

Qualifications for the Civil Service Examination during the Goryeo Period in Korea

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Abstract: Under the centralizing bureaucratic system of the Joseon Dynasty, which was dominated by Confucianism, the literary examination (mun-gwa) was a test to select the civil officials who were at the core of central politics. However, not everyone was granted unlimited eligibility to take this examination. Regardless of whether it was a regular or special exam, candidates had to undergo eligibility reviews at each stage of the examination process, including the preliminary test (cho-si) and the main test (jeon-si), before being allowed to take the exam. During the Joseon Dynasty, the eligibility for civil service examinations primarily drew attention due to issues related to the class system. However, from the perspective of the operation of the examination system, the academic requirements necessary for taking the examination became the actual qualifications for eligibility. There were many obstacles to the realization of the state's ideal of linking state-run education with civil service examination eligibility in practice. Consequently, continuous reforms of the system became inevitable. However, the government continued its efforts to manage examination candidates. One notable phenomenon that emerged during this time was the steady increase in the number of individuals qualified to take the civil service examinations.

1. Introduction

The civil service examination system, known as "gwageo"¹, during the Goryeo (918-1392) and Joseon (1392-1910) periods in Korea played a crucial role in shaping the country's bureaucracy and social structure. The gwageo system was inspired by the Chinese imperial examination system, which aimed to create a merit-based bureaucracy. Goryeo adopted this model to strengthen central governance and promote Confucian ideals. The system was formally established during the Goryeo period, with its structure evolving further during the Joseon period to emphasize Confucian values.

The gwageo consisted of multiple tiers, including local and regional exams leading up to the national-level "seonggwa." Successful candidates at this final level were eligible for high-ranking

¹ In this text, "gwageo" refers to the literary examination and the saengwon and jinsa exams. While the formal examination system included the literary exam, military exam, miscellaneous exam, and the saengwon and jinsa exams, it was conventionally recognized that the literary exam and the saengwon and jinsa exams were grouped together as "gwageo," while the military and miscellaneous exams were seen as separate tests.

government positions. Candidates were examined on their knowledge of Confucian classics, Chinese literature, history, and their ability to compose poetry and essays.[1] This rigorous assessment ensured that only the most qualified individuals could enter public service. The gwageo system was a significant step toward creating a meritocratic society. While initially dominated by the yangban (noble class), it gradually allowed commoners with talent and education to participate, promoting social mobility. [3]The emphasis on education fostered a culture of learning and intellectual achievement. It led to the establishment of schools and academies across the country.

Under the Joseon dynasty, the examinations became even more aligned with Confucian principles, with a stronger focus on moral character in addition to academic ability. Reforms during this period made the examinations more accessible to commoners, although socio-economic barriers still existed. This shift allowed for greater diversity in government offices.

By the late Joseon period, the gwageo system faced criticism for corruption and elitism, which undermined its original meritocratic ideals. Despite its decline, the gwageo system established a legacy of valuing education and intellectual capability in Korea, influencing modern educational practices and the competitive educational landscape.

The gwageo examination system was a cornerstone of governance in Korea during the Goryeo and Joseon periods. Its evolution reflected broader societal changes and set the stage for the enduring importance of education in Korean culture.

In the early Joseon period, the state aimed to grant qualifications for the civil service examination based on whether candidates studied in state-sponsored schools. However, as the avoidance of local schools by the yangban class became widespread, the criteria were changed in the 8th year of King Myeongjong (1553) to include the possession of academic records and evaluations through the "jaohik" system. [2]This criterion was reestablished in the 17th century, and in the first year of King Injo (1623), the system for the "saengwon" and "jinsa" examinations was introduced. By the 5th year of King Hyojong (1654), a principle was established that only those with academic records from state-sponsored schools would be eligible to take the civil service examination.

In the late 18th century, with the cessation of the local Confucian school examinations and the compilation of the "Cheonggeumrok," the principle of granting examination qualifications based on academic records lost its effectiveness. [4]However, it was still possible to compile lists of candidates through various educational programs operated in each district. In cases where candidate lists could not be created, eligibility for the civil service examination was determined based on household registration and the possession of positions as Confucian scholars.

