

The Honest First-Place Finisher at the Imperial Civil Service Examination

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(Clearwisdom.net) Wang Hongchen lived in the Song Dynasty. He was from a very poor family. His father had passed away when he was very young leaving his mother with four young children. Wang Hongchen was the oldest and he helped his mother with the burden of supporting the whole family. He was a devoted son to his mother. He lived simply and frugally, and was an honest and trustworthy person. All the people in his hometown praised him constantly. He also loved to study and was a very diligent student. He often got up before the crack of dawn to study. If he happened to wake up in the middle of the night, he would get up and read a few more pages from his books.

After years of hard work, when he was 20 years old, Wang Hongchen had learned to write essays very well. He participated in the local, and then provincial civil service examinations and received high marks. In 1030 A.D., he went to the capital and participated in the Imperial Civil Service Examination personally hosted by Emperor Renzong at the royal court. The Emperor met with every student and read every student's essay. He felt that Wang Hongchen's essay was original, unique and well-written and no other student's could compare with his. So he named Wang Hongchen the first-place finisher of the examination.

On the third day, the Emperor ordered the top three finishers into the royal court and announced their names in front of all the officials at the court. The other two students immediately knelt down to thank the emperor. Wang not only didn't thank the emperor for the honor, but he said, "Your Majesty, I don't deserve to be the first-place finisher. I beg you to give the honor to someone else."

People at the court were shocked. The civil service examination system had been in place for four to five hundred years, and nobody who had been given the first-place honor had ever tried to give it away. What a strange thing Wang just did!

Emperor Renzong was also very surprised and asked Wang why.

Wang Hongchen said, "Your Majesty, I have studied very hard for ten long and difficult years now. I have wanted to be the first-place finisher in the imperial examination even in my dreams. But the topic of the essay for the imperial examination was one that I had written another essay on a while ago. I got lucky and that is how you chose me to be the first-place finisher. I don't want to damage and destroy my own virtue just because of my desire to be a first-place finisher."

Emperor Renzhong was very moved and really appreciated Wang's honesty. He became even more convinced that Wang would be able to contribute a lot to the country. He told Wang, "The reason that you had written another essay on the topic used in the examination is that you were industrious. In addition, from your essay, one can tell that you were expressing your own honest opinions, and you deserve to be the first-place finisher. Furthermore, you dare to tell the truth and are honest with other people. That is the very characteristic that an honored first-place finisher should possess. Your honesty is even rarer than your talent. Therefore, I must name you the first-place finisher. You shouldn't try to push the honor away any more."

That is how Wang Hongchen became the "Honest First-Place Finisher" known throughout history. He served as an official in the Royal Court for 55 years and gained the respect of both the common people and his fellow officials because of his honest and upstanding character and extraordinary talents. Li Gefei, a renowned scholar in the Song Dynasty, was his son-in-law. Li Qingzhao, one of the most well-known poets in Chinese literary history, was his granddaughter.