

Section 2. Cranes and Peacocks: Rank Badges for Civil Officials

Introduction

Scholar-officials (called **mandarins** by Westerners) held the most prestigious positions in the Chinese imperial bureaucracy. As early as the **Zhou** dynasty (1027–256 BCE), court officials were selected based on ability. In the **Tang** dynasty (618–907) candidates for office were tested on their literary knowledge. It was the **Qing** dynasty (1644–1911), however, that refined the multi-tiered examination system; until their abolition in 1905, passing these examinations was the most certain path to social and material advancement for the successful candidate and his family.

Candidates aspired to posts on the emperor’s advisory council (for first-rank officials) or to a provincial post. With further study a mandarin might gain promotion to the higher ranks—some ranks could also be purchased. There were nine civil ranks, each represented by a bird, with minor variations between the **Ming** and **Qing** dynasties. Birds were selected because they featured frequently in literary works and literati paintings.

It could take years to obtain an appointment and once achieved, there were rules of appropriate behavior for civil officials. For example, they were not permitted to walk, but were required to travel in a sedan chair with the number of attendants and outriders appropriate to their rank—these could number more than fifty men. For mandarins above the fourth rank, all street traffic had to stop when they passed, gongs were beaten, and cannon fired when they entered or left a building.

From a very early age boys were prepared for success in the examinations. Theoretically open to almost all males in China, the first test of learning was conducted by the local magistrate when a boy was eighteen. If the candidate was successful, he was eligible to take the first-degree examination, held annually in the prefectural capital. Passing at this level was roughly equal to earning a Bachelor of Arts degree today and gave the student government support (*shengyuan*) as well as entry to the gentry.

Second-degree examinations were given every three years on the eighth moon in the provincial capital. Of the ten thousand to twelve thousand entrants, fewer than three hundred passed to become *juren* (“prominent men”). This was approximately equivalent to our Master of Arts degree.

In the spring of the following year, the candidate was eligible to take the third-degree examination, equal to a Doctor of Philosophy, held in Beijing. Only about twenty percent of the candidates passed. For those who successfully reached the third-degree level, the final examination took place in the palace. If the candidate passed the palace examination, a high position in the government was assured, while those who only passed the lower examinations had to wait for an official appointment, usually in the provinces.

Rank	Emblem	Symbolic Meaning
First	Manchurian Crane	Longevity, wisdom
Second	Golden Pheasant	Courage
Third	Peacock	Beauty and dignity
Fourth	Wild Goose	Loyalty
Fifth	Silver Pheasant	Beauty, good fortune
Sixth	Lesser Egret	Happiness
Seventh	Mandarin Duck	Loyalty
Eighth	Quail	Courage
Ninth	Paradise Flycatcher	Longevity, good fortune
Unclassified	Paradise Flycatcher	Longevity, good fortune

Section 2.2 Object Descriptions



1. Badge (*buzi*) With Crane for a First-Rank Civil Official
China, **late** Ming dynasty, 1620-1644
Silk brocade
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

Ming regulations issued in 1391 decreed that the insignia of first-rank civil officials should be the crane, a symbol of longevity and wisdom. As the rules did not specify the number of birds, Ming-period rank badges have between one and three. In the succeeding **Qing** dynasty one bird became standard. The waves, rocks, and plants at the sides and lower edge of this badge are an early indication of the landscape compositions that became common in Qing badges.



2. One of a Pair of Badges (*buzi*) With Crane for a First-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, mid-19th century
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Butler in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Fistere, 1988.10.7 C

The lack of a center seam and the bird facing to the viewer's left indicates this is a badge for the back of a woman's **surcoat**. On formal occasions, the principal wife of a civil official sat to his right with their birds facing each other. This meant that the bird on a woman's front badge looked to the right (when seen face-on) and to the left on the back badge.



3. Pair of Badges (*buzi*) With Crane for a Child
China, Qing dynasty, 1850-1860
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. Harvey W. House, 1976.35.78A,B

Wives and sons of officials wore the rank emblem of their husbands or fathers. Slight variations in the design of this badge, for the front of the robe, suggest different embroiderers worked each half.



