vol. 1.



FIGURE 6.5. A Two-Headed Horseman Appears in a 1583 Dream-Vision. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

and was thus a man with "two heads" (*shuang-t'ou-jen* 雙頭人). By passing ahead of Li in the dream, Chu had assured himself of finishing ahead of a man who had "two firsts" to his credit. "One head," in this case at least, was better than two.¹¹³

The dreams typical of *Ming chuang-yuan*, which reflected the religious beliefs of the compilers, were wish-fulfillment dreams of becoming number

¹¹³ *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 3.33a-34a.



FIGURE 6.6. A Spirit Heralds the 1454 Optimus. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

one in the palace examination. In Figure 6.6, for instance, a spirit appears in a dream-vision and heralds the future 1454 *optimus* Sun Hsien 孫賢 at the gate in front of his home while Sun dozes over a book with a cup and pot of tea nearby on his desk in a pleasant studio. The herald carries a yellow pennant with the graphs for *chuang-yuan* on it, and he is dressed in the formal imperial garb of one who is responsible for announcing the



FIGURE 6.7. Entering Heaven's Gate in 1544. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of *optimus* during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

final ranking lists (*chin-pang* 金榜) to the public. The compilers tell us that Sun's success also had several auspicious dreams associated with it.¹¹⁴

Similar wish-fulfillment dreams were reported by many Ming *chuang-yuan* or members of their families. Ch'in Ming-lei 秦鳴雷 frequently had dreams of storming the imperial Gate of Heaven (*Tien-men* 天門) before

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 2.11b-13a.

he became the 1544 *optimus*. Figure 6.7 shows a dream-vision emanating from the second floor of an elegant pastoral pavilion overlooking water and mountains where Ch'in is daydreaming. In the dream he whips his horse upward toward a closed gate to a high-walled city. Civil examinations were usually viewed as the means to enter the gate of officialdom, but Ch'in's dream was specifically oriented toward the gate forbidding entry to the walled imperial city, where the emperor resided. As an *optimus*, he would enter that gate in triumph and serve in the court as a Hanlin academician. Another version of this dream was to ride the dragon, as the 1472 *optimus* Wu K'uan 吳寬 (1436-1504) did, before the palace examination.¹¹⁵

Sumptuous meals and hobnobbing with the rich and powerful were another feature of candidates' dreams. Figure 6.8 shows K'o Ch'ien 柯潛 (1423-73) asleep on a carpet in front of an altar in his home. He is dreaming that he is seated at the head of a table eating with friends at a temple. Auspiciously, one of his friends presents a goat's head (*yang-t'ou* 羊頭) as one of the delicacies. Using the technique of deciphering written words (*ch'ai-tzu*), those at the banquet cleverly figure out what this augurs for K'o. The year 1451 was known as the *hsin-wei* 辛未 year, according to the lunar sexagenary cycle of keeping track of time using the twelve heavenly stems and ten earthly branches. The graph for goat 羊 resembled the bottom of the character for *hsin* 辛 in the sexagenary cycle; 1451 was the year of the goat; and moreover, the head itself implied finishing first that year.¹¹⁶

Wish-fulfillment dreams often recorded auspicious omens tied to popular culture and religion, which affirmed the hopes and aspirations of the candidates and members of their families. Usually the omens that were described in such dreams were straightforward symbols from local cults or the Taoist and Buddhist pantheon of worthies and deities. A dream-vision that the 1505 *optimus* Ku Ting-ch'en, the initial compiler of the *Ming chuang-yuan t'u k'ao*, included in the collection was one in which a yellow crane (*huang-ho* 黃鶴) descended to get a better look at him (see Figure 6.9). The crane, an auspicious bird associated with Taoism, also represented the relationship between father and son. Ku had faithfully burned incense every evening to honor his father, who was over fifty when Ting-ch'en was born, and prayed for his father's long life. In appearing before Ku Ting-ch'en, the crane was auspiciously communicating not only Ku's future examination success but also that that success would be shared with his father. His filiality was rewarded when at the age of eighty, Ting-

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 3.12b-13b, and 2.21b-22b. The "dragon's head" (*lung-t'ou* 龍頭) and "dragon-spirit" (*lung-shen* 龍神) also appeared in auspicious dreams for the 1478 (2.24b-25b) and 1526 (3.4a-b) *chuang-yuan*.

¹¹⁶ *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 2.10b-11a. See also 3.14a-15a, for a depiction of a meal honoring the 1547 *optimus*.



FIGURE 6.8. Presenting a Goat's Head in 1451. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

ch'en's father saw his son become the empire's *chuang-yuan*, and Ku went on to collect records of all such auspicious events to show that his fate was not unique.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2.38a–39a. See Eberhard, *Lexikon chinesischer Symbole*, pp. 163–64. See also Ong, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient China*, p. 112, which relates Su Shih's dream in the famous prose-poem on Red Cliff, in which Su equates the crane with a Taoist immortal.



FIGURE 6.9. A Yellow Crane Appears in 1505. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

Shen K'un 沈坤 (d. 1560?), the 1541 *optimus*, had what appeared initially to be an auspicious dream while asleep in his bedroom (illustrated in Figure 6.10). Out of Shen's bedroom flows a dream-vision in which a Taoist immortal (*hsien* 仙) presents Shen with medicine in the form of a round elixir. The elixir, known as "Awakening the Nine Foods" (*chiu-shih chih hsing* 九食之醒), was expected to activate the stomach as if there were



FIGURE 6.10. An Immortal Presents Medicine in 1541. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of *optimi* during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

something inside. A strange, incense-like smell would then envelop the room and inflame one's nostrils. In the dream, Shen clearly accepted the elixir, which apparently enabled him to become the first *chuang-yuan* from his native place in the Huai-an region 淮安郡 in northern Chiang-su.

The full effects of the elixir, however, were not clear until eighteen years later in 1559, when Ting Shih-mei 丁士美 became the second *optimus* from Huai-an. What was growing inside Shen K'un's stomach turned out to be another *optimus* from Huai-an. By the time Ting became the *optimus*, however, Shen K'un's political fortunes had declined, and he was arrested, tried, and executed based on false charges, which no one opposed because of Shen's notorious behavior and detested character. The popular version of what happened was that "a new *chuang-yuan* had entered the court, while the old one had entered prison" (新狀元入朝，舊狀元入獄). The compilers added their view that Shen K'un's glorious success and calamitous ending had been set by ingesting the elixir (榮辱禍福事皆前定).¹¹⁸

Curiously, however, in Figure 6.11, depicting Ting Shih-mei's own dream, prior to his becoming the 1559 *optimus*, a female Taoist immortal descends toward him riding a crane to deliver a yellow flag. As she descends, a group of heavenly fairies are seen in the sky, producing the music of the immortals by playing on classical instruments. After the yellow flag, announcing the auspicious selection of Ting by the gods, is placed in front of the gate to his home, the immortal remounts the crane and returns to the heavens. There is no mention in Ting's dream narrative of any connection to the trial and execution of Shen K'un. We are told only of his sympathies for Taoism. The doors to the other world are not interlocking, revealing that the dream narratives are themselves fragmented, cultural constructions appropriate to a specific story line.¹¹⁹

Although most of the dreams and mantic arts reviewed here in light of the examination market were tied to popular cults and religious Taoism, the influence of Buddhism was clear in the case of the 1553 *optimus* Ch'en Chin 陳謹 (1525–66), in our final example of a dream-vision illustrated by Huang Ying-ch'eng for the *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* collection. In the dream, which floats above the roofs of three elegant buildings in a compound, Ch'en Chin is shown sitting on a lotus flower in a meditating "lotus position" surrounded by three people (see Figure 6.12). All are floating on a cloud in the sky, and the dream scene takes precedence over the earthly world seen from above. The three personages floating on the cloud dropping from the sky are an immortal, a young man, and a woman. The three had invited Ch'en to mount the lotus, and he has obliged them. As they entered the clouds, Ch'en became afraid, but the immortal presented him with a gold cap and crimson official robe, both symbols that he would become the *optimus* and formally appear before the emperor.

¹¹⁸. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 3.11a–12a. See also *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 924.

¹¹⁹. Ibid., 3.20a–21a.

