

Document 3.4: “Fan Jin Passes the Juren Examination,” an excerpt from *The Scholars* by Wu Jingzi, c. 1740

The Scholars (Rulin Waishi) is thought to have been written somewhere between 1740 and 1750. In his book, Wu Jingzi describes and jokes about life in China during the Qing dynasty, including what he saw as hypocrisies and inequities. Jonathan Spence, in his introduction to the novel, writes that The Scholars “captures more clearly than any other existing novel the quality of everyday life in Qing [dynasty] China.”

The Qing used the civil service examinations, established centuries earlier during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), to choose government officials. The Chinese had established a system whereby government officials would ideally be appointed on merit rather than family status and connections. They designed a series of increasingly difficult exams—the first in the world. As a man passed each exam, he would become eligible for a position of greater authority. From the Song dynasty (960 C.E.) on, the exams were based on mastery of four key Confucian books, including the Analects, and five ancient classics. They did not directly assess a person’s ability to run an office; rather they tested his knowledge of literature and his moral worth.

Wu Jingzi, the author of The Scholars, was only ever able to obtain the lowest examination title and spent most of his life in poverty. In “Fan Jin Passes the Juren Examination,” he focuses on the futility of the exam.

Soon it was time to go to the examination in the capital. Zhou Jin’s traveling expenses and clothes were provided by Jin. He passed the metropolitan examination too; and after the palace examination he was given an official post. In three years he rose to the rank of censor and was appointed commissioner of education for Guangdong Province.

Now though Zhou Jin engaged several secretaries, he thought, “I had bad luck myself so long; now that I’m in office I mean to read all the papers carefully. I must not leave everything to my secretaries, and suppress real talent.” Having come to this decision, he went to Canton [Guangzhou] to take up his post. The day after his arrival he burnt incense, posted up placards, and held two examinations.

The third examination was for candidates from Nanhai and Panyu Counties. Commissioner Zhou sat in the hall and watched the candidates crowding in. There were young and old, handsome and homely, smart and shabby men among them. The last candidate to enter was thin and sallow, had a grizzled beard and was wearing an old felt hat. Guangdong has a warm climate; still, this was the twelfth month and yet this candidate had on a linen gown only, so he was shivering with cold as he took his paper and went to his cell. Zhou Jin made a mental note of this before sealing up their doors. During the first interval, from his seat at the head of the hall he watched this candidate in the linen gown come up to hand in his paper. The man's clothes were so threadbare that a few more holes had appeared since he went into the cell. Commissioner Zhou looked at his own garments — his magnificent crimson robe and gilt belt — then he referred to the register of names, and asked, "You are Fan Jin, aren't you?"

Kneeling, Fan Jin answered, "Yes, Your Excellency."

"How old are you this year?"

"I gave my age as thirty. Actually, I am fifty-four."

"How many times have you taken the examination?"

"I first went in for it when I was twenty, and I have taken it over twenty times since then."

"How is it you have never passed?"

"My essays are too poor," replied Fan Jin, "so none of the honourable examiners will pass me."

“That may not be the only reason,” said Commissioner Zhou. “Leave your paper here, and I will read it through carefully.”

Fan Jin kowtowed and left.

It was still early, and no other candidates were coming to hand in their papers, so Commissioner Zhou picked up Fan Jin’s essay and read it through. But he was disappointed. “Whatever is the fellow driving at in this essay?” he wondered. “I see now why he never passed.” He put it aside. However, when no other candidates appeared, he thought, “I might as well have another look at Fan Jin’s paper. If he shows the least talent, I’ll pass him to reward his perseverance.” He read it through again, and this time felt there was something in it. He was just going to read it through once more, when another candidate came up to hand in his paper.

This man knelt down, and said, “Sir, I beg for an oral test.”

“I have your paper here,” said Commissioner Zhou kindly. “What need is there for an oral test?”

“I can compose poems in all the ancient styles. I beg you to set a subject to test me.”

The commissioner frowned and said, “Since the emperor attaches importance to essays, why should you bring up the poems of the Han and Tang Dynasties? A candidate like you should devote all his energy to writing compositions, instead of wasting time on heterodox studies. I have come here at the imperial command to examine essays, not to discuss miscellaneous literary forms with you. This devotion to superficial things means that your real work must be neglected. No doubt your essay is nothing but flashy talk, not worth reading. Attendants! Drive him out!” At the word of command, attendants ran in from both sides to seize the candidate and push him outside the gate.