4. Badge (*buzi*) With Golden Pheasant for a Second-Rank Civil Official
China, late Qing dynasty, c. 1900
Metallic thread couched with colored silk thread
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Bea Brunt, 1987.24.24

This is a badge from the **Reform Period** (1898-1911). The continued deterioration of the imperial system in the second half of the nineteenth century led to extravagance among officials. In reaction, the Kuang Hsu Emperor (1875-1908) made sweeping reforms including restricting the imagery on rank badges to the bird emblem, clouds, and sun. Only a few years later, however, auspicious symbols began to appear in the sky area of the badge.



5. Badge (*buzi*) With Golden Pheasant for a Second-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, 1875-1895
Metallic thread couched with colored silk thread

Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Alyce and T. J. Smith, 1997.66.86

This is an example of a badge with an **appliqué** emblem. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century buying ranks or promotions had become commonplace. Separately worked emblems facilitated changing rank and saved the expense of a new badge. The extensive use of metallic thread became increasingly popular from the middle of the nineteenth century, with the use of colored silk threads to hold down (**couch**) the metallic threads gaining favor after the introduction of chemical dyes in 1870.



6. Badge (*buzi*) With Peacock for a Third-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, late 17th century
Silk, peacock feather filament, and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

The peacock, clouds and other elements embroidered in colorful silk floss and thread wrapped in peacock feather filament stand out dramatically against the shiny gold sky. The idyllic scene is a microcosm of a peaceful and orderly universe ruled by a wise emperor (symbolized by the sun) supported by his loyal officials—indicated by the rank bird looking toward the sun.



7. Purchased Round Badge (*buzi*) With Peacock
China, Qing dynasty, 1850-70
Silk tapestry (*kesi*) with metallic thread and ink
Lent by Dodi Fromson

This is a special type of round badge for a woman. It indicated that her husband's rank was not officially awarded, but purchased. These badges were increasingly common, particularly for women, from the second half of the nineteenth century as the **Qing** imperial system began to falter and ranks were sold to raise cash for the regime.



8. Badge (*buzi*) With Peacock for a Third-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, 1850-75
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College

Under **Ming** rule the peacock was established as the symbol of the third-rank civil official. It remained so during the following **Qing** dynasty.



9. Badge (*buzi*) With Wild Goose for a Fourth-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period, 1750-1760
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

A simple gold border and a rudimentary landscape of rocks and waves are first seen on rank badges in the early 16th century. It is during the long reign of the Emperor Qianlong (1736-95) that elaborate naturalistic scenes as a setting for the bird turn the badge into pictures in miniature.



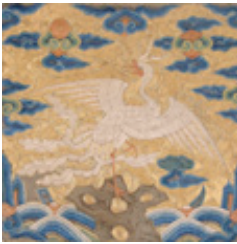
10. Pair of Badges (*buzi*) With Wild Goose for a Fourth-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, c. 1795
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Dodi Fromson

This badge is worked entirely in tiny circular stitches known as the **Peking** or **Chinese knot**. At the end of the eighteenth century this stitch, previously only used for small details, became applied more widely. It became known in the West as the **blind** or **forbidden** stitch because it was banned as girls supposedly went blind doing it—a tale invented by missionaries. In fact, the stitch is similar to the common **French knot** in Western embroidery.



11. Badge (*buzi*) With Wild Goose for a Fourth-Rank Civil Official China, Qing dynasty, 1860-70
Silk tapestry (*kesi*), peacock feather filament, metallic thread
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of the Collectors' Gallery, 1979.16.1

The Wild Goose was a symbol of loyalty. The diagonal lines at the bottom of the badge are known as *lishui* or “deep water” (the ocean). *Lishui* on the badge echoes the same representation of the ocean on the hem of court robes: slanted lines topped with stylized waves that first appear in the early eighteenth century.



