

Using the write tool to assess one's virtue and morality

Study finds link between quality of poetry in Tang Dynasty exams for civil servants and their ethical behaviour. Could this have use today in recruitment?

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Around the world, the fallout from corporate corruption and financial mismanagement scandals has seen growing calls for a renewed focus on business ethics and good governance.

Yet, evaluating an employee's or official's moral compass is not easy. Likewise, building an ethical element into a job recruitment process is a challenging task. So is there a way to predetermine or assess an individual's inclination to behave ethically, beyond simply watching and waiting until they stray or overstep the mark?

One answer may lie in ancient imperial China – and, more specifically, in its approach to poetry.

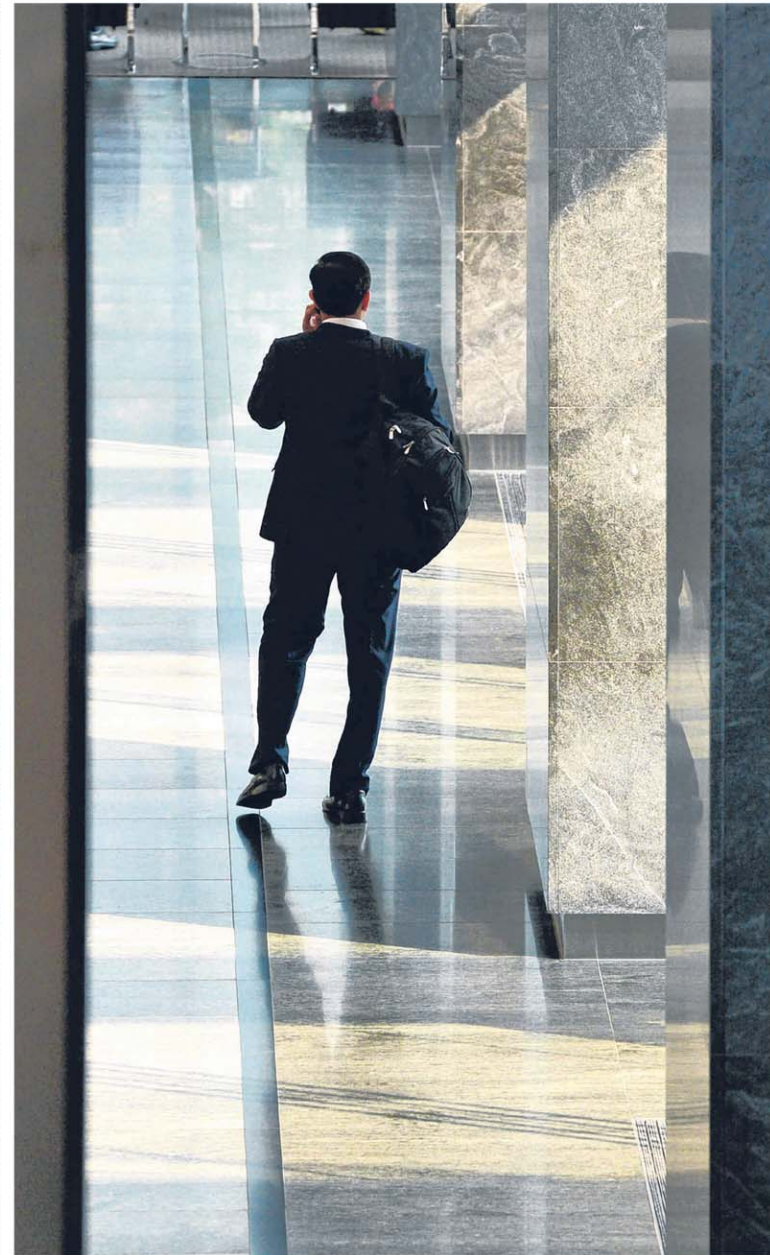
From its capital in Chang'an – the modern day city of Xi'an – the Tang Dynasty ruled China for almost 300 years between AD618 and AD907.

It is considered a golden age in Chinese civilisation – a prosperous and culturally rich period, and one of the greatest for Chinese literature.

As with many other dynasties, the Tang had strict examinations and testing procedures for selecting its civil servants. Recruitment placed a heavy emphasis on ethics and, uniquely, included an assessment of the quality of a candidate's poetry.

In a research study with colleagues at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School and Nanjing University, we were curious whether this focus on poetry as a test of a candidate's character might – in part, at least – account for the dynasty's unprecedented power and prosperity.