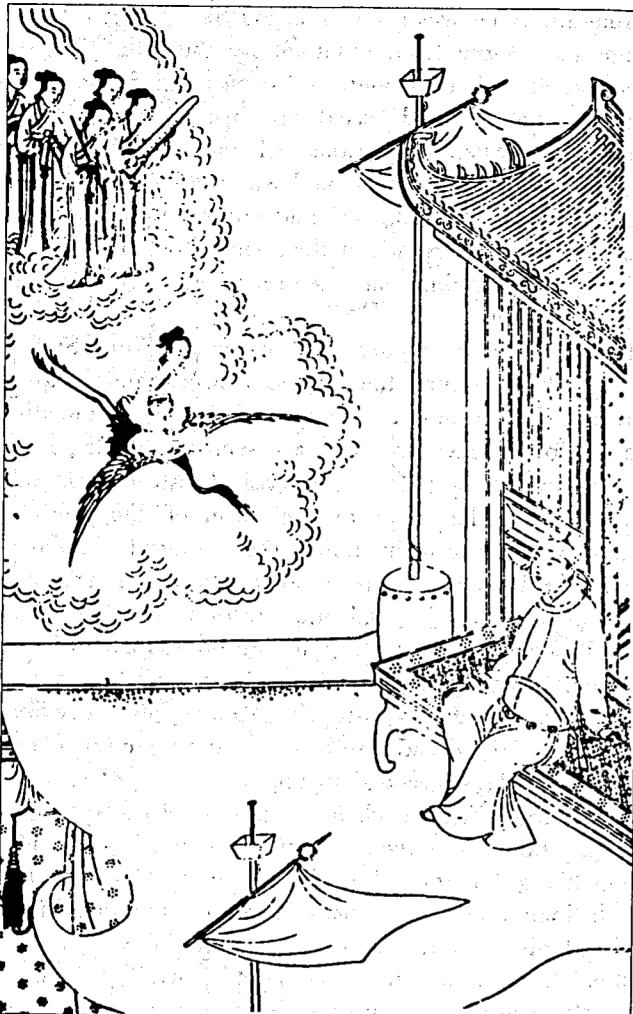


FIGURE 6.11. A Taoist Immortal Rides a Crane in 1559. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

Sitting like a Buddha in meditation but dressed in the garb of a literatus, Ch'en Chin appears in the dream-vision at peace and in control, after having put aside his initial fears. The illustration projects an image of order and inevitability, which of course clashes with our historical portrayal of the examination market as a venue of furious competition, widespread corruption, and male anxiety. Sitting on a lotus in Buddhist-style meditation, Ch'en has floated to the other world and received its blessing



FIGURE 6.12. Riding the Lotus Flower in 1553. Source: *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao* 明狀元圖考 (Illustrated survey of optimi during the Ming dynasty). Compiled by Ku Ting-ch'en 顧鼎臣 and Ku Tsu-hsun 顧祖訓. 1607 edition.

for success in this world. Again, there is no mention of the years of hard work, memorization, and essay writing that any young boy from a family of means would have endured. A therapeutic victory over the trials and tribulations of the Ming examination market has been achieved.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.17b-18a.

RESISTANCE TO THE MANTIC ARTS IN CIVIL EXAMINATIONS

When mantic techniques failed to produce the expected effects, however, profound disillusionment often followed. Many assailed the pervasive uses of divination, geomancy, and dream interpretation in the examination market as misplaced reliance on the other world. Similar sentiments were repeated inside Ming examination halls. The reign of cults, gods, spirits, and the mantic techniques to communicate with them was challenged by many metropolitan and provincial examiners, who used the political precincts of the dynasty's "cultural prisons" to place limits on elite belief in popular notions of fate and communication with the other world. The institutional regime of examinations enforced examiner power to elide nonofficial beliefs.¹²¹ For instance, in the third-session policy questions (whose range of content is detailed in Chapter 9), examiners at times raised the issue of natural anomalies (*tsai-i* 災異) and asked students how to account for such events.¹²²

The 1558 Shun-t'ien Provincial Examination and Interpretation of Natural Anomalies

Representative of the elite trend to profess publicly its distance from popular religion and the mantic arts, the 1558 policy question on anomalies, which were usually seen as inauspicious natural disasters, was administered by examiners in charge of the Shun-t'ien provincial examination in the northern capital region.¹²³ Of the more than 3,500 candidates who took this examination, only 135 (3.86%) passed. For the five policy ques-

121. For background, see Deborah Sommer, "Confucianism's Encounter with the Evil Arts of Herodoxy: Ch'iü Chün's (1420-1495) Visions of Ritual Reform," paper presented at the University Seminar on Neo-Confucian Studies (New York: Columbia University, December 7, 1990). Ch'iü was an influential mid-Ming examination official. For his prefaces to Ming civil examination reports, see *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu*, 1248.163-192.

122. For policy questions on anomalies in 1558, 1561, 1573, 1582, 1588, 1594, 1597, 1603, and 1604, in provincial and metropolitan examinations, see *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, which covers the broad range of policy questions from 1504 to 1604 that dealt with heterodoxy, astrology, the five phases, heavenly bodies, and strange artifacts. See also *Ying-t'ien fu hsiang-shih lu*, 1597: 5a-6b, 34a-42b, for a policy question and answer on heaven's mandate (*tien-ming* 天命) and anomalies; and *Hui-shih chu-chüan* 會試硃卷 (Metropolitan examination essays), 1604: 26a, for a question on "eternal fate" (*yung-ming* 永命).

123. *Shun-t'ien hsiang-shih lu* 順天鄉試錄 (Record of the 1558 Shun-t'ien prefecture provincial civil examination), 1558: 12a-13a. See also the policy questions on *tsai-i* from the 1594 Shun-t'ien and 1597 Chiang-hsi, Hu-kuang, and Yun-nan provincial examinations in *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, *chüan* 12, 15, and 16.

tions on session three, the examiners selected two dealing directly or indirectly with the natural world (*tzu-jan* 自然): (1) "Serving Heaven" (which included discussion of astronomy and governance), (2) "Establishing officials," (3) "Employing talent," (4) "Disaster and inauspicious events" (which discussed the resonance between the realms of Heaven and people), and (5) the "Four Barbarians." That over 3,500 candidates had to be prepared to answer two policy questions on natural studies indicates that the provincial examinations in the late Ming exerted a broad influence on students preparing for the examinations by having them study aspects of the "Chinese sciences" (see Chapter 9).¹²⁴

The examiners began their question by addressing the overlap between the heavenly and human realms and the subtle principles underlying this overlap. Citing the "Hung-fan" 洪範 (Great plan) chapter of the *Documents Classic* as the locus classicus, the examiners asked candidates to explain how the "five matters" (*wu-shih* 五事) in human affairs corresponded to the "five phases" (*wu-hsing* 五行) in the heavenly order. In many other civil examinations, these issues were raised by focusing on the five phases themselves.¹²⁵

Since antiquity, literati as officials had debated the role of natural disasters in society and their impact on politics. Discussion of this issue usually lay within the limits of the boundaries first demarcated by Hsun-tzu 范子 in the Warring States era and later substantially revised by Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒 (179-104 B.C.), who, as a result of his persuasive examination policy essays (*hsien-liang san-ts'e* 賢良三策), became one of the most influential advisors in the Former Han.¹²⁶ For Hsun-tzu, the spheres of heaven and man interacted, but the latter's destiny depended on man's own abilities to govern effectively. Anomalies were odd (*kuai chih k'o yeh* 怪之可也) but not to be feared (*erh wei chih fei yeh* 而畏之非也).¹²⁷ Tung Chung-shu, on the other hand, regarded anomalies in nature as "omens"

124. *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, 2.24a. See also the "Hsu" 序 (Preface) to the *Shun-t'ien-fu hsiang-shih lu*, 1558: 2b. For the policy questions see pp. 8a-14b.

125. The second policy question in the 1582 Ying-t'ien provincial examination in the southern capital region, for example, dealt with the five phases as a correspondence system (*shih-ying* 事應) between people and Heaven. See *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, 7.26a; and *Nan-kuo hien-shu*, 4.37a-42a. A policy question on the five phases was repeated in the 1597 Honan provincial examination. See *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, 16.73a.

126. The emperor's questions and Tung's answers are contained in *Han-shu*, pp. 2495-2524. In the eighteenth century, the Ch'ien-lung emperor made Tung's famous *ts'e* one of the guiding elements in the emperor's notions of statecraft and world-ordering. See Chun-shu Chang, "Emperorship in Eighteenth-Century China," *The Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong* 7, 2 (December 1974): 554-56.

127. *Hsun-tzu chi-chieh* 范子集解 (Collected notes to the Hsun-tzu) (Taipei: Hua-cheng Bookstore, 1979), pp. 209-13.

(*ch'ien* 譴) arising from errors in the dynasty (*fan tsai-i chih pen chin sheng yü kuo-chia chih shih* 凡災翼之本董生於國家之失).¹²⁸ In this 1558 question, the examiners were asking candidates to define what the “overlap between heaven and people” (*t'ien-jen chih chi* 天人之間) meant for contemporary Ming literati.

What was at stake here were the dangers of indulging too readily in the arts of communication between the real and unseen worlds. The 1558 examiners asked:

How can the resonance between the five phases and five matters be demonstrated? To observe the overlap, some use the year, others the moon, and still others the day. How does one divide things up like this? Next, Confucius in preparing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* recorded calamities as inauspicious, but why didn't he record the corresponding events? In commenting on this some have said that Confucius feared that if there was no overlap then others would not have believed in the overlap. Is this right or wrong?¹²⁹

Here the examiners were referring to Ou-yang Hsiu's 歐陽修 (1007–72) discussion of anomalies in the *Annals* in his *Hsin T'ang-shu* 新唐書 (New history of the T'ang dynasty). There, Ou-yang described Confucius as very cautious in his efforts to link events on earth to the heavens. Confucius regarded disasters (*tsai* 災) and inauspicious events (*i* 翼) as omens (*ch'ien* 譴), according to Ou-yang Hsiu, which rightfully instilled fear and the need for moral cultivation (*k'ung-chü hsiu-hsing* 恐懼修省). Ou-yang noted that Confucius also recognized the need to be circumspect (*kai shen chih yeh* 蓋慎之也) about omens and did not try to link all anomalies to human events (*t'ien-tao yuan fei chun-chun i yü jen* 天道遠非諱諱以諭人).¹³⁰ Candidates were asked to assess the interpretation of anomalies given by one of the greatest Sung literati.