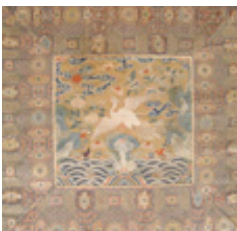
12. Badge (*buzi*) With Silver Pheasant for a Fifth-Rank Civil Official China, Qing dynasty, mid-17th century
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Ninel Dubrovich and David Woodruff

This badge is part of a striking group that dates from the reign of Kangxi, the second **Qing** emperor (1662-1722). The embroiderers of these badges skillfully exploited the smooth sheen of silk floss for the waves, rocks, bird and clouds against a shimmering golden sky of metallic thread.



13. Badge (*buzi*) with Silver Pheasant for a Child China, Qing dynasty, c.1735
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

On this child's badge are three of the **Eight Precious Things** (*ba bao*): on the left of the bird, two jewels and a coral branch; to the right, the pointed *Artemesia* leaf and another round jewel. Together these bring wishes for wealth and happiness.



14. Badge (*buzi*) With Silver Pheasant for a Fifth-Rank Civil Official China, Qing dynasty, late 18th century; border: early 19th century; assembled: mid-20th century
Silk tapestry (*kesi*), metallic thread and ink; border: silk and metallic thread brocade
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Miss Myrle Whitford, 1972.1.5

Five bats on this badge symbolize the **Five Blessings**: longevity, health, virtue, wealth and a peaceful death. The word for “bat” is *fu* in Chinese; the character for “happiness” is also pronounced *fu*. This similarity of sounds with different meanings is called a homophone. In China, many things are auspicious because their name is homophonic with something desirable.



15. Badge (*buzi*) With Egret for a Sixth-Rank Civil Official
China, Ming dynasty, 16th century
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

By the sixteenth century only two birds were typically used on civil badges, one standing on the stylized mountain peaks and the other flying downward toward the first. Late **Ming** badges would only have one bird standing firmly on a rocky outcropping—a style that became standard from then to the end of the **Qing** dynasty in 1911.



16. Badge (*buzi*) With Egret for a Sixth-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, second half 17th century
Silk, metallic and peacock feather filament embroidery
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

The egret on this badge from the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662-1722) stands on a craggy rock with cavities. These were known as scholar's rocks or **Taihu Rocks** after their place of origin, Lake Tai in Jiangsu province. The rocks were symbols of longevity and reliability; they were frequently used in scholar's gardens—places for painting, writing poetry and contemplating nature.



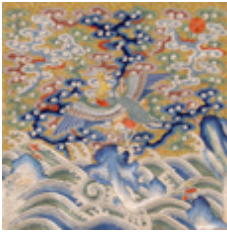
17. Badge (*buzi*) With Egret for a Sixth-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, c. 1850
Silk and metallic thread embroidery
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S. M. McFedries in memory of Katherine E. Howell, 1976.41.13

The clean white feathers of the egret made it a symbol of the honest and incorruptible official.



18. Badge (*buzi*) With Mandarin Duck for a Seventh-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, c.1730-35
Silk brocade
Lent by the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College

Believed to mate for life, the colorful Mandarin Duck was a symbol of marital fidelity and thus loyalty, a noble quality in a government official. Like all rank birds since the Kangxi emperor's reign (1662-1722), this bird faces the emperor, symbolized by the sun disk.



19. Badge (*buzi*) with Mandarin Duck for a Seventh-Rank Civil Official

China, Qing dynasty, c. 1730-35

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S.M. McFedries in memory of Katherine E. Howell, 1976.41.12

The duck stands on a variation of the scholar's or **Taihu** rock (without the characteristic holes) almost swallowed by the roiling sea around it.



20. Badge (*buzi*) with Mandarin Duck for Seventh-Rank Civil Official

China, Qing dynasty, 1898-1900

Silk and metallic thread tapestry (*kesi*)

Lent by the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College

This is an example of the austere style of badge introduced by court reforms in 1898 to counteract extravagance among officials. Only the bird emblem, the sun and clouds were allowed: no landscape elements or auspicious symbols (except in the border). As this badge conforms closely to the reforms, it must have been made soon after they were put in place, since auspicious symbols reappeared within a few years.



21. Badge (*buzi*) With Quail for an Eighth-Rank Civil Official
China, Qing dynasty, c. 1860

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Lent by the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College

The quail in China was a symbol of peace. In the **Ming** dynasty (1364-1644) it was also the emblem of the ninth-rank civil official. This designation continued in the following **Qing** dynasty (1644-1911) until the laws of 1652 gave the quail to the eighth rank and the Paradise Flycatcher to the ninth.



22. Badge (*buzi*) With Paradise Flycatcher for a Ninth-Rank Civil Official

China, Qing dynasty, Daoguang period (1821-50)

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mrs. Russell Dod, 1977.24.13

The most common badge to survive is that of the Paradise Flycatcher. Occasionally an attempt was made to imply a higher rank emblem by eye-fooling tricks. Here the feathery edges of the two long tail feathers, three shorter side feathers, and an all white body make the bird look at a glance like a fifth-rank Silver Pheasant. Only the faintly colored “eyes” at the ends of the tail feathers identify this bird as a Paradise Flycatcher.



23. Crib Sheet / Cheater's Handkerchief
China, Qing dynasty, 19th century
Ink on silk
Lent by Beverley Jackson

Covered on both sides in minute calligraphy, this cheater's crib sheet would have had to remain undiscovered through rigorous inspections to be of help to its owner. This silk cloth was coated with an unknown substance, possibly alum, before being written upon, to prevent the ink from spreading into the fibers.



24. Boy's Hat
China, Qing dynasty, 1850-1900
Silk and metallic thread embroidery, silk velvet, metallic thread tassels
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mrs. Jane Ullman, 1983.6.2

From birth, everything was done to ensure that male children were successful candidates in the civil examinations. On the back of this hat is a winged fish with a dragon's head leaping in front of a gateway: a reference to the saying "the carp leaping the dragon gate becomes a dragon" meant to encourage perseverance and express the wish that one overcome difficulties and successfully pass the examinations. Scholars who did pass were called "fish-become-dragons."



25. Game of Promotion (*shegguan tu*)
China, Qing dynasty, late 19th century
Ink on paper
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

Li He, a **Tang** dynasty (618-906) official, is credited with inventing a promotion game with advancement based on merit. Subsequent versions relied more on luck in the roll of the dice than earning merit, but all were based on success (or failure) in moving up the ranks of civil office. The paper board represents the career of a civil official from the lowest to highest grade. Played with four dice, it was similar to *Snakes and Ladders*. This game would have been played at family gatherings.



26. Uncut Badge (*buzi*) Without Insignia
China, Qing dynasty, late 19th –early 20th century
Silk and metallic thread embroidery on mesh, paper binding
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S.M. McFedries in memory of Katherine E. Howell, 1976.41.10

This badge was intended to be cut down the middle for the front of a robe. The purchaser would select the emblem of the appropriate rank—which might have been earned or purchased. The center could accommodate a right- or left-facing bird, making the badge suitable for a man or woman; however, the lack of lucky symbols and the large lotus flowers suggest it is a woman's unofficial badge. Circular badges were reserved for the imperial family, but by placing the circle within a square, this transgression was technically avoided.



27. Pair of Wild Goose Appliqué Insignia
China, Qing dynasty, late 19th - early 20th century
Metallic thread couched with colored silk thread
Lent by the Petterson Museum of Intercultural Art, Pilgrim Place

Even in the **Ming** dynasty it was possible to purchase imperial favor and thus be given a civil rank, but in the second half of the nineteenth century, when **Qing** rule was beginning to decline, it became very easy to buy rank status. Wealthy merchants, in particular, bought ranks for themselves and even their ancestors. Those who had lower ranks and the means could also buy their way up the ladder.



28. Pair of Golden Pheasant Appliqué Insignia
China, Qing dynasty, late 19th - early 20th century
Metallic thread couched with colored silk thread
Lent by the Petterson Museum of Intercultural Art, Pilgrim Place

Independently embroidered rank emblems, in this case for second-rank civil office, were readily available from the 1850s on. These were to be applied to badges like the one shown nearby, worked with a blank center for this purpose. As officials were promoted or purchased promotion, the emblem could easily be changed.