But although Commissioner Zhou had had this man driven out, he still read his paper. This candidate was called Wei Haogu, and he wrote in a tolerably clear and straightforward style. “I will pass him lowest on the list,” Zhou Jin decided. And, taking up his brush, he made a mark at the end of the paper as a reminder.

Then he read Fan Jin’s paper again. This time he gave a gasp of amazement. “Even I failed to understand this paper the first two times I read it!” he exclaimed. “But, after reading it for the third time, I realize it is the most wonderful essay in the world—every word a pearl. This shows how often bad examiners must have suppressed real genius.” Hastily taking up his brush, he carefully drew three circles on Fan Jin’s paper, marking it as first. He then picked up Wei Haogu’s paper again, and marked it as twentieth. After this he collected all the other essays and took them away with him.

Soon the results were published, and Fan Jin’s name was first on the list. When he went in to see the commissioner, Zhou Jin commended him warmly. And when the last successful candidate—Wei Haogu—went in, Commissioner Zhou gave him some encouragement and advised him to work hard and stop studying miscellaneous works. Then, to the sound of drums and trumpets, the successful candidates left.

The next day, Commissioner Zhou set off for the capital. Fan Jin alone escorted him for ten miles of the way, doing reverence before his chair. Then the commissioner called him to his side. “First-class honours go to the mature,” he said. “Your essay showed real maturity, and you are certain to do well in the provincial examination too. After I have made my report to the authorities, I will wait for you in the capital.”

Fan Jin kowtowed again in thanks, then stood to one side of the road as the examiner’s chair was carried swiftly off. Only when the banners had passed out of sight behind the next hill did he turn back to his lodgings to settle his bill. His home was about fifteen miles from the city, and he had to travel all night to reach it. He bowed to his mother, who lived with him in a thatched cottage with a thatched shed outside, his mother

occupying the front room and his wife the back one. His wife was the daughter of Butcher Hu of the market.

Fan Jin's mother and wife were delighted by his success. They were preparing a meal when his father-in-law arrived, bringing pork sausages and a bottle of wine. Fan Jin greeted him, and they sat down together.

"Since I had the bad luck to marry my daughter to a scarecrow like you," said Butcher Hu, "Heaven knows how much you have cost me. Now I must have done some good deed to make you pass the examination. I've brought this wine to celebrate."

Fan Jin assented meekly, and called his wife to cook the sausages and warm the wine. He and his father-in-law sat in the thatched shed, while his mother and wife prepared food in the kitchen.

"Now that you have become a gentleman," went on Butcher Hu, "you must do things in proper style. Of course, men in my profession are decent, high-class people; and I am your elder too—you mustn't put on any airs before me. But these peasants round here, dung-carriers and the like, are low people. If you greet them and treat them as equals, that will be a breach of etiquette and will make me lose face too. You're such an easy-going, good-for-nothing fellow, I'm telling you this for your own good, so that you won't make a laughing-stock of yourself."

"Your advice is quite right, father," replied Fan Jin.

"Let your mother eat with us too," went on Butcher Hu. "She has only vegetables usually—it's a shame! Let my daughter join us too. She can't have tasted lard more than two or three times since she married you a dozen years ago, poor thing!"

So Fan Jin's mother and wife sat down to share the meal with them. They ate until sunset, by which time Butcher Hu was tipsy. Mother and son thanked him profusely, then,

throwing his jacket over his shoulders, the butcher staggered home bloated. The next day Fan Jin had to call on relatives and friends.

Wei Haogu invited him to meet some other fellow candidates, and since it was the year for the provincial examination they held a number of literary meetings. Soon it was the end of the sixth month. Fan Jin's fellow candidates asked him to go with them to the provincial capital for the examination, but he had no money for the journey. He went to ask his father-in-law to help.