Finally, the question turned to the manipulation of calamities as inauspicious political events by Han dynasty officials during the first century B.C., when prognostication and prophecy based on *ch'en-wei* 識緯 (apocrypha) were popular at court. The role of portents in political culture during the Han has been explored in detail by Wolfram Eberhard, and the function of astronomy, astrology, and meteorology has been described as

128. *Ch'un-chü fan-lu i-cheng* 春秋繁露義證 (Proofs of meanings in [Tung Chung-shu's] The Spring and Autumn's Radiant Dew), compiled by Su Yü 蘇輿 (Kyoto: Chubun Press, 1973), 8.24a–24b.

129. *Shun-t'ien-fu hsiang-shih lu*, 1558: 12a–12b.

130. Ou-yang Hsiu and Sung Ch'i 宋祁, *Hsin T'ang-shu* (New history of the T'ang dynasty) (Peking: Chung-hua Bookstore, 1971), 34.873.

“purely political.”¹³¹ Believing in the conjuncture between abnormal natural phenomena and sociopolitical life, Han officials used this belief as an ideological weapon in the political struggles of the times. While Eberhard overstates the case and overlooks the technical achievements made by Han calendrical specialists in determining lunations and accurately predicting lunar eclipses, it is nonetheless clear that the Ming examiners were exposing this Han predilection for omens to ask students what they thought of the effort to link politics to anomalies in imperial governance.¹³²

Among the examples the Ming examiners raised were those of Kung-sun Hung 公孫弘 (d. 121 B.C.), Kung-sun Ch'ing 公孫卿, Ching Fang 京房 (79–37 B.C.); and I Feng 翼奉, all high officials who had been questioned by Han emperors about the meaning of natural calamities or anomalies. When asked why floods had occurred in Yu's 禹 reign (tr., 3rd mill. B.C.), for example, Kung-sun Hung had replied that virtue and anomalies were mutually exclusive and that “if one accorded with heaven's virtue then harmony arose, if one opposed it, calamity struck” (天德無私親，順之和起，逆之害生).¹³³

Likewise the Han official Kung-sun Ch'ing had explicated the reasons why natural disasters such as droughts occurred, while Ching Fang, who was exiled for his alleged crimes as a Han minister, predicted a great deluge and was imprisoned and executed when his prediction came to pass.¹³⁴ I Feng had replied to an emperor concerned about calamities during his reign that “heaven's heart determined whether the kingly way was peaceful or endangered” (考天心言王道之安危).¹³⁵ Most of these views could be discredited (*pu tsu ch'eng* 不足稱), the examiners implied in their question, but the students were asked if there was anything of note to some of the pronouncements (*so-yen yu ho-tao che yü* 所言有合道者歟). Some principle must explain such things, the examiners concluded.¹³⁶

The examiners then brought up the nine years of recorded floods under Emperor Yao 堯 (tr., r. 3rd mill. B.C.) and the seven years of drought under Emperor Tang 湯 (tr., r. 2nd mill. B.C.) as examples of inauspicious events for the candidates to evaluate. Was it possible that

131. Eberhard, “The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 33–70.

132. See Nathan Sivin, “Cosmos and Computation in Early Chinese Mathematical Astronomy,” *T'oung Pao* 55 (1969): 53–54n1.

133. *Han-shu*, 58.2617.

134. *Shih-chi*, 12.472–73; *Han-shu*, 75.3162.

135. *Han-shu*, 75.3171–72.

136. *Shun-t'ien-fu hsiang-shih lu*, 1558: 13a.

later eras, for which no such inauspicious events were recorded, could be considered superior to the reigns of the sage-kings Yao and T'ang? If heaven had no aims (*wu-i* 無意), then why should one fear inauspicious events? If indeed heaven had its purposes (*yu-i* 有意), then its heart would be in favor of life. Yet if heaven had its purposes, then how could calamities serve its goal of favoring life?

When viewed in light of the mantic arts then prevalent in Ming cultural life, the 1558 Shun-t'ien examiners were cutting against the grain of public culture in Peking and elsewhere that surrounded the examination compound in which the question was delivered. The popular correlate to the role of anomaly interpretation by Han officials criticized by the examiners was the effort by examination candidates to divine their futures via the mantic arts. The way the collected dreams of *optimi*, which reflected popular lore in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were honored as biographical sources indicates that literati communication with the other world was more tolerated in government and society than in the halls and cells of the civil examinations.

Since the Han, the records of "anomalies" had been featured in a variety of private and official writings that sought to domesticate the other world by fixing its unusual impact on everyday life within a taxonomy known as *chih-kuai* 志怪 (recording unusual events). Indeed, following the fall of the Han in A.D. 220, anomaly records were shifted from the "small writings" (*hsiao-shuo* 小說) section in the canon of "philosophers" (*lzu-pu* 子部) to the section on "histories" (*shih-pu* 史部). After the T'ang, when the civil examinations were reconstituted and expanded, the accounts in many *i-wen lu* 異聞錄 (records of unusual matters) that we discussed above focused on the examination compounds and the mental life of candidates, which in effect became an important subgenre in the *chih-kuai* category.¹³⁷

These accounts mounted in number and by Sung times were widely prevalent in encyclopedias such as the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* 太平廣記 (Expanded records of the T'ai-p'ing era), completed in 977, and in "note-form literature" (*pi-chi* 筆記). Daiwie Fu has examined the evolution of the anomaly accounts in Northern Sung times and found that in general there was a tendency among Sung literati such as Shen Kua 沈括 (1031-95) to revise the T'ang categorization of natural anomalies by distancing themselves from such records of ghosts and divine spirits. In his *Meng-hsi pi-t'an* 夢溪筆談 (Brush talks from the dream book), for instance,

¹³⁷. See Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in Tang China*, pp. 31-42; and Robert F. Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 28-29, 150-55, which revises earlier findings in DeWoskin, "The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction," pp. 21-52.

Shen Kua retained the Han-T'ang style of fascination with marvels and anomalies but, according to Fu, also sought to dispel the "supernormal aura of ghosts." In Fu's view, Sung literati sought to create an official intellectual position that would distance elites from the popular lore associated with Han-T'ang aristocratic culture and recorded in *chih-kuai* accounts.¹³⁸

Yiyi Wu has described, for instance, how Northern Sung literati-officials adopted an attitude of what Wu calls, a bit too teleologically, "pragmatic agnosticism" toward astral anomalies and thereby triumphed over career bureaucrats in the Directorate of Astronomy between the 1006 sighting of a supernova (*k'o-hsing* 客星) and the 1066 discovery of a comet (Halley's) in the heavens. Fan Chung-yen 范仲淹 (989-1052) was extremely circumspect in viewing astral anomalies such as the supernova of 1006 or the meteor shower of 1038 as evidence of heaven's interaction with human and political affairs. In a like manner, Ou-ying Hsiu attacked then-popular sky-reading traditions and attempted to separate politics from astral anomalies. The Sung literati position, which the Ming examiners tried to reproduce, stressed human agency in the political world. Hsun-tzu's classical position of distancing heaven from human affairs was preferred to Tung Chung-shu's Han interpretation of anomalies as omens of political failure.¹³⁹

Representative of this Sung effort was Hung Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202), whose collection of anecdotes and stories of unusual events, like Shen Kua's *Meng-hsi pi-t'an*, entertained elites with a wide array of Sung popular lore concerning the mantic arts. Hung preferred to record such materials for posterity in his *I-chien chih* 夷堅志 (Record of I-chien), but when politics became involved he was careful to diagnose the cause of political failure as the activities of rulers and not impute celestial phenomena as the ultimate reason for such events. Astral omens had supposedly heralded the rise of Wang An-shih, but, according to Hung Mai, such auspicious sightings had not prevented the dynasty from collapsing in 1127 to the Jurchen Chin onslaught, which Hung attributed to Wang's disastrous reform policies. For Hung, "treating the real as unreal and treating the unreal as real" were both confused.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸. See Daiwie Fu, "A Contextual and Taxonomic Study of the 'Divine Marvels' and 'Strange Occurrences' in the *Mengxi bitan*," *Chinese Science* 11 (1993-94): 3-35.

¹³⁹. See Yiyi Wu, "Auspicious Omens and Their Consequences: Zhen-ren (1006-1066) Literati's Perception of Astral Anomalies" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, History, 1990), pp. 131-63, 171-252. See also Yung Sik Kim, "The World-View of Chu Hsi (1130-1200): Knowledge about the Natural World in 'Chu-tzu ch'üan-shu'" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, History, 1980), pp. 14-40, 147-216.

¹⁴⁰. Hung Mai, *Jung-chai sui-pi* 容齋隨筆 (Miscellaneous jottings from Jung Studio) (Shanghai, Ku-chi Press, 1978), 1/218. See Yves Hervouet, ed., *A Sung Bibliography* (Hong

Accordingly, we can see that by invoking Ou-yang Hsiu's cautious position on linking events on earth to the heavens, the 1558 Ming examiners in Shun-t'ien were appealing to a classical (Hsun-tzu) and Sung (Ou-yang Hsiu) ideal that tolerated records of anomalous events but also sought to set limits to how seriously such speculations should be taken. In addition, by explicitly attacking the role of Han officials in manipulating omens and anomalies for political purposes, the Shun-t'ien examiners were also trying to control the impact of the mantic arts in official life, if not in personal life, by stressing instead Tao Learning notions of human responsibility and moral cultivation.

