

Eight-Legged Essay

Bāgǔwén 八股文

Starting during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and continuing for hundreds of years, the “Eight-Legged Essay” was the required eight-part response to civil service examination questions based on Confucian thought. The extremely formulaic essay, which had both critics and defenders over the years, evolved as a way for official examiners to impartially evaluate the work of tens of thousands of candidates.

Most accounts of the development of the late imperial examination essay begin with modernist apologies. The twentieth-century cultural assault on the infamous Eight-Legged Essay (*baguwen*)—as the classical essay on the Confucian texts, the Four Books and Five Classics, was called since the fifteenth century—has included accusations that the essay became a byword for petrification in Chinese literature or that the essay itself was one of the reasons for China’s cultural stagnation and economic backwardness in the nineteenth century.

Origins of the Eight-Legged Essay “Grid”

Whatever the literary verdict, the late imperial examination essay had its most immediate roots conceptually in the epochal transition from medieval belles-lettres

(literature that is an end in itself and not merely informative) to the classical essay (*jingyi*) championed by Wang Anshi (1021–1086) in the eleventh century. The classical essay, however, was not firmly in place empire-wide in civil examinations as the key literary form until the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644). When the Eight-Legged Essay was still the rage, before 1850, many efforts were made to trace a history of ideas about its literary pedigree. In fact, when it was still fashionable to do so, champions of both parallel-prose and ancient-style prose essays each claimed the Eight-Legged Essay as a kindred genre to legitimate their competing literary traditions in the late nineteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The eight “legs” (*ku*, bones) of the classical essay referred to the parallel and balanced lines that made up its structure.

The examination essay style that was specifically called the “Eight-Legged” style appeared for the first time in the early years of the Chinghua reign, 1465–1487. Consequently, the tendency to construct the historical genealogy of the Eight-Legged Essay from the earlier dynasties tends to elide its sudden appearance in the 1480s as the accepted form for an examination essay. Later claims that the form derived from earlier styles served to legitimate the Eight-Legged Essay as the harvest of past literature and classical learning. As in earlier such cases the literati themselves, not the imperial court, initially produced this new trend in classical writing.

Although detractors of the Eight-Legged Essay genre have received a more sympathetic hearing in the twentieth century, its late imperial advocates were numerous and came from a broad spectrum of literati. Li Zhi (1527–1602), a late Ming iconoclast on so many issues, saw in

the evolution of classical essay genres a cultural dynamic that was commentary to the ongoing literati search for values in antiquity. The Eight-Legged Essay represented a “contemporary-style essay” for Li and was a genuine genre that had proven its worth by producing famous officials. Their moral achievements, he thought, were because of the use of an orthodox genre for the classical essay in civil examinations.

The Hanlin academician Liang Zhangju’s (1775–1849) early nineteenth-century work entitled *Zhiyi conghua* (Collected Comments on the Crafting of Eight-Legged Civil Examination Essays), while mentioning the accruing flaws in the selection process, praised the artistic and cultural levels that the examination essays fostered in Chinese life. Liang noted that no one to date had come up with an acceptable alternative. Qing dynasty (1644–1912) literati who prepared prefaces for the work, which was designed to place the examination essay in full cultural relief, wrote in praise of their dynasty’s contributions to the further evolution of the Ming genre.

In the late seventeenth century Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) dated the Eight-Legged Essay with more historical precision to the mid-fifteenth century, when essays began to appear in a clear sequence of eight parts:

- 1 breaking open the topic (*poti*),
- 2 receiving the topic (*chengti*),
- 3 beginning discussion (*qijiang*),
- 4 initial leg (*qigu*),
- 5 transition leg (*xugu*),
- 6 middle leg (*zhonggu*),
- 7 later leg (*hougu*),
- 8 conclusion (*dajie*)

One of the most renowned early composers of Eight-Legged Essays was the scholar-official Wang Ao (1450–1524), who passed the 1474 Nanjing provincial examination ranked number one out of 2,300 candidates and 135 graduates. Wang then passed the 1477 metropolitan examination in Beijing, also ranking number one. In the palace examination, however, Wang Ao had the misfortune of having as his chief reader Shang Lu (1414–1486), who was at that point the only Ming literatus who had achieved “three firsts” (*sanyuan*) on the Ming civil examinations. He made sure that Wang would not be the

second by ranking Wang’s final policy answer third overall after other readers had initially ranked it first. Shang Lu could identify Wang Ao’s paper because the palace examination, unlike the provincial and metropolitan examinations, was not graded anonymously.

Despite this downclassing, Wang Ao’s classical essays won the day outside the examination compound and beyond the reach of the imperial court. Although official rankings could be tampered with by jealous men such as Shang Lu, the latter’s writings never measured up to Wang Ao’s in the evolution of the genre that would become the Eight-Legged Essay grid. Wang Ao served frequently as a metropolitan examiner in the late fifteenth century, during which his classical essays occasionally served as models for thousands of candidates in the compounds he supervised. Accordingly, the first glimpse we have of the early emergence of the Eight-Legged form of the classical essay, before its explicit declaration as the official examination style in 1487, can be traced to Wang Ao’s 1475 essay on a passage from the *Mencius*: “The Duke of Zhou subjugated the northern and southern barbarians, drove away the wild animals, and brought security to the people” (Elman 2000, 387).