Butcher Hu spat in his face, and poured out a torrent of abuse. "Don't be a fool!" he roared. "Just passing one examination has turned your head completely—you're like a toad trying to swallow a swan! And I hear that you scraped through not because of your essay, but because the examiner pitied you for being so old. Now, like a fool, you want to pass the higher examination and become an official. But do you know who those officials are? They are all stars in heaven! Look at the Zhang family in the city. All those officials have pots of money, dignified faces and big ears. But your mouth sticks out and you've a chin like an ape's. You look like a monkey, yet you want to become an official. Come off it! Next year I shall find a teaching job for you with one of my friends so that you can make a few taels of silver to support that old, never-dying mother of yours and your wife—and it's high time you did! Yet you ask me for traveling expenses! I kill just one pig a day, and only make ten cents per pig. If I give you all my silver to play ducks and drakes with, my family will have to live on air." The butcher went on cursing at full blast, till Fan Jin's head spun.

When he got home again, he thought to himself, "Commissioner Zhou said that I showed maturity. And, from ancient times till now, who ever passed the first examination without going in for the second? I shan't rest easy till I've taken it." So he asked his fellow candidates to help him, and went to the city, without telling his father-in-law, to take the examination. When the examination was over he returned home, only to find that this family had had no food for two days. And Butcher Hu cursed him again.

The day the results came out there was nothing to eat in the house, and Fan Jin's mother told him, "Take that hen of mine to the market and sell it; then buy a few measures of rice to make gruel. I'm faint with hunger."

Fan Jin tucked the hen under his arm and hurried out. He had only been gone an hour or so, when gongs sounded and three horsemen galloped up. They alighted, tethered their horses to the shed, and called out: "Where is the honourable Mr. Fan? We have come to congratulate him on passing the provincial examination."

Not knowing what had happened, Fan Jin's mother had hidden herself in the house for fear. But when she heard that he had passed, she plucked up courage to poke her head out and say, "Please come in and sit down. My son has gone out."

"So this is the old lady," said the heralds. And they pressed forward to demand a tip.

In the midst of this excitement two more batches of horsemen arrived. Some squeezed inside while the others packed themselves into the shed, where they had to sit on the ground. Neighbours gathered round, too, to watch; and the flustered old lady asked one of them to go to look for her son. The neighbour ran to the market-place, but Fan Jin was nowhere to be seen. Only when he reached the east end of the market did he discover the scholar clutching the hen tightly against his chest and holding a sales sign in one hand. Fan Jin was pacing slowly along, looking right and left for a customer.

"Go home quickly, Mr. Fan!" cried the neighbour. "Congratulations! You have passed the provincial examination. Your house is full of heralds."

Thinking this fellow was making fun of him, Fan Jin pretended not to hear, and walked forward with a lowered head. Seeing that he paid no attention, the neighbour went up to him and tried to grab the hen.

“Why are you taking my hen?” protested Fan Jin. “You don’t want to buy it.”

“You have passed,” insisted the neighbour. “They want you to go home to send off the heralds.”

“Good neighbour,” said Fan Jin, “we have no rice left at home, so I have to sell this hen. It’s a matter of life and death. This is no time for jokes! Do go away, so as not to spoil my chance of a sale.”

When the neighbour saw that Fan Jin did not believe him, he seized the hen, threw it to the ground and dragged the scholar back by main force to his home.

The heralds cried, “Good! The newly honoured one is back.” They pressed forward to congratulate him. But Fan Jin brushed past them into the house to look at the official announcement, already hung up, which read: “This is to announce that the master of your honourable mansion, Fan Jin, has passed the provincial examination in Guangdong, coming seventh in the list. May better news follow in rapid succession!”

Fan Jin feasted his eyes on the announcement, and, after reading it through once to himself, read it once more aloud. Clapping his hands, he laughed and exclaimed, “Ha! Good! I have passed.” Then, stepping back, he fell down in a dead faint. His mother hastily poured some boiled water between his lips, whereupon he recovered consciousness and struggled to his feet. Clapping his hands again, he let out a peal of laughter and shouted, “Aha! I’ve passed! I’ve passed!” Laughing wildly he ran outside, giving the heralds and the neighbours the fright of their lives. Not far from the front door he slipped and fell into a pond. When he clambered out, his hair was disheveled, his hands muddied and his whole body dripping with slime. But nobody could stop him. Still clapping his hands and laughing, he headed straight for the market.

They all looked at each other in consternation, and said, “The new honour has sent him off his head!”

His mother wailed, "Aren't we out of luck! Why should passing an examination do this to him? Now he's mad, goodness knows when he'll get better."

"He was all right this morning when he went out," said his wife. "What could have brought on this attack? What *shall* we do?"