The 1558 policy question on anomalies sought to reproduce the Sung sense of prudence and care about overinterpreting the linkages between this and the other world. The answer they selected as most outstanding, and thus the one that best reflected their cosmological perspective, was written by Wu Shao 吳紹, an imperial student from Chia-hsing county in Che-chiang province who finished third overall in the Shun-t'ien provincial examination. His answer was rated by the examiners as a model for "fathoming the principles" (*ch'iung-li* 究理) that mediated between heaven and people. In the opening to his answer, Wu Shao agreed with the examiners that the interaction between Heaven and man was subtle and hard to discern. Nonetheless, Wu contended, heaven had "concrete principles" (*shih-li* 實理), and man had "concrete affairs" (*shih-shih* 實事). Heaven's "concrete principles" were based on the operations of yin and yang; "concrete affairs" were brought to completion under the control of men. Accordingly, Wu Shao concluded: "Those who say that heaven has planned out calamities to accord with earthly affairs are slandering heaven. Similarly, those who say that people have planned earthly affairs to accord with calamities are slandering men. These are all instances of seeking the principles unsuccessfully and twisting words to misconstrue things. Would the gentlemen select such views?"¹⁴¹

Because heaven and people were unified in principle, the gentleman could seek principles to fathom successfully the workings of heaven and earth, according to Wu Shao. Confucius' *Spring and Autumn Annals* exemplified this approach. His chronicle of events and calamities did not link heaven and humans to explain inauspicious events; rather, because his standpoint was for the public good and because he resided in correct prin-

ciples, he did not force events to fit the notion that calamities were preordained. Wu further explained: "Therefore, I think those who discuss calamities and inauspicious events must use the *Annals* as their standard. Confucius' intent was true, and his words were straight. The chronicle was verified according to unchanging principles."¹⁴²

Coming to the part of the question dealing with the calamities that had beset the sage-kings Yao and T'ang, Wu Shao noted that the lack of such calamities in later reigns did not mean that Yao or T'ang were deficient in morality. Rather, the problem lay in the operations of *ch'i* 氣 (the material/spiritual world of matter and energy), which was unified in its operations between heaven and earth. Sometimes it acted in harmony with people; at other times it went against them. Even a sage-king such as Yao or T'ang could not control the operations of *ch'i* when they went against the ruler's will. Later reigns were more fortunate in living in a time when the operations of *ch'i* were more harmonious. Rather than fear such events, according to Wu Shao, the gentleman understood that "heaven has its Way, and men have their efficacy." Fear of the workings of the universe could be tamed and brought within the framework of self-control and self-scrutiny in the realm of human affairs.¹⁴³

To explain why calamities occurred (*so-i-jan* 所以然), Wu Shao appealed to the subtle revolutions of the heavenly Way, which were beyond the ken of humans. The great virtuous power of heaven favored life, but even heaven could not stand in the way of the workings of the Way, when heaven's heart was moved by the plight of men caught up in calamities. To blame heaven for the calamity was to slander heaven and misrepresent its support of life. The prediction of calamities by ancients such as Ching Fang did not confirm heaven's intentions but merely demonstrated the various purposes imputed by men to heaven when calamities occurred. The actual causes for such calamities were never really fathomed.

Wu Shao compared the calamities of heaven to the diseases of humans. Just as an illness must be identified and dealt with by testing one's pulse, so too an anomaly or calamity in the heavens is revealed in light of the "arcane aspects of correspondence" (*hsiang-wei* 象緯). On earth they are revealed in mountains and streams. In things, calamities and anomalies are revealed in supernatural birds, animals, plants, and trees. Among humans, they are seen in villains. When the causes are properly examined, then both illness and calamities can be handled and treated. Just as a doctor and medicine are required to treat an illness and restore the

Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), pp. 304–05. For discussion, see Yiyi Wu, "Auspicious Omens and Their Consequences," pp. 268–70; Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, pp. 190–91; and Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China*, passim.

¹⁴¹ *Shun-t'ien-fu hsiang-shih lu*, 1558: 68a–69b; and *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, 2.24b.

¹⁴² *Huang-Ming ts'e-heng*, 2.24b–26a.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 2.26a–27a.

inborn vitalities (*yuan-ch'i* 元氣) of the body, the cultivation of moral standards and judgments based on laws and regulations are needed to cope with a calamity and restore the original vitality of the dynasty.¹⁴⁴

Wu Shao concluded his policy answer by declaring that those who sought to bring order to the world did not make plans depending on whether there would be calamities. They simply concerned themselves with whether their plans were complete. Yao handled nine years of floods and T'ang seven years of drought by making the appropriate plans to deal with such calamities. Those who did not have to face calamities never had to come up with the plans to deal with such events. Thus Yao and T'ang were great sage-kings, according to Wu Shao, precisely because they had to overcome adversity to create order in the world. In effect, Wu had turned the discussion of calamities and inauspicious events inside out. They became tests of greatness rather than harbingers of the intervention of the supernatural on earth. Flood and drought demonstrated the sagely credentials of Yao and T'ang.¹⁴⁵

This policy question and its answer, typical of the cosmological outlook favored in written examinations, were pervaded by a distancing orientation to natural calamities and were clearly opposed to what were called "disjoined" (*pu-ho* 不合) interpretations of nature. Limitations in the human understanding of the cosmos, according to both the examiners and candidate, had to be recognized. Otherwise, to impute human meaning and intent to calamities, as prognostication and the mantic arts presumed, was to humanize heaven and translate human knowledge into human fear and ignorance. Furthermore, the candidate's appeal to sage-kings as men who confronted the events of their time and rectified them indicated that notions of fate implying resignation in the face of calamities were unacceptable for orthodox literati operating in the public domain. What mattered was not the symbolic meaning of floods or droughts but rather what concrete policies were followed to deal with them. Governance by men took precedence in a world in which the complete workings of heaven were beyond one's understanding.

Ch'ing Views of Fate Prediction in the Examinations

The tension between an ideal cosmos, in which the natural and political worlds were acceptable though distant reflections of each other, and the popular mantic arts, which brought such theories dangerously down to earth in the forms of religious and popular communication with the other

world, were never successfully resolved in the late empire. Although increasingly evident in the Ch'ing, literati dissatisfaction with the inroads that popular religion and the mantic world of diviners, fortune-tellers, and Taoist priests had made in Ming examination life was already foreshadowed during the sixteenth century.

The Che-chiang scholar-bibliophile Hu Ying-lin 胡應麟 (1551-1602), for example, became a *chü-jen* degree-holder in 1576, but between 1577 and 1598 he failed the metropolitan examination eight times. His distaste for the examination system carried over into his private life, during which he read widely and began writing fiction at the age of fifteen. In 1594-95, while he stayed in Peking preparing for his seventh attempt at the *chin-shih* degree in spring 1595, Hu recorded one of his dreams, which in effect became a parody of the dream-visions so popular among examination candidates.¹⁴⁶

Under the heading "Examiners in Heaven" ("T'ien-shang chu-ssu" 天上主司), Hu Ying-lin related that the night before the 1595 metropolitan examination he had dreamed of an officially dressed man sitting above him in the palace, who invited him to enter and take the examination. When Hu entered the palace examination, he found that a man named I-shui sheng (易水生, lit., "Master Change-Water") was already seated. When only one sheet of paper with the examination questions on it floated down from the examiner, Hu struggled with the other man to catch it. Master Change-Water succeeded in catching the paper, although Hu could make out seven characters on the sheet. After falling short on the heavenly examination, Hu awoke angrily and remained ill at ease. When the first session of the actual metropolitan examination commenced, Hu was surprised to see that the seven characters he had glimpsed in his dream, if properly interpreted, would have correctly predicted the first quotation.

Nevertheless, when Hu saw the official rankings posted, he learned that he had failed a seventh time. When he saw the name of the 1595 metropolitan *hui-yuan*, Hu noted that the surname of T'ang Pin-yin 湯賓尹 (b. 1568) bore a striking resemblance to the two characters of "Change-Water" in Hu's dream, the man with whom he had struggled to catch the examination paper. The character for *i* 易 (change) made up the right side of T'ang's surname, while the character for *shui* 水 formed the left-side water radical *丶* in T'ang. So far, Hu's story was a straightforward account of fate and the reason why one man lost and another won.

144. Ibid., 2.27a-28b.

145. Ibid., 2.28b-29b.

146. See Hu Ying-lin, *Chia-i sheng-yan* 甲乙剩言 (Leftover words from heavenly stems one and two), *Pai-pu ts'ung-shu* 百部叢書 edition (reprint, Taipei: I-wen Press), pp. 4b-5b.

Hu went on to note, however, that the heavenly examiner must have been "illiterate" (*pu-shih tzu* 不識字) because the character for "change" was missing the middle line contained in the graph *yang* 易. In other words, the heavenly examiner had not understood the rules for character formation, whereby the left-side radical for water 氵 provided the correct meaning of "soup" for T'ang Pin-yin's surname, but the right-side character for "change" was the wrong phonetic element. Instead of the sound of *i*, the correct phonetic should have rhymed with the sound of [y]ang 易. Such a backhanded critique of the heavenly examiner permitted Hu to conclude: "If the heavenly examiner was illiterate, how much better could the earthly examiners be?"¹⁴⁷

Hu Ying-lin effectively turned the typical Ming dream interpretation inside out and cast doubt on the credibility of the other world. His parody of the dream satirized the mantic arts, which had given the other world precedence over the human realm. In the end, all Hu could do, however, was to throw up his hands in disgust and retire to private life. Nevertheless, his views echoed sentiments among many Ming literati that the degree of belief in fate and examination success had gone too far. It took a mortal such as Hu to recognize that the heavenly examiner was poorly grounded in the linguistic foundations of the classical language that most young boys had mastered in childhood.