In the 14th year of King Taejong (1414), the first "alseongmun" examination after the founding of Joseon saw over 540 candidates participate. In contrast, the last alseongmun examination held in the 30th year of King Gojong (1893) had 157,593 participants. Compared to the number in 1414, this represents an increase of nearly 300 times.

While the number of candidates for the literary examination and the saengwon and jinsa exams gradually increased over time, there were also periods of sharp increases. Notably, a significant rise in candidates was observed during the reigns of King Injo, King Sukjong, King Jeongjo, and King Gojong. In the context of the increasing number of candidates for the civil service examination during the Joseon period, there was a recurring perception that individuals lacking the proper qualifications were applying for the exams. Consequently, there were ongoing efforts to restrict access to the examinations based on academic requirements.

The issue of qualifications for the civil service examination during the Joseon period has been examined from two main perspectives. Early research primarily focused on the aspect of social class regarding examination qualifications. The discussions of the time centered around whether anyone of good character could take the civil service examination. However, at least in terms of

legislation, there was consensus that under the structure of the yangjeong system, commoners were permitted to take the examination.[6]Exceptionally, the seolal class, which had been prohibited from taking the civil service examination, gradually gained opportunities to participate starting in the late 16th century. By the 22nd year of King Sukjong (1696), all seolal individuals were allowed to take the examination.[7]

During the reign of King Jungjong, qualifications for the civil service examination were granted not only to saengwon and jinsa candidates but also to those in early education through specific academic achievements. In the 8th year of King Myeongjong (1553), the "Examination Regulations" presented academic records and the "jaohik-gang"² system as new criteria. Subsequently, based on this model, the "Sohak" curriculum was introduced for the saengwon and jinsa examinations in the first year of King Injo (1623). By the 5th year of King Hyojong (1654), legislation was enacted allowing only those who were registered in the Four Studies and local Confucian schools to take the civil service examination.

Although the criteria varied by period, the principle that candidates must meet academic requirements to be eligible for the civil service examination was consistently upheld over time. While this principle was not strictly enforced, it served as a guiding ideology throughout the Joseon Dynasty.

Administratively, eligibility for the civil service examination was granted through the candidate list known as the "Hugye Domo"³, which was compiled by each district. Examples of the "Hugye Domo" can be traced from the reign of King Taejong to that of King Gojong, indicating that there were consistently certain eligibility requirements for taking the civil service examination. This also reflects that there was an administrative procedure in place to verify these qualifications.

2. Granting examination eligibility through academic records and qualifications

The qualifications for the civil service examination have often been discussed in terms of social class, but there were instances during the Goryeo period when corresponding educational requirements were mandated for candidates. A notable example is from the 5th year of King Eojong (1110), where even those who passed the national examination were required to have studied at the national academy for at least three years or served as officials for over 300 days to qualify for the Ministry of Rites examination.[8]

In the proclamation issued by King Taejo shortly after the founding of Joseon, there is also a mention regarding candidates for the literary examination. It states that in the capital, the Sungkyunkwan would select students who had studied the classics, while in the provinces, the local magistrates would choose students from schools who were well-versed in the classics to send to the Sungkyunkwan.

The relationship between the educational institutions envisioned by the founders of Joseon and the civil service examination can be glimpsed through the examination regulations established in the 4th year of King Taejo (1395). Although this examination system is not included in the Annals of King Taejo, its contents are found in the Gyeongje Yukjeon, a compilation of documents from the Taejo period, which is referenced in the Annals of King Sejong. Among these, concerning eligibility for the examination, it states that a "Four Books and Five Classics" hall should be established at the Sungkyunkwan, and that students from Sungkyunkwan, as well as students from across the country, must pass the Sungkyunkwan's examinations on the Four Books and Five Classics to be permitted

² "Jaohik-gang" refers to a preliminary examination conducted during the Joseon Dynasty before candidates could take the civil service examination. Presided over by the Sungkyunkwan or local magistrates, this exam required students who had completed the household registration review to memorize specific texts: for the secondary examination, the Sohak and Garye, and for the higher examination, the Gyeongguk Daejeon and Garye.