The neighbours consoled them. "Don't be upset," they said. "We will send a couple of men to keep an eye on Mr. Fan. And we'll all bring wine and eggs and rice for these heralds. Then we can discuss what's to be done."

The neighbours brought eggs or wine, lugged along sacks of rice or carried over chickens. Fan Jin's wife wailed as she prepared the food in the kitchen. Then she took it to the shed, neighbours brought tables and stools, and they asked the heralds to sit down to a meal while they discussed what to do.

"I have an idea," said one of the heralds. "But I don't know whether it will work or not."

"What idea?" they asked.

"There must be someone the honourable Mr. Fan usually stands in awe of," said the herald. "He's only been thrown off his balance because sudden joy made him choke on his phlegm. If you can get someone he's afraid of to slap him in the face and say, 'It's all a joke. You haven't passed any examination!'—then the fright will make him cough up his phlegm, and he'll come to his senses again."

They all clapped their hands and said, "That's a fine idea. Mr. Fan is more afraid of Butcher Hu than of anyone else. Let's hurry up and fetch him. He's probably still in the market, and hasn't yet heard the news."

"If he were selling meat in the market, he would have heard the news by now," said a neighbour. "He went out at dawn to the east market to fetch pigs, and he can't have come back yet. Someone had better go quickly to find him."

One of the neighbours hurried off in search of the butcher, and presently met him on the road, followed by an assistant who was carrying seven or eight catties of meat and four or five strings of cash. Butcher Hu was coming to offer his congratulations. Fan Jin's mother, crying bitterly, told him what had happened.

“How could he be so unlucky!” exclaimed the butcher. They were calling for him outside, so he gave the meat and the money to his daughter, and went out. The heralds put their plan before him, but the Butcher Hu demurred.

“He may be my son-in-law,” he said, “but he's an official now—one of the stars in heaven. How can you hit one of the stars in heaven? I've heard that whoever hits the stars in heaven will be carried away by the King of Hell, given a hundred strokes with an iron rod, and shut up in the eighteenth hell, never to become a human being again. I daren't do a thing like that.”

“Mr. Hu!” cried a sarcastic neighbour. “You make your living by killing pigs. Every day the blade goes in white and comes out red. After all the blood you've shed, the King of Hell must have marked you down for several thousand strokes by iron rods, so what does it matter if he adds a hundred more? Quite likely he will have used up all his iron rods before getting round to beating you for this, anyway. Or maybe, if you cure your son-in-law, the King of Hell may consider that as a good deed, and promote you from the eighteenth hell to the seventeenth.”

“This is no time for joking,” protested one of the heralds. “This is the only way to handle it, Mr. Hu. There's nothing else for it, so please don't make difficulties.”

Butcher Hu had to give in. Two bowls of wine bolstered up his courage, making him lose his scruples and start his usual rampaging. Rolling up his greasy sleeves, he strode off toward the market, followed by small groups of neighbours.

Fan Jin's mother ran out and called after him, "Just frighten him a little! Mind you don't hurt him!"

"Of course," the neighbours reassured her. "That goes without saying."

When they reached the market, they found Fan Jin standing in the doorway of a temple. His hair was tousled, his face streaked with mud, and one of his shoes had come off. But he was still clapping his hands and crowing, "Aha! I've passed! I've passed!"

Butcher Hu bore down on him like an avenging fury, roaring, "You blasted idiot! What have you passed?" and fetched him a blow. The bystanders and neighbours could hardly suppress their laughter. But although Butcher Hu had screwed up his courage to strike once, he was still afraid at heart, and his hand was trembling too much to strike a second time. The one blow, however, had been enough to knock Fan Jin out.

The neighbours pressed round to rub Fan Jin's chest and massage his back, until presently he gave a sigh and came to. His eyes were clear and his madness had passed! They helped him up and borrowed a bench from Apothecary Chen, a hunchback who lived hard by the temple, so that Fan Jin might sit down.

Butcher Hu, who was standing a little way off, felt his hand begin to ache; when he raised his palm, he found to his dismay that he could not bend it. "It's true, then, that you mustn't strike the stars in heaven," he thought. "Now Buddha is punishing me!" The more he thought about it, the worse his hand hurt, and he asked the apothecary to give him some ointment for it.