Resistance to the mantic arts in examination life probably increased during the Ch'ing, but given the deluge of candidates taking the civil examinations after 1700 (see Chapter 4), it is unlikely that such resistance had much effect in practice. Tai Ming-shih 戴名世 (1653–1713), who became a popular writer of classical essays and as an outside observer frequently criticized the official examination rankings, ridiculed the popular belief in the role of fate in these rankings. In his 1702 preface to his collection of the best provincial examination essays from that year, Tai pointedly attacked those who attributed their success or failure to fate, ghosts, or the mantic arts. In Tai's view, the hard work required to learn how to write proper eight-legged essays, outlined in Chapter 4, was the key to success or failure. In this regard, "individuals had to accept responsibility because ghosts had no role to play" (人有權，而鬼為無權矣). Tai Ming-shih restored the years of childhood memorization and thousands of practice essays that had been elided in the rush to grant fate the final say.¹⁴⁸

In the eighteenth century, Wu Ching-tzu, for example, relied on geomancy early in his quest for an examination degree, but as his failures

¹⁴⁷. Ibid., pp. 4b–5b.

¹⁴⁸. See Tai Ming-shih, "Jen-wu mo-chüan hsu" 壬午墨卷序 (Preface for examination essays from 1702), in *Ch'ing-tai ch'ien-ch'i chiao-yü lun-chu hsuan*, 2/238.

mounted Wu ridiculed the practice in his famous novel *The Scholars*. His lineage had attributed their early Ch'ing literary prominence to an auspicious gravesite chosen by a geomancer. In the famous chapter 44 of his novel, Wu had a character say:

Nothing enrages me more than the way geomancers nowadays, who quote Kuo [P'u 郭璞, 276–324] as an authority to say: "This plot will ensure that your descendants come first in the palace examination and are Number One Palace Graduates." I ask you, sir: Since the rank of Number One Palace Graduate was instituted in the T'ang dynasty, how could Kuo P'u, who lived in the Chin dynasty [265–419], know of this T'ang title and decree that a certain type of ground would produce this rank? This is absolutely ridiculous! If the ancients could foretell high honors and rank from the soil, how is it that Han Hsin 韓信 [d. 196 B.C.], who chose a high and spacious burial ground for his mother, first became a noble and then had three branches of his lineage wiped out? Was that site good or bad?¹⁴⁹

This Ch'ing backlash against such religious avenues for fate prediction, however considerable, should not cloud our conclusions about their popular role in the examination market. We can certainly see in Wu Ching-tzu's satire the voice of the literatus ideal enunciated since Confucius that "to keep one's distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence can be called wisdom."¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the literati mastery, in theory, of the high-minded areligiosity in the Four Books did not eliminate the inroads of popular religion or its mantic resources in literati life. At best, classical aloofness and literary satire could only curtail the public affirmation of popular religion and try to keep it in its secondary place. Even the Ch'ien-lung emperor was bedeviled by the mass hysteria in 1768 resulting from rumors that sorcerers were practicing magical arts by stealing the souls of their owners. They used the technique of cutting off the queues worn by Han Chinese men, which had symbolized their submission to the Manchu dynasty since the fall of the Ming.¹⁵¹

Dream interpretation, for example, remained an important feature of literati life in the Ch'ing dynasty, but its historical significance when compared to the Ming elite craze for dreams diminished and was transposed to general works on popular lore. In the late Ch'ing, the *Tien-shih-chai hua-pao* 點石齋畫報 (The Tien-shih Pavilion's pictorial), a popular periodical,

¹⁴⁹. See Wu Ching-tzu, *The Scholars*, pp. 490–91. See also Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, pp. 160–71.

¹⁵⁰. *Lun-yü yin-te*, 11/6/22. Cf. Lau, ed., *Confucius: The Analects*, p. 84.

¹⁵¹. See Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers*, pp. 94–118.

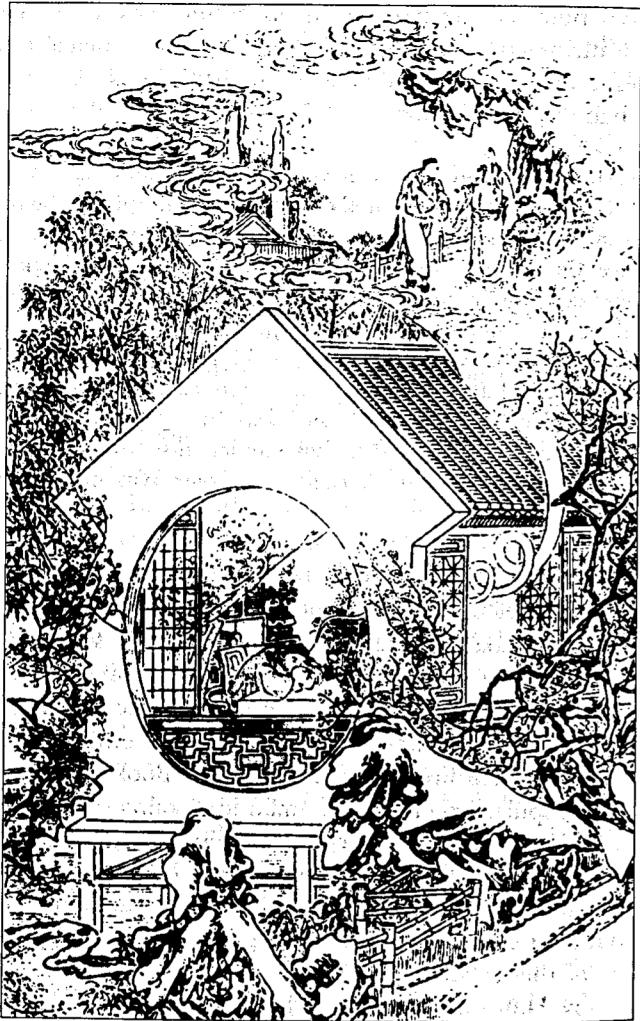


FIGURE 6.13. Dreaming of an Auspicious Meeting at the Local Wen-ch'ang Temple in 1822. Source: *Tien-shih-chai hua-pao* 點石齋畫報 (The Tien-shih Pavilion's pictorial), serial 2, vol. 11 (1897), *hsu* 戊 12, pp. 91b–92a. Reprinted, Yang-chou: Chiang-su Rare Books, 1983.

also presented accounts of preordained examination success, which included illustrations of the “dream visions” of Ch'ing literati fated to succeed. In Figure 6.13, for instance, we see a youth from the Huang 黃 family napping in his bookish study within an elegant garden. In his daydream, which takes place before the 1822 Shan-hsi provincial examination, the

young man is received in the local Wen-ch'ang Temple, where he meets the patron deity of the literary arts. The meeting is later read as an omen of his future success (*teng-k'o yu-chao* 登科有兆) as the *chieh-yuan* on the provincial examination.¹⁵²

The popularity of such collections indicated that the “distancing” of heaven in the civil examination compound was always resisted even when the candidate's examination essay correctly reproduced the required literati critique of fate and anomaly interpretation. The *Ming chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, for example, was also enlarged to include lists of Ch'ing *optimi*. But such lists gave only the barest of examination information and career success each *optimus* had attained. Not one mini-account mentioned any Ch'ing *optimus* who had premonitions and dreams of their imminent success in the examination competition similar to *Ming chuang-yuan*. Nor were any illustrations of dream-visions included. Sketchy accounts were added about the second- and third-place finishers on the palace and the top graduate from the metropolitan examinations.

Moreover, the brief accounts stopped in 1682, indicating that support for such an elite record of the role of mantic techniques and dreams among the most heralded Ch'ing literati empirewide was not as acceptable for gentry publications as in the late Ming. Titled the *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, the Ming-Ch'ing accounts covered *chuang-yuan* from 1371 to 1682, some three hundred years in the heyday of the late imperial civil examination machinery and its cultural efflorescence, but a sharp break in the acceptability of dream narratives had occurred after 1644. No subsequent publication attempted to paint dreams and the mantic arts as positively as the Ming account of *chuang-yuan* had.¹⁵³

Instead, the narratives of dreams continued in popular works of literature, such as those by P'u Sung-ling,¹⁵⁴ in *i-wen lu* 異聞錄 (records of unusual matters) accounts of the examination compounds, and in late-Ch'ing periodicals such as the *Tien-shih-chai hua-pao*. The *Kuo-ch'ao k'o-ch'ang i-wen lu* 國朝科場異聞錄 (Recording unusual matters heard in the Ch'ing examination grounds) in particular became a rich depository of civil examination lore up to the Taiping Rebellion and paralleled earlier *chih-kuai* collections during the Sung and Ming dynasties. Such popular elements were also incorporated in two influential works on Ming and

¹⁵². See *Tien-shih-chai hua-pao* 點石齋畫報 (The Tien-shih Pavilion's pictorial), serial 2, vol. 11 (1897), *hsu* 戊 12, pp. 91b–92a (reprint, Yang-chou: Chiang-su Rare Books, 1983). My thanks to Meng Yue for pointing out this source for Ch'ing dreams of examination success.

¹⁵³. *Chuang-yuan t'u-k'ao*, 4.23a–32a. See also Richard Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers*, p. 251.

¹⁵⁴. For discussion, see Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, pp. 164–81.