³ The "Hugye Domo" was also referred to as the "Gugye Domo," "Gugja Domo," "Hugye An," and "Hugye Jang," and for convenience, it was sometimes called "Domo Seongchag," "Domo Cheok," or simply "Domo." In the 19th century, it was occasionally used interchangeably with "Jaohik Seongchag" and "Rokmyeong Seongchag."

to take the literary examination.

Eligibility for the literary examination is granted only to those who have studied and mastered the Four Books and Five Classics to a certain level through education and evaluation at school.

Starting from the reign of King Taejong, saengwon and jinsa candidates were awarded points based on their attendance. Only those who accumulated a certain number of points were allowed to take the literary examination.

According to records from the 11th year of King Taejong (1411), a total of 300 points was required to participate in the "gwan-si" (hall exam) held by the Sungkyunkwan for the preliminary literary examination. However, in the new examination regulations established in the 17th year of King Taejong (1417), the same qualification was mandated not only for the gwan-si but also for the provincial examinations.

Thus, when saengwon and jinsa candidates applied for the literary examination, a total of 300 points was required for all types of examinations, including the gwan-si, Hanseong-si, and hyang-si.

3. Granting examination eligibility through academic records and the jaohik system

During the reign of King Jungjong, there were frequent discussions about applying points and examinations to Confucian scholars, particularly regarding the reluctance of the sons of the yangban class to study at local Confucian schools. These sons of the yangban often avoided attending local schools and referred to themselves as "yeokyu" (scholars engaged in practical work), suggesting that those who became teachers were primarily trying to evade military service. Please refer to the image below.

The state's attempt to enforce Confucian scholars' study in state-sponsored schools through points and examinations was intertwined with the newly emerging phenomenon of the yangban class's reluctance to attend these institutions.

The Regulations for Local Schools issued in the 1st year of King Myeongjong (1546) contained two key provisions. One was to send instructors appointed as saengwon and jinsa to local Confucian schools, and the other was to limit the recruitment of students for the annual tribute service and miscellaneous duties. Please refer to the image below.

The aim was to improve the quality of education at local Confucian schools and enhance the treatment of students in order to attract sons of the yangban class to these institutions.

In the 8th year of King Myeongjong (1553), reforms to the civil service examination system were implemented. This reform included several significant changes, particularly regarding the eligibility of Confucian scholars to take the examination. One change stipulated that all candidates wishing to take the examination must be registered at either the Four Studies or local Confucian schools. Another requirement was that candidates had to pass the oral examinations on the Zhongyong and Daxue before they could apply for the saengwon, jinsa, or literary examinations.[9]

During the reigns of King Seongjong and King Jungjong, there were no regulations regarding points or examinations for Confucian scholars. While academic records were required, there was no enforcement of a minimum period of study. Instead, candidates had to demonstrate a certain level of educational attainment by passing the oral examinations on the Zhongyong and Daxue to be eligible for the civil service examination. In practice, given the inability to compel the sons of the yangban class to study at private or local Confucian schools, eligibility for the examination was granted through academic records and evaluations.

The "Jaohik" outlined in the Examination Regulations was implemented every three years, starting from January 20th of the designated examination year. According to the Mukjae Ilgi, the Jaohik was conducted in January of the 12th year of King Myeongjong (1557) and the 21st year (1566). Additionally, there are records indicating that the grandson of the author received passing

grades in both the Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean) and Daxue (Great Learning) exams, and he was awarded a "Jaohik Certificate," demonstrating that certificates were issued based on these evaluations.⁴ However, the regulations for the oral examinations on the Daxue (Great Learning) and Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean) were abolished in the 21st year of King Myeongjong (1566). Please refer to the image below.

In April of the 5th year of King Hyojong (1654), regulations were reintroduced stating that students who were not registered in academic institutions would not be permitted to take the civil service examination. In February of that year, the positions of instructors and mentors in private schools were restored, and the Cheonggeumrok⁵ (Blue Collar Register) of the Four Studies was also reinstated, requiring all Confucian scholars in the capital to be recorded in this register. Subsequently, in April, a regulation was established stating that only those registered in state-sponsored schools would be allowed to take the civil service examination.⁶

The regulations for the civil service examination from the Daejeung-gwangsi, implemented in the 30th year of King Yeongjo (1754), are included, indicating that their effectiveness was maintained until that time. However, the examination regulations from the 3rd year of King Sunjo (1803) no longer contain this content, and there is no evidence of discussions mandating such provisions, suggesting that their effectiveness had been lost.[5]

In the first year of King Injo (1623), the Jaohik system was reintroduced for the preliminary saengwon and jinsa examinations. While the discussion process is not clearly documented, it is evident that Minister of the Interior Shin Him proposed it based on past practices, indicating that precedents from the Myeongjong period served as a model. The texts were changed from the Zhongyong and Daxue to the Sohak, and the nature of the examination shifted to serve as a qualification test for the saengwon and jinsa examinations. Please refer to the image below.