Meanwhile Fan Jin was looking round and asking, "How do I come to be sitting here? My mind has been in a whirl, as if in a dream."

The neighbours said, "Congratulations, sir, on having passed the examination! A short time ago, in your happiness, you brought up some phlegm; but just now you spat out several mouthfuls and recovered. Please go home quickly to send away the heralds."

"That's right," said Fan Jin. "And I seem to remember coming seventh in the list." As he was speaking, he fastened up his hair and asked the apothecary for a basin of water to wash his face, while one of the neighbours found his shoe and helped him put it on.

"The sight of his father-in-law made Fan Jin afraid that he was in for another cursing. But Butcher Hu stepped forward and said, "Worthy son-in-law, I would never have presumed to slap you just now if not for your mother. She sent me to help you."

"That was what I call a friendly slap," said one of the neighbours. "Wait till Mr. Fan finishes washing his face. I bet he can easily wash off half a basin of lard!"

"Mr. Hu!" said another. "This hand of yours will be too good to kill pigs any more."

"No indeed," replied the butcher. "Why should I go on killing pigs? My worthy son-in-law will be able to support me in style for the rest of my life. I always said that this worthy son-in-law of mine was very learned and handsome, and that not one of those Zhang and Zhou family officials in the city looked so much the fine gentleman. I have always been a good judge of character, I don't mind telling you. My daughter stayed at home till she was more than thirty, although many rich families wanted to marry her to their sons; but I saw signs of good fortune in her face, and knew that she would end up by marrying an official. You see today how right I was." He gave a great guffaw, and they all started to laugh.

When Fan Jin had washed and drunk the tea brought him by the apothecary, they all started back, Fan Jin in front, Butcher Hu and the neighbours behind. The butcher, noticing that the seat of his son-in-law's gown was crumpled, kept bending forward all the way home to tug out the creases for him.

When they reached Fan Jin's house, Butcher Hu shouted: "The master is back!" The old lady came out to greet them, and was overjoyed to find her son no longer mad. The heralds, she told them, had already been sent off with the money that Butcher Hu had brought. Fan Jin bowed to his mother and thanked his father-in-law, making Butcher Hu so embarrassed that he muttered, "That bit of money was nothing."

After thanking the neighbours too, Fan Jin was just going to sit down when a smart-looking retainer hurried in, holding a big red card, and announced, "Mr. Zhang has come to pay his respects to the newly successful Mr. Fan."

By this time the sedan-chair was already at the door. Butcher Hu dived into his daughter's room and dared not come out, while the neighbours scattered in all directions. Fan Jin went out to welcome the visitor, who was one of the local gentry, and Mr. Zhang alighted from the chair and came in. He was wearing an official's gauze cap, sunflower-coloured gown, gilt belt and black shoes. He was a provincial graduate, and had served as a magistrate in his time. His name was Zhang Jinzhai. He and Fan Jin made way for each other ceremoniously, and once inside the house bowed to each other as equals and sat down in the places of guest and host. Mr. Zhang began the conversation.

"Sir," he said, "although we live in the same district, I have never been able to call on you."

"I have long respected you," replied Fan Jin, "but have never had the chance to pay you a visit."

"Just now I saw the list of successful candidates. Your patron, Mr. Tang, was a pupil of my grandfather; so I feel very close to you."

"I did not deserve to pass, I am afraid," said Fan Jin. "But I am delighted to be the pupil of one of your family."

After a glance round the room, Mr. Zhang remarked, “Sir, you are certainly frugal.” He took from his servant a packet of silver, and stated, “I have brought nothing to show my respect except these fifty taels of silver, which I beg you to accept. Your honourable home is not good enough for you, and it will not be very convenient when you have many callers. I have an empty house on the main street by the east gate, which has three courtyards with three rooms in each. Although it is not big, it is quite clean. Allow me to present it to you. When you move there, I can profit by your instruction more easily.”

Fan Jin declined many times, but Mr. Zhang pressed him. “With all we have in common, we should be like brothers,” he said. “But if you refuse, you are treating me like a stranger.” Then Fan Jin accepted the silver and expressed his thanks. After some more conversation they bowed and parted. Not until the visitor was in his chair did Butcher Hu dare to emerge.

Source: Wu Jingzi. *Rulin waishi* [*The Scholars*]. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1999. 28–39.