Ch'ing civil examinations: the *Chih-i ts'ung-hua* 制義叢話 (Collected comments on the crafting of eight-legged civil examination essays), compiled by Liang Chang-chü 梁章鉅 and published in 1843, and the *Chih-i k'o-so chi* 制義科瑣記 (Collection of fragments about the crafted eight-legged essays for civil examinations), by Li T'iao-yuan 李調元.

This trend to reclassify and thereby redomesticate the oddities of the civil examination experience shared much in kind with the T'ang-Sung evolution of the *chih-kuai* genre overall, which had evolved in medieval times into an acceptable elite record of unusual phenomena and human fortune. The late Ming passion for dream interpretation never really waned in the Ch'ing, but its official portrait became more scholarly and aloof, perhaps under the influence of a more sober-minded elite increasingly oriented toward evidential research (see Chapter 9). Many Sung literati, such as Ou-yang Hsiu, had distanced themselves from the mantic practices of their times, and many Ming-Ch'ing followers of the Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy or Han Learning followed their lead.¹⁵⁵

By the late Ch'ing and early Republic, this elite view of popular custom was reconfigured in modernist terms, a trend that culminated with Hsu K'o's *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao* 清稗類鈔 (Classified jottings on Ch'ing dynasty unofficial history). In Hsu's collection, examination lore was divided up and reclassified into the categories of "civil examinations," "magicians and shamans" (*fang-chi* 方伎), and "confused beliefs" (*mi-hsin* 迷信). Hsu K'o intended his collection of lore, published in 1917, as a sequel to the Sung *Tai-p'ing kuang-chi*, but the new cultural context ensured that such lore was publicly acceptable among modernist literati only if it could be pigeonholed as superstition.¹⁵⁶ Here we see that Ch'ing literati views of mantic techniques and the later "May Fourth" hostility toward imperial Chinese "superstitions" were homologous.

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSES TO FAILURE

To conclude this account of the examination life and its late imperial popular forms of cultural expression, I shall briefly look at psychological portraits of students and examination candidates during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. The internalization of public failure, which became the lot of

¹⁵⁵ Campany, *Strange Writing*, pp. 116–19, 122–29. See also Smith, *Fortune-Tellers*, pp. 160–71. On evidential research, see my *From Philosophy to Philology*, pp. 27–36.

¹⁵⁶ See Zvia Lipkin, "Soothsayers, Clients and the State in Republican Canton," presented at the Graduate Student Conference on Modern Chinese History, University of California, San Diego, spring 1996, for the survival of late-imperial mantic practices despite these modernizing tendencies.

almost all young men who competed in the examination market, was usually rationalized according to the therapeutic regimes offered candidates and their families by religion and popular mantic techniques. Such therapies when accepted and effectively applied kept male anxiety within the acceptable social boundaries of personal mental well-being and prevented dreams and hallucinations from losing their links to acceptable standards of cultural health during the Ming and Ch'ing. But this was an inherently unstable balance of outer public pressure and inner emotional resources that each individual had to navigate successfully for himself.

P'u Sung-ling on Alienation and the Examination Life

P'u Sung-ling, a failure many times himself, immortalized the travails of the vast majority trapped in the relentless machinery of late imperial civil examinations in his many stories that parodied the examination system. In his most famous portrait of the candidate as a young man, P'u realistically sketched "The Seven Likenesses of a Candidate" ("Hsiu-ts'ai ju-wei yu ch'i-szu yen" 秀才入闈有七似焉):

A licentiate taking the provincial examination may be likened to seven things. When entering the examination hall, bare-footed and carrying a basket, he is like a beggar. At roll-call time, being shouted at by officials and abused by their subordinates, he is like a prisoner. When writing in his cell, with his head and feet sticking out of the booth, he is like a cold bee late in autumn. Upon leaving the examination hall, being in a daze and seeing a changed universe, he is like a sick bird out of a cage. When anticipating the results, he is on pins and needles; one moment he fantasizes success and magnificent mansions are instantly built; another moment he fears failure and his body is reduced to a corpse. At this point he is like a chimpanzee in captivity. Finally the messengers come on galloping horses and confirm the absence of his name on the list of successful candidates. His complexion becomes ashen and his body stiffens like a poisoned fly no longer able to move. Disappointed and discouraged, he vilifies the examiners for their blindness and blames the unfairness of the system. Thereupon he collects all his books and papers from his desk and sets them on fire; unsatisfied, he tramples over the ashes; still unsatisfied, he throws the ashes into a filthy gutter. He is determined to abandon the world by going into the mountains, and he is resolved to drive away any person who dares speak to him about examination essays. With the passage of time, his anger subsides and his aspiration rises. Like a turtle dove just hatched, he rebuilds his nest and starts the process once again.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ See *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, 21.62–63, for a version of the original. This famous passage is narrated in Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, "Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service

This account is of course fiction, but its realistically constructed cultural content lays out in full relief the massive psychological strain that candidates like P'u Sung-ling experienced in and outside the cultural prisons of the Ch'ing government. Writing in the late Ch'ing, Shang Yen-liu noted that P'u's phrase "like a cold bee in late autumn" may have been accurate for Shan-tung, but that in Kuang-chou, where Shang took his *chü-jen*, it was more like "an ant in a hot pot."¹⁵⁸ For our purposes, P'u Sung-ling's literary version of male anxiety circa 1700 reflects how his society and his time described the examination experience for most young men who traversed the rites of passage from youthful hope to adult disappointment and then to elderly maturity. P'u's account thus tells us a great deal about his views of the examinations and the toll they took on him and his fellow failures who tried to cope with the social pressure to succeed. Their narratives of examination failure stand in sharp relief against the reassuring woodblock prints carved by Huang Ying-ch'eng of Ming *optimi* daydreaming in the midst of their studies.

Read autobiographically, the account of the "seven transformations" tells us how P'u Sung-ling channeled his experiences and transformed them into cultural significance as fictional stories that appealed to others for their realism and maturity. As Allan Barr correctly notes, through the ironic exploration of fancy, fate, and gods, P'u Sung-ling had successfully turned his disappointments into a series of therapeutic versions of Ch'ing daily life. He did not seek to overthrow the examination regime, despite his sharp satire. Rather, P'u learned to come to grips with his failures inside the system and coped with it by turning his energies to literature instead. In the process, P'u achieved a level of therapeutic distance that must have been emotionally common in a land filled with so many examination failures and so few daydreaming *chuang-yuan*. As indicated in Chapter 5, even *optimi* had to fail several times before their predestined success was successfully rationalized.¹⁵⁹

In the psychological narrative that P'u Sung-ling depicted, the examination candidate, typically a young man from a gentry family who had spent ten or more years preparing for local licensing examinations and

Examination System," pp. 67–68, and translated in C. T. Hu, "The Historical Background: Examinations and Control in Pre-Modern China," *Comparative Education* 20, 1 (1984): 16, and incompletely in Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, pp. 57–58. See also P'u's [Pu] Strange Tales of Liao-zhai. For discussion, see Barr, "Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System," pp. 87–111.

¹⁵⁸ Sheang [Shang] Yen-liu, "Memories of the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination System," p. 68.

¹⁵⁹ See Barr, "Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System," pp. 107–08.

another five to ten competing in provincial examination halls (see Chapter 5), is transformed into a supplicant begging for admission into the cultural prisons of the dynasty. Once inside, his status as a prisoner subject to constant surveillance and abuse as he prepares his essays inside his assigned examination cell isolates him from his fellow candidates and identifies him in that isolation as a lonely individual caught in a system of political power to which he has sought admission.

After leaving the compound, the psychological toll of the brief imprisonment leads to moments of flight and fancy as hopes for success are balanced by fears of failure in the subsequent days of nervously waiting for the examination rolls to be announced. Elation is assumed for the 1% who see their names on the list. P'u Sung-ling, however, tells us the emotional costs for the 99% who failed. Their faces become white; their bodies are immobilized; their hopes are dashed. Here we see the psychological and physical symptoms of the examination life, and its manifest imagery in the literature inscribed by P'u Sung-ling's own historical circumstances.

Failure quickly turns to discouragement, but P'u Sung-ling details how such emotions can be quickly channeled into anger at the examiners and criticism of the examination system itself. In the extreme, the candidate renounces his studies, burns his books, and not satisfied with that, further reveals the obsessive nature of his emotional reaction to failure by trampling on the ashes of the physical traces of his years of sacrifice and hard work and then gathering them up to throw away as garbage. In the accepted psychology of late imperial times, failure and religion go hand in hand. Escape from the regime of examinations is culturally narrated by P'u Sung-ling in light of Taoist and Buddhist notions of leaving this world and entering the world of pure nature where human artifice does not intervene. The candidate, who competed alone in the examination cell, now seeks to live alone in the forest, away from friends and family.

P'u's account is formulaic in many ways, even for successful graduates. Arthur Waley, for example, has described the T'ang roots of such dreams of escapism in his gloss on a poem by the eighteenth-century poet and stylist Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–98), who in 1765 came across a chair-carrier who looked familiar to him. Yuan's poem captured the pain of remembrance:

The chair-carrier wiped his eyes and looked,
And looked again, and heaved a deep sigh.
He told me that on the day of my wedding
He was one of those that carried the bridegroom's chair.
"Brisk you were, a little Hanlin academician,
Your young cheeks rosy as a morning glow.