Cognitive Issues in Eight-Legged Essays

Many of Wang Ao’s Eight-Legged Essays were later cited in Ming and Qing examination essay collections as models for the form. One was based on a passage in the *Analects*: “When the people have enough, how can the ruler alone have too little?” (Elman 2000, 389). It became perhaps Wang’s most famous essay. It dealt with the ruler’s responsibilities to provide a livelihood for his people and was copied, printed, and studied by generations of civil examination candidates.

What is immediately striking about Wang Ao’s essays is their exaggerated structural commitment to formal parallelism and thinking by analogy. Strict adherence to balanced clauses (*duiju*) and balanced pairs of characters (*shudui*) was required, but this feature becomes particularly rule-like in Wang’s framing of his arguments. As the classical essay’s length requirement increased from the five hundred characters common in late Ming times to more than seven hundred during the eighteenth century,

the basic structure of the essay remained unchanged. However, a dispute in the 1543 Shandong provincial examination over the veiled criticism of the throne in the “conclusion” of an Eight-Legged Essay led to a decline in the practice of ending the essay with rhetorical flourish.

The form of chain arguments used in such essays was built around pairs of complementary propositions, which derived their cogency from rich literary traditions that over the centuries had drawn on both the parallel-prose and ancient-style prose traditions of early and medieval China. Balanced prose presupposed that an argument should advance via pairs of complementary clauses and sections that, when formalized and disciplined by analogies, avoided an unfocused narrative. Accordingly, the Eight-Legged Essay represented an effort to confirm the vision of the sages in the Four Books and Five Classics from a “double angle of vision,” which strictly correlated with the parallel syntax of the legs of the examination essay.

In the first leg of Wang Ao’s essay on the prince’s responsibilities, mentioned earlier, the ruler’s actions were directly related to a series of positive economic consequences that would ensue if he followed the way of sagely governance. In the middle leg Wang Ao’s personal assessment was delivered within a balanced sequence that analogized the households of farmers to the prince’s treasury in the first half and compared the farmers’ fields with the prince’s vaults in the second half. The final leg presented the same conclusion in light of the prince’s ritual and culinary needs, all the while stressing the priority of the people in any equation between taxes and wealth. From these three balanced legs it therefore followed that raising taxes of itself was not the sage’s method for governance.

The first leg was almost Aristotelian in its explicit rhetorical linkage of cause (low taxes) and effect (the people’s prosperity). The second leg elaborated on the first by showing how low taxes would increase the overall wealth of the realm if it remained in the hands of the people. And the final leg clinched the argument by responding to questions of how low taxes would directly benefit the dynasty and not just the people. In this manner a conclusion that ran counterintuitively to statist discourse about the wealth and power of the dynasty, which drew on legalist (relating to strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code) traditions, was successfully channeled into

a literati discourse built around the Chinese philosopher Confucius’s (551–479 BCE) vision of a polity pegged to the interests of the people.

Based on the specific Eight-Legged grid, examiners and tutors literally followed the number of legs and counted the number of characters in an essay based on the requirements of balanced clauses, phrases, and characters. In marked-up examination essays that have survived, scholars always find numerous small circles marking exactly the balanced and antithetical clauses in each of the legs of the essay. Examiners used a set pattern of markings to distinguish the main points. This classical grid provided examiners with a simple, impartial standard for ranking essays, which has rightly been labeled “a kind of stylistically formalized classicism” (Elman 2000, 395). The grid also included rules for presentation of the essay form on paper that necessitated proper spacing of characters from top to bottom and left to right. References to the reigning emperor, for instance, had to be highlighted by raising that column of characters higher and avoiding taboo names, while the body of the essay began at a lower level in each column. Essay drafts that survive reveal that Eight-Legged Essays were copied onto paper that was divided into columns and rows to make it easier for examiners to keep track of the parallel legs of the essay.

If a candidate could not follow these strict rules of length, balance, and complementarities, then his essay was judged inferior. One misplaced character, or one character too many or too few, in building a clause in one of the legs of the essay could result in failure. Given the tens of thousands of civil candidates in the compounds where local and provincial examinations were held, the official examiners rightly felt that with a stylized and formulaic Eight-Legged grid as a requirement, their job of reading and evaluating thousands of essays in a brief time was made easier and more impartial.

Printing and Publishing Examination Essays

Civil examination papers were first compiled in the publishing rooms inside the provincial and metropolitan examination compounds, where a host of copyists, woodblock carvers, and printers worked under the

examiners. Essays were printed out with the examiner's comments and bound according to rank. These official collections of examination essays were based on the original, anonymous essays that the examiners actually had read. Those originals were returned to examinees who requested them after the examination. In addition, the best essay on each quotation or question in all three sessions of both provincial and metropolitan examinations was included in the official examiners' report and sent to the court for review.

The public printing of essay collections increased during the late Ming publishing boom, when the commoditization of culture intensified. The sixteenth-century increase in private, commercial collections of examination essays can be attributed to the formalization of the Eight-Legged Essay during the last half of the fifteenth century into the official essay style. The expansion of the examination market, which during the Ming and Qing dynasties added a third tier of 1,300 local county and 140 prefectural examinations, thus dramatically increased the empire-wide pool of candidates who would be interested in such collections.

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