According to ancient Chinese philosophy, poetry acts as a window for the character of the author, reflecting the writer's "inner purpose" and ethical aspirations. Across imperial history, dozens of politicians,



The Tang Dynasty's imperial exam system was potentially capable of assessing and selecting civil service officials based on ethics. ST FILE PHOTO

artists and writers drew connections between poetic skill and an individual's knowledge, virtue and morality.

In the fifth century, for example, writer Liu Xe compiled *The Literary Mind And The Carving Of Dragons*, considered one of the most influential works on Chinese literary aesthetics. The book begins with the quote: "Poetry speaks to one's heart... Within the heart, it is the lofty ambition; spoken, it is poetry."

Several centuries later, in the Song Dynasty, artist Zhao Mengjian (1199–1295) wrote: "Poetry is not

just a skill. It is a reflection of virtue and a chime from the heart." Many Western writers and philosophers have also suggested a link between poetic ability and a person's ethics.

A poem is an expression of an individual's inner world and ethics form a critical part of that inner world – therefore, high-quality poetry expresses a high-quality inner world.

This was a view the Tang Dynasty administrators firmly subscribed to. To them, one's ability to write good poetry was an indicator of high ethical values and concern for others, and thus, it had the mark of a

good imperial servant. The question for our research was: Did this belief translate into practical reality?

Although the Tang Dynasty ended more than a thousand years ago, many records from the era survive. These include archives detailing the activities and behaviour of Tang officials and their attainment in imperial examinations.

To grade the ethics of Tang Dynasty officials, we used these records to identify and assess ethical behaviour using traditional Confucian standards. These include factors such as loyalty, trustworthiness, freedom from corruption and several others. Markers of low ethical behaviour, on the other hand, include greed for power, cruelty and bribery.

We are fortunate that several volumes of Tang era poems have been passed down, and we used them to measure skill in poetry. Foremost among these is *A Collection Of 300 Tang Poems*, an anthology compiled in the 18th century by scholar Sun Zhu (not to be confused with the Sun Tzu of *Art Of War* fame). This book, still widely seen in Chinese households, is regarded by literary experts and historians as containing some of the most artistically significant examples of Tang poetry. Therefore, we regarded inclusion in the collection as a benchmark of high poetic talent.

Another method was using the Tang imperial examination records, which included an evaluation of the candidate's poetry. Those recorded as having passed the highest levels of the exams, attaining the status of "Jinshi", were regarded as having high-quality poetic skills.

By cross-referencing these books and imperial records against each other, we were able to build a strong sample pool of imperial civil servants, matching their poetic talent with their ethical behaviour.

Having excluded those whose level of ethics was ambiguous, those who had military roles, or those who may have obtained their position through family connections, we found a strong positive link between quality of poetry and an individual's ethics. In short, poetic civil servants consistently displayed a higher level of ethics than non-poetic ones.

The Tang Dynasty's imperial exam system was potentially capable of assessing and selecting

civil service officials based on ethics. Specifically, the Tang records show that a higher level of poetic talent – reflected either in a strong imperial exam performance, or inclusion in Sun Zhu's poetry anthology – was associated with individuals with a higher level of ethical behaviour.

Perhaps most significantly, the Tang records also show that civil servants who were selected via the imperial examination were significantly more likely to have taken stances or actions that were consistent with good ethics. This raises an intriguing possibility that the success of the Tang Dynasty had some relation to its unique selection process.

Interestingly, immediately after the Tang Dynasty, the popularity of poetry began to wane in Chinese culture. Subsequent dynasties dropped poetic skills from the imperial examination system and China entered a long period of gradual decline.

So what can we learn from this? Numeric reasoning, personality and other aptitude tests are commonly applied in a range of job recruitment processes today, particularly those which require a high degree of financial responsibility. Adding poetry composition to the list of recruiters' tools would doubtless raise a good few eyebrows.

Still, our findings provide some interesting food for thought on potential indicators of an individual's ethical character and value. A candidate vying for the position of finance manager, for example, might prove exceptional in numeracy, financial literacy and logical reasoning, but do they also have the right character to use those skills ethically? Today we might not consider poetic skill to be especially relevant to assessing ethical value, but our findings show that ancient Chinese philosophers found a meaningful and creative solution to the challenge. These ancient arts offer some interesting clues to recruiters seeking better methods of gauging our inner selves.

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