THE DREAMS OF SUCCESS

Why have we not seen you for so long
That then you were a boy and now an old man?"
He broke off; but before he had finished speaking
A great depression suddenly came upon me.
It was like meeting an aged T'ien-pao era [742-55] person
Telling again the yellow millet dream.

Yuan Mei's poetic reference to the "yellow-millet dream" (*Han-tan meng-chueh* 邯鄲夢覺) and the glories of the T'ang before the An Lu-shan Rebellion of 756 (see Chapter 1) contained a parable that Waley succinctly summarizes:

A young man going up to the capital to try his fortune orders supper at an inn. While he is waiting for the millet to be cooked he falls asleep, his head propped on a pillow given to him by another guest. He dreams that he comes to the Capital, takes his degree, is promoted from one high post to another, gets into trouble and is degraded, is recalled to office, endures the hardship of distant campaigns, is accused of treason, condemned to death, saved at the last moment, and finally dies at a great old age. Awakening from his dream he discovers that the millet is not yet cooked. In a moment's sleep he has lived through the vicissitudes of a great public career. Convinced that in the world "honors are followed by disgrace and praise by calumny" he turns back towards the village from which he came. The pillow was a magic pillow, and the other guest a Taoist magician.¹⁶⁰

Whether for failure or graduate, the therapeutic role of religious awakening and dreams of an unencumbered life were available to both as an escape from the examination life and its subsequent careerist ordeals.

Though his parody of the anger felt by the examination failure is the part of the narrative that most current readers of P'u Sung-ling's tale focus on, the more important part comes at the end, for it was this part that told examination candidates that they could cope with their failures. P'u's clinical depiction of the failure as an emotional wreck is not the final story for him or for them. Rehabilitation, the return to mental peace of mind and the restoration of personal confidence, is the final lesson. Here P'u wisely tells us how and why the 99% who failed healed their mental and physical wounds and in time returned to the examination cell to compete again and again, not much wiser perhaps, but surely emotionally stronger, more mature, and experienced in the ways of the examination market and the difficult paths to fame and fortune in the late empire.

^{160.} Waley, *Yuan Mei: Eighteenth Century Chinese Poet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), pp. 103-04. See also Yuan Mei, *Shih-hua* 詩話 (Poetry talks), 3.7b, in *Sui-yuan ch'üan-chi* 隨園全集 (Complete works of Yuan Mei) (Shanghai: Wen-ming Bookstore, 1918). My thanks to Tony Wang, then of the Fulbright Foundation in Taiwan, for directing my attention to this passage.

Accordingly, P'u Sung-ling's realism is therapeutic in intent. Rebellion and iconoclasm were among the responses that examination failures often entertained, but in the end they persevered and became part of the vast pool of residual manpower who repeatedly took examinations while they got on with their lives. In P'u's own case, this meant turning to writing stories as an alternative means of cultural life and livelihood. Some could channel their frustrations into compiling examination editions for local printers or become local printers themselves, as did the Mas 馬 and Tsous 繆 in the Ssu-pao 四堡, Fu-chien, publishing industries. Others would crack under the pressure, as did the northern literatus Yen Yuan 顏元 (1635-1704), when he failed to cope with his personal family crisis and with his continual failures on local examinations. Yen successfully transformed his emotional crisis into a virulent attack on Ch'eng-Chu teachings as bookish and the examinations as unmanly.¹⁶¹ Similarly, a Che-chiang licentiate, when deprived of his local degree and expelled by his father in 1819, was arrested by authorities in the Temple of Confucius, where he had damaged the tablet of Confucius while wailing and complaining.¹⁶² P'u Sung-ling's therapeutic response, which falls far short of rebellion against the civil examinations, was typical but not unique. Not infrequently, failures would take that extra emotional step and strike out at the dynasty and its coercive examination regime.¹⁶³

It has long been taken for granted in accounts of late imperial history that local troublemakers frequently came from the pool of local licentiates who sought in vain to gain the coveted *chü-jen* and *chin-shih* degrees. Indeed, some of the leaders of the northwest revolt, whose forces had captured Peking in 1644 and brought down the dynasty in north China, were local examination candidates who had repeatedly failed to gain high office. Though the late Ming economic crisis, exacerbated by famine, corruption, and war, was the primary cause for the weakness of the Ming after the Tung-lin debacle (see Chapter 4), the willingness of some disgruntled examination candidates, such as Li Tzu-ch'eng 李自成 (1605?-45), to take up arms at a time of dynastic crisis was predictable within an examination regime that could produce such high levels of emotional disappointment and anger among so many failures.¹⁶⁴

^{161.} See Jui-sung Yang, "A New Interpretation of Yen Yuan (1635-1704) and Early Ch'ing Confucianism in North China" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, History, 1997), chapters 2 and 3.

^{162.} For this case, see Bodde and Morris, *Law in Imperial China*, pp. 271-72.

^{163.} Barr, "Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System," pp. 88-91. See also Nivison, "Protest against Conventions and Conventions of Protest," pp. 198-201; and Brokaw, "Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China," pp. 62-65.

^{164.} On the late-Ming economic crisis, see William Atwell, "The T'ai-ch'ang, T'ien-ch'i, and Ch'ung-chen Reigns, 1620-1644," in Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett,

Hung Hsiu-ch'üan and Examination Countervisions

Men like P'u Sung-ling, who transformed their bitter examination failures into "healthy," apolitical forms of cultural production, were the rule during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. Some, however, crossed the political and cultural boundaries of what their society and dynasty could consider acceptable. Chapter 4 described how the Ch'ing court in particular vainly tried to keep the pool of local licentiatees and candidates in political and legal line. The Ch'ien-lung emperor feared that plots against Manchu rule would emerge from the pool of men who had failed the civil examinations.¹⁶⁵

The hallucinations and countervisions of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan 洪秀全 (1813–64), whose religious visions were the ideological foundations for the Taiping Rebellion, are a case in point. Many like the future Taiping leader, who had a complete mental breakdown after repeatedly failing to pass local examinations in Canton, were left bereft of any hope of competing successfully for political office. Atypical in his use of Christian themes in the mid-nineteenth century to augment his views, Hung nevertheless appealed to long-standing religious forms of protest to contest the Ch'ing dynasty's examination regime and its cultural legitimacy under Manchu rulers.¹⁶⁶

At the age of thirteen *sui* in 1827, under his registered name of Huo-hsiu 火秀, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan traveled from his village in Kuang-tung province to take the qualifying examination in Hua county 花縣. Since the age of seven he had studied in his Hakka village school, and by all accounts he had been fond of learning for the five years he attended. There were high hopes for him. His teacher and family thought his literary talent would enable Hung Hsiu-ch'üan to gain high office, and perhaps even enter the Hanlin Academy. Hung passed the county qualifying examination on his first try. When he traveled to Kuang-chou prefecture 廣州 (Canton) to take the licensing examination, he failed, however. It is assumed that Hung first came into contact with a new world of trade, foreigners, and perhaps even Christian literature when he went for the pre-

eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, part 1, *The Ming Dynasty*, 1368–1644, pp. 615–40. On examination candidates who became rebels, see Ku Kung-hsieh, *Hsiao-hsia hsien-chi ch'ao*, B.3a–3b. Cf. Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, pp. 121–24.

¹⁶⁵ Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers*, p. 227.

¹⁶⁶ Wang Ch'ing-ch'eng 王慶成, "Lun Hung Hsiu-ch'üan te tsao-ch'i ssu-hsiang chi ch'i fa-chan" 論洪秀全的早期思想及其發展 (On Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's early thought and its development), in *Tai-p'ing tien-kuo-shih hsueh-shu t'ao-lun-hui lun-wen hsuan-chi* 太平天國史學術討論會論文選集 (Peking: Hsin-hua Bookstore, 1981), pp. 244–49.

fectural examinations to the only port in Ch'ing China legally open to foreign trade and contact.¹⁶⁷

To prepare for the next round of local examinations, Hung became a village teacher, based on his success in the county examination. His teaching allowed him the leisure to continue preparing for the civil examinations. In 1836, at the age of twenty-four, already a bit old among the many younger candidates, Hung traveled a second time to Canton to take the prefectural examination. Again he failed. He also failed in 1837. After the third failure, Hung returned home and became seriously ill. Ill for four days (later Taiping accounts said he was ill for forty days, to accord with Jesus' forty days of fasting) and in the midst of a delirium, Hung had a fantastic dream.¹⁶⁸

Fearing his own imminent death, Hung asked his parents' forgiveness for his examination failures before visions began to appear to him. He first saw a dragon, a tiger, and a rooster. Then a group of men playing music approached in a beautiful sedan and carried him away. They reached a land of distinguished-looking men and women who greeted him. An old woman took Hung to a river and, while washing him, admonished him not to defile himself again among the people below. Hung then entered a large hall, where an esteemed elderly man of the heavens (天上至尊的老人) asked Hung to venerate him because the man sustained all worldly life (世界人類皆我所生). The man presented Hung with a sword to overcome all demons and to protect his brothers and sisters, a seal to overcome evil spirits, and a golden fruit that was sweet to the taste. These represented imperial regalia, and Hung immediately began to admonish all around him to honor the venerable man who had presented him with these three marks of future power.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ See Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), passim. Spence argues that Hung was given a missionary tract by an American missionary that he later used to unravel the meaning of his subsequent illness and dream.

