

Civil Service Examinations

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The civil service examination system, a method of recruiting civil officials based on merit rather than family or political connections, played an especially central role in Chinese social and intellectual life from 650 to 1905. Passing the rigorous exams, which were based on classical literature and philosophy, conferred a highly sought-after status, and a rich literati culture in imperial China ensued.

Civil service examinations connected various aspects of premodern politics, society, economy, and intellectual life in imperial China. Local elites and the imperial court continually influenced the dynastic government to reexamine and adjust the classical curriculum and to entertain new ways to improve the institutional system for selecting civil officials. As a result, civil examinations, as a test of educational merit, also served to tie the dynasty and literati culture together bureaucratically.

Premodern civil service examinations, viewed by some as an obstacle to modern Chinese state-building, did in fact make a positive contribution to China's emergence in the modern world. A classical education based on nontechnical moral and political theory was as suitable for selection of elites to serve the imperial state at its highest echelons as were humanism and a classical education that served elites in the burgeoning nation-states of early modern Europe. Moreover, classical examinations were

an effective cultural, social, political, and educational construction that met the needs of the dynastic bureaucracy while simultaneously supporting late imperial social structure. Elite gentry and merchant status groups were defined in part by examination degree credentials.

Civil service examinations by themselves were not an avenue for considerable social mobility, that is, they were not an opportunity for the vast majority of peasants and artisans to move from the lower classes into elite circles. The archives recording data from the years 1500 to 1900 indicate that peasants, traders, and artisans, who made up 90 percent of the population, were not a significant part of the 2 to 3 million candidates who usually took the local biennial licensing tests. Despite this fact, a social byproduct of the examinations was the limited circulation in the government of lower-level elites from gentry, military, and merchant backgrounds.

One of the unintended consequences of the examinations was the large pool of examination failures who used their linguistic and literary talents in a variety of nonofficial roles: One must look beyond the official meritocracy to see the larger place of the millions of failures in the civil service examinations. One of the unintended consequences of the examinations was the creation of legions of classically literate men who used their linguistic talents for a variety of nonofficial purposes: from physicians to pettifoggers, from fiction writers to examination essay teachers, and from ritual specialists to lineage agents. Although women were barred from taking the exams, they followed their own educational pursuits if only to compete in ancillary roles, either as girls competing for spouses or as mothers educating their sons.

Pu Songling (1640–1715), a failure many times himself, immortalized the travails of those trapped in the relentless machinery of late imperial civil service examinations in his many stories that parodied the examination system. His most famous portrait sketched “The Seven Likenesses of a Candidate”:

A licentiate taking the provincial examination may be likened to seven things. When entering the examination hall, bare-footed and carrying a basket, he is like a beggar. At roll-call time, being shouted at by officials and abused by their subordinates, he is like a prisoner. When writing in his cell, with his head and feet sticking out of the booth, he is like a cold bee late in autumn. Upon leaving the examination hall, being in a daze and seeing a changed universe, he is like a sick bird out of a cage. When anticipating the results, he is on pins and needles; one moment he fantasizes success and magnificent mansions are instantly built; another moment he fears failure and his body is deduced to a corpse. At this point he is like a chimpanzee in captivity. Finally the messengers come on galloping horses and confirm the absence of his name on the list of successful candidates. His complexion becomes ashen and his body stiffens like a poisoned fly no longer able to move. Disappointed and discouraged, he vilifies the examiners for their blindness and blames the unfairness of the system. Thereupon he collects all his books and papers from his desk and sets them on fire; unsatisfied, he tramples over the ashes; still unsatisfied, he throws the ashes into a filthy gutter. He is determined to abandon the world by going into the mountains, and he is resolved to drive away any person who dares speak to him about examination essays. With the passage of time, his anger subsides and his aspiration rises. Like a turtle dove just hatched, he rebuilds his nest and starts the process once again. (Elman 2000, 361)

This account is, of course, fictional, but its cultural content lays out in full relief the psychological strain that candidates experienced inside and outside the examination compounds.

Women along with Buddhist and Daoist clergy were excluded, so the pool of candidates in late

imperial China—as in contemporary education circles worldwide—was exclusive. Because of the requirement to master nonvernacular classical texts, an educational barrier was erected as the hidden curriculum that separated those licensed to take examinations and those who could not because they were classically illiterate. The circulation of partially literate nonelites and lesser lights as writers-for-hire was an unintended byproduct of the civil examination’s educational process and explains the value of examinations for the many and not just the few in pre-modern China.

When modern reformers summarily decided to eliminate the civil service examinations in 1904 the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) undermined its longstanding partnership with gentry-merchant elites. The dynasty fell before a new schooling system could be put in place empirewide. With hindsight one can see that civil service examinations had served both imperial interests and literati values. Along with the examinations the dragon throne (symbol of dynastic government) and its traditional elites also collapsed in the twentieth-century Chinese revolution.

Examinations as Socio-Cultural “Glue”

In addition to their governmental role, imperial Chinese civil service examinations played a central role in Chinese social and intellectual life from 650 to 1905. Beginning in 1400 imperial examiners were committed to the “Learning of the Way” (neo-Confucianism) as the state orthodoxy in official life and in literati culture. From 650 to 1200 literary talent and classical learning had been tested as important, dual-track educational proficiencies. A unifying philosophical orthodoxy was not widely influential in the examination halls until Chinese literati deemed that they needed to speak with a single cultural voice at a time when the political unity of the empire had been squashed by the Mongol conquest (1240–1368). Han Chinese classical scholars built a new cultural and educational fortress around the bequeathed neo-Confucian teachings of the literati of their beloved but vanquished Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279).

Civil service examinations reflected the larger literati culture because they were already penetrated by imperial interests and local elites who together formed the



Detail from the eighth-century painting *Literary Gathering*, by Tang dynasty artist Han Huang. Ink and color on silk. One component of the civil service examination was the writing of an “Eight-Legged Essay” that adhered to rigorous structure and exactitude. One slip of the pen in the formation of a written classical Chinese character was cause for failure.

classical curriculum. Gentry and merchant status groups were defined in part by their examination credentials. The intersections between elite social life, popular culture, and religion from 1400 to 1900 also reveal the full cultural scope and magnitude of the examination process in the 1,300 counties, 140 prefectures, 17 provinces, as well as in the capital region, where they were administered. These regular testing sites, which in terms of the role of police surveillance in the selection process operated as “cultural prisons,” elicited the voluntary participation of millions of men—women were excluded from participating in this aspect as well—and attracted the attention of elites and commoners at all levels of society.

The demise of civil service examinations yielded consequences that the last rulers of imperial China and

reformist gentry generally underestimated. The Manchu court was complicit in its own dismantling after the forces of delegitimation and decanonization were unleashed by reformist Chinese gentry, who prevailed in late-nineteenth-century education circles in the 1890s and convinced the imperial court to eliminate the institution in 1904.

Education reform and the elimination of examinations were tied to newly defined national goals of Western-style change that superseded the conservative goals of reproducing dynastic power, granting elite prestige, and affirming the classical orthodoxy. The ideal of national unity replaced dