

ON SUBSTANTIVE LEARNING
By Chen Hongmou

Introduction

The Qing government employed officials at the imperial, provincial, and county levels to carry out the responsibilities of government. Those qualified for appointments as officials had passed a highly competitive series of examinations based largely on the Confucian classics. Qing officials were responsible for a wide range of duties — in addition, they were expected to be morally upright gentlemen. (Needless to say, they were not always so in practice.)

In their intellectual lives, the scholars from whose ranks Qing officials were appointed were concerned with the study of the large corpus of classical texts — philosophical, historical, and literary — which were their inheritance from the past.

The following excerpts are from the writings of Chen Hongmou (1696-1771). Chen had a long career as a provincial governor, serving in that post in a number of provinces. The following are excerpts from some of his letters and other writings in which he discusses his approach to the challenge of studying the Confucian texts which lay at the core of the intellectual tradition and thus of the identity of the scholar-official class itself.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 157-160. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

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**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
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The examinations test first the candidate's knowledge of basic principles revealed in the classical texts, and then move on to legal and policy questions. ...

Imperial edicts have repeatedly ordered that, in the provincial-level examinations, equal weight be given to this second part, in order to scrutinize the candidates' understanding of political economy ... But students in fact do not diligently prepare for these practical policy questions ... instead, they quickly cram for them as the examination approaches, by memorizing standardized crib book answers.

Questions:

1. How does Chen imagine the relationship between the Confucian classics and the practice of government to work, ideally?
2. What defects does Chen point out in the examination system? Can you make a valid comparison between the problems Chen points to and problems with examination systems with which you may have had personal experience?
3. What solutions might Chen propose to address the problem that he points to in these excerpts?

Longer Selection

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The noble words and essential ideas of the sages are scattered throughout the classical canon. Only by studying these works closely can one begin to extract from them their meaning and put their ideas into practice. If one takes scholarship to be merely poetry and belles lettres, then though the craftsmanship be jewel-like, it will have no relevance to one's moral nature and may indeed serve to mislead one in one's personal conduct. One will invariably end up with empty verbiage and groundless speculation, obstructing the grasp of true principle. This is of no use in personal cultivation, and still less in serving the needs of the people. Books then remain merely books, and quite separate from real life. It is because of this that so many people today dismiss book learning as no more than the repetition of conventional platitudes and scholarship as simply a way to pass the examinations.

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The examination system promotes scholars on the basis of their literary achievement. But scholarly practices tend to decline over the course of time, to become less concerned with

fundamentals and more with style, to substitute what simply sounds good for what one has made a genuine effort to understand. Scholars merely unthinkingly copy over the words of the past, and their vacuous phrasings have absolutely no connection to real-life affairs. Few, indeed, can even adequately explain the basic meaning of the sages' words. They simply repeat empty conventions and the world rewards them with success in the examinations. The glibness of contemporary letters, and the slovenliness of today's education, are primarily due to this.

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The state selects and promotes scholars above all out of the hope that they will prove useful officials in the future. In sitting for the examinations, scholars should reveal the learning they have patiently accumulated over the course of time. The examinations test first the candidate's knowledge of basic principles revealed in the classical texts, and then move on to legal and policy questions. ...

Imperial edicts have repeatedly ordered that, in provincial-level examinations, equal weight be given to this second part, in order to scrutinize the candidates' understanding of political economy and prevent undue emphasis being accorded to facility with current literary fashions. ... But students in fact do not diligently prepare for these practical policy questions on a day-to-day basis; instead they quickly cram for them as the examination approaches, by memorizing standardized crib book answers. ... Since examining officials obviously do not take seriously this second half of the examination, these bad practices have become so institutionalized that even genuinely serious students no longer see this part as requiring more than last-minute cramming. Thus the study of political economy is neglected, and the court's purpose in using the examinations to select officials is defeated.

Now, the Yunnan Provincial Academy ... has recently become quite successful in producing scholars. The only problem is that the academy's monthly tests do not include questions relevant to the second part of the examinations. Cramming at the last minute is by no means as good as studying on a protracted, regular basis. I therefore propose that, beginning with the next school term, in addition to the usual lectures on classical philosophy, a portion of each class be devoted to assignment of a passage from the Four Books, upon which the students must compose an answer in the manner of the policy questions on the exams. They should also be assigned a question in which they decide a sample legal case. The policy question should be concerned with a contemporary issue in either national or local affairs. The phrasing of this question must be clear and specific, so as to preclude giving a standard crib book response. ... In this way, we can counter the ingrained dysfunctions of contemporary education and more fully put into practice our Sagely Dynasty's appropriate emphasis on substantive learning.

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Substantive learning necessarily involves painstaking immersion in texts on a routine basis. ... It seems that today there are two major harmful trends. The first is acquisition of literary polish without penetrating the text's essential meaning. To save time, teachers lecture their students on the generalities of a passage, without making sure that they understand the precise meaning of each word and phrase. If one's reading level does not allow one to grasp the Way, one cannot employ it effectively to put the world in order. The second harmful trend is studying the classics only out of antiquarianism, without looking for applications in the world in which we live. Scholars like this may have highly refined philological skills and great bibliographic command, but by remaining mired in the past they do violence to the present. ...

One reason why so many people today dismiss professional literati as useless is because the latter do not assiduously read the *Beijing Gazette*.¹ ... In my opinion, all educational officials in local cities and villages ought to make the *Gazette* required reading for their students. If the students are not capable of reading it on their own, all students of the locality should be formed into study groups to read it collectively. This would be highly beneficial, yet cost very little.

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In my view, the duties of the literati are to study when dwelling at home and to serve when called to public office. By "studying," I mean to study proper moral conduct, which is the prerequisite to being of service. By "serving," I mean governing the affairs of the people, which is how the superior man puts into practice that which he has studied. Practical affairs and basic principles are essentially interdependent; eternal truths and functional utility are but two aspects of the same thing. Contemporary scholars treat the two as distinct, but for the ancients themselves their profound words were inseparable from positive action. ...

There are some today who discuss classical texts but see no need to apply them to the contemporary world, or even argue that they cannot be applied to the contemporary world. This is not only a perversion of the Way but also a trivialization of the role of scholarship. ...

Of course, just as scholarship may be correct or misdirected, substantive or vacuous, so too will those in public service inevitably include the careless and negligent as well as the judicious and skilled. There are those who acquire a reputation for scholarship and appear solid and upright, who, once selected for an official post, immediately forget all that they have previously studied. There are even those who treat their official service as a shortcut to a lavish lifestyle and an easy paycheck, behaving precisely contrary to everything they have learned in the past. It is as if the man prior to official selection and the man after selection were two different people! Official service and scholarship are mutually complementary and must be fully integrated in one's mental attitude.

¹ The *Beijing Gazette* (*Chaobao* or *Jingbao*), published in Beijing, contained transcripts of correspondence between the court and its officials regarding current conditions and policy.