¹⁶⁸ See Su Shuang-p'i 蘇雙碧, *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan chuan* 洪秀全傳 (Biography of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan) (Peking: Ta-ti Press, 1989), pp. 13–15; and Ch'en Hua-hsin 陳華新 et al., *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan ssu-hsiang yen-chiu* 洪秀全思想研究 (Research on the thought of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan) (Canton: Kuang-tung People's Press, 1991), pp. 9–11. See also Franz Michael and Chung-li Chang, *The Taiping Rebellion*, vol. 1, *History* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1966), pp. 22–23; and Jen Yu-wen (Chien Yu-wen), *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 15–19.

¹⁶⁹ For the dream, see Su Shuang-p'i, *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan chuan*, pp. 17–18. For a different version, see Jen Yu-wen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, pp. 15–16, which is based on Theodore Hamberg's 1854 account in *The Visions of Hung-siu-Ishuen, and Origin of the Kwang-si Insurrection* (reprint, Peking: Yenching University Library, 1935), pp. 9–11. Because the accounts of the dreams were manipulated under Taiping rule, some later scholars have dis-

Typically this series of fantastic visions that Hung had in 1837 have been dissected by later Western or westernized scholars as evidence of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's "madness" or religious conversion. In the former view, Hung was a victim of acute paranoia, "a form of psychosis in which there are delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, and feelings of untoward pride and hatred, all of which are logically systematized so that the individual actually believes his disordered perceptions." Following the latter view, scholars contend that Hung had been decisively influenced by Christianity in his visits to Canton, and that these experiences "served as a catalyst, transforming his disordered and frustrated mind through the impact of the idea of salvation and the concept of a 'Man-God.'" Alternatively, scholars in China have demystified Hung's religious visions and rationalized them as premonitions of a new political order in China that would replace the imperial system.¹⁷⁰

The discussion of the mantic arts and dreams in imperial Chinese examination lore earlier in this chapter reveals how inadequate such modernist, psychohistorical, and sociohistorical accounts of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's initial dreams are. When placed within the historical context of Chinese dream interpretation during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, Hung's visions are less evidence of an individual Han Chinese man's paranoia than they are comprehensible narratives drawing on the rich symbolic traditions of Chinese religious and cultural life, which well-adjusted Ming *chuang-yuan* and Ch'ing literati equally engaged in and which were deemed socially acceptable among upper elites until the late seventeenth century. The cultural boundaries of mental health were drawn differently in late imperial China than in early modern Europe, and Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's delirium was an acute response to the examination pressures he faced and the high expectations his family and teacher had placed in him. Unlike most literati, such as P'u Sung-ling, who coped, Hung had cracked.

For the Taipings and for Hung himself, who both benefited from hindsight, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's strange, "anomalous dream" (*i-meng* 異夢) be-

missed them as fabrications. For our purposes, however, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's dreams, even if historical fabrications, are useful historical constructions that reveal how human experience was ordered, altered, and reshaped in the mid-nineteenth century. For discussion, see Ch'en Hua-hsin et al., *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan ssu-hsiang yen-chiu*, pp. 10–12.

¹⁷⁰ See P. M. Yap, "The Mental Illness of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, Leader of the Taiping Rebellion," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 13, 3 (May 1954): 287–304; and Hamberg, *The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen*. See also Vincent Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, pp. 448–49. For a political reading of Hung's dream, see Ch'en Hua-hsin et al., *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan ssu-hsiang yen-chiu*, pp. 12–13.

came a sign of his special future and confirmed his fate as the anointed leader of the Taipings. Along with the rich repertoire of traditional Chinese religious and mantic symbolism, which included immortals, gods, demons, and fairies, Hung initially had unconsciously added Christian notions of a single old man in power in the heavens to the pluralist menagerie of Taoist and Buddhist powers in the other world that intervened in this world on behalf of young men who were trapped in the examination life. As therapeutic as these visions were (Hung recovered on his own without any successful medical treatment), they contained ominous elements that threatened to go beyond the usual limits of literati critiques and spoofs of the examiners and the civil examination system.

Rather than offering guarantees of examination success or even premonitions that Hung would become an *optimus*, as Ming dreams formulaically depicted, the old man above had presented Hung Hsiu-ch'üan with imperial regalia and a call to purify the world below. The Hung lineage called in local doctors to treat the illness and also asked a mantic expert to interpret Hung's visions and exorcise the demon possessing him, but we have no record of how the latter handled these disturbing aspects of the dream. We know only that Hung rebuked the exorcist brought in to cure him. In Ch'ing times, under Manchu rulers, the crime of *lèse-majesté* was just below the surface of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's manifest dreams.¹⁷¹

After recovering, Hung appeared more sure of himself, but his life was relatively uneventful for several more years. Based on his dream, however, Hung changed his name from Huo-hsiu to Hsiu-ch'üan, thinking, according to some scholars, that the two parts of the graph for *ch'üan* 全 symbolized the people's (*jen* 人) ruler (*wang* 王). Following the traditional art of character analysis and glyphomancy described above, Hung had responded to his dream by renaming himself in accordance with his dream. In the spring of 1843, Hung tried again for the coveted status of local licentiate. To this point, his emotional recovery followed the same pattern P'u Sung-ling had described in the examination candidate who had rebuilt his nest and started over. Hung had returned to the examination life.

When he failed a fourth time, however, Hung's reaction was rage not delirium. While returning by boat from Canton, he cursed the examiners and composed a poem intimating a revolt against the Manchu dynasty. After arriving home, Hung's fury had not relented. Denouncing the dynasty and its officials, Hung threw his books out and apparently cried out: "Let me give examinations to select the literati of the empire" (等我自己來開科取天下士罷). Hung's threat to become the examiner was realized when, as we shall see in Chapter 11, he radically revised the

¹⁷¹ Jen Yu-wen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, p. 17.

The Cultural Scope of Civil Examinations and the Eight-Legged Essay among Elites

Ch'ing examination curriculum to conform with Taiping ideology and Christian doctrine and in 1851 ordered civil examinations under the Heavenly Kingdom to commence.¹⁷²

By rejecting the psychological mold that had in Nivison's words conventionalized literati protest against the civil examinations since the T'ang dynasty, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan was revolutionary in the content of his protest, but the institutional forms his examination protest took were still conventional. After 1843, Hung's "anomalous dream" was used by him and his God Worshipers Society (*Pai shang-ti chiao* 拜上帝教) to demonstrate that Hung had ascended to heaven and met with God and Jesus Christ. Their instructions to purify the earth meant that the Manchus had to be removed, the Ch'ing dynasty overturned, and the teachings of Confucius and Mencius eliminated. Hung had found his calling as the new emperor of the Heavenly Kingdom of Eternal Peace (*T'ai-p'ing tien-kuo* 太平天國), which would establish an examination regime for young men in the Yangtzu delta based on Sino-Christian Taiping truth. Whether they admitted it or not, late Ch'ing reformers who decanonized the official literati orthodoxy (see Chapter 11) used in the civil examinations since the early Ming dynasty were following in Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's rebellious wake.¹⁷³

The popular, nonofficial dimensions of the civil examinations described in this chapter affected the lives of elites and commoners in remarkable ways. Popular culture permeated the examination venues of the dynasty, while Hanlin examiners vainly struggled to keep the mantic arts out of the examination compound. Although such attempts failed, their efforts succeeded in setting limits to the scope of religion and popular culture in the orthodox content of the civil examination papers until the eruption of Taiping religiosity and its penetration of examinations in the 1850s (see Chapter 11). The next chapter further examines elite aspects of the cultural scope of the civil examinations and the classical essays produced during the Ming dynasty. Chapters 8 and 9 then turn to the standards used to measure success and failure on the examinations before 1800.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 19–20; Su Shuang-p'i, *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan chuan*, pp. 13–14; and Ch'en Hua-hsin et al., *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan ssu-hsiang yen-chiu*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁷³ Su Shuang-p'i, *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan chuan*, pp. 21–34; and Ch'en Hua-hsin et al., *Hung Hsiu-ch'üan ssu-hsiang yen-chiu*, pp. 14–37. See also Michael and Chang, *The Taiping Rebellion*, pp. 24–37.

The public ceremonies that accompanied the testing and selection of candidates for public office accorded local *sheng-yuan*, provincial *chü-jen*, and palace *chin-shih* graduates with both sociopolitical status and cultural prestige. Classical literacy, the mastery of *Tao-hsueh* learning, and the ability to write terse but elegant examination essays together publicly marked the educated literati whose names appeared on the final lists of graduates. In addition to its political and social functions (described in previous chapters), the civil service competition successfully created a dynastic curriculum that consolidated gentry, military, and merchant families empirewide into a culturally defined status group of degree-holders sharing a common classical language and memorization of a mutual canon of Classics.

The internalization of a literary culture that was in part defined by the civil examination curriculum also influenced the literatus' public and private definition of his moral character and social conscience.¹ A view of government, society, and the individual's role as an elite servant of the dynasty was continually reinforced in the memorization process leading up to the examinations themselves. The moral cultivation of the literatus (*shih-hsi* 士習; see Tables 8.5 and 8.6) was a perennial concern of the imperial court as it sought to ensure that the officials it chose in the examination market would serve the people in the name of the ruling family. Literati, as the highest social group, were expected to be partners of the dynasty and serve as models (*ssu-min chih shou* 四民之首) for those beneath them politically and socially. For the literatus, it was important that the dynasty conformed to classical ideals and upheld the Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy that literati themselves had formulated in the Sung-Yuan-Ming tran-

¹ Rieff, *The Feeling Intellect*, pp. 233–35, citing Durkheim.