After that, there were occasional emphases on the strict enforcement of the Jaohik system, but there were no significant changes to the system itself. However, during the reign of King Jeongjo, a major reform occurred in which the Jaohik, previously administered in the capital, was assigned to local magistrates in each district. While there were changes in the details of its operation thereafter, the fundamental framework remained in place until the civil service examination system was abolished in the 31st year of King Gojong (1894).

During the Myeongjong period, the preliminary Jaohik was applied universally to both the saengwon and jinsa examinations, and it was conducted separately from the preliminary examination held in the fall of the designated examination year, starting from January 20th of that year. In contrast, from the first year of King Injo (1623), the Jaohik was implemented just prior to the preliminary saengwon and jinsa examinations, establishing itself as the qualification test specifically for those exams. As a result, the eligibility requirements for the literary examination and the saengwon and jinsa examinations, which were initially the same, became differentiated.

Since the early Joseon period, the state sought to grant eligibility for the civil service examination through state-sponsored education. Up until the reign of King Jungjong, this eligibility was determined based on attendance and the points and examinations related to the "gajae"; however, after the Myeongjong period, eligibility was granted through academic records and the jaohik system. This difference highlights a significant shift. Implementing such a system uniformly across private schools and local Confucian schools faced many challenges. Nevertheless, the state's consistent aim to grant examination eligibility through educational institutions remained unchanged.

⁴ Lee Mun-chan, *Mukjae Ilgi*, January 18, 1557 (12th year of King Myeongjong), Year of the Snake; January 19, Year of the Rooster; January 23, Year of the Ox; same book, January 24, 1566 (21st year of King Myeongjong), Year of the Fire Horse.

⁵ The Cheonggeumrok is a register used to manage Confucian scholars active in state-established educational institutions such as the Sungkyunkwan, the Four Studies, local Confucian schools, and private institutions like seowon.

⁶ Seungjeongwon Ilgi, April 30, 1654 (Year of the Sheep); edited by the Institute of National Culture, Yeungnam University, Collection of Gyeongbuk Local Confucian School Materials II, Yeungnam University Press, 1992, p. 207, (Yea-an Confucian School) "Draft for Separate Scholars."

4. Conclusions

During the Joseon Dynasty, the state's ideal was to cultivate talent through schools and select them for bureaucratic positions through the civil service examination. The government aimed to link state-run education with the examination system, granting eligibility for the exams through educational institutions. In the early Joseon period, the standards were based on schooling at state-run institutions such as the "Wondot" or "Suhdo." However, as the local gentry increasingly avoided attending hyanggyo (local Confucian schools), the criteria were changed in the eighth year of King Myeongjong's reign (1553) to focus on the retention of academic records and evaluations through the preliminary exam, known as "joheulgang." This principle was reaffirmed in the 17th century, when the introduction of the elementary learning evaluation occurred during the preliminary examination for the "saengwon" and "jinsa" in the first year of King Injo's reign. By the fifth year of King Hyojong's reign (1654), the principle was established that only those with academic records from state-run education would be granted eligibility to take the civil service examinations.

To grant civil service examination eligibility based on the academic records of state-run education, the student roster (yusaeng-an) had to be organized first. However, since the 17th century, the student roster was influenced by the class consciousness of the local gentry and the policies of the local government, leading to different methods of compilation in various regions. Consequently, the method of creating the list of examination candidates, known as bugo-domok, also varied by region. Nevertheless, it is consistently observed that the bugo-domok was compiled based on the hyanggyo student roster or the Cheonggeumrok, and that there was a common practice of managing examination candidates in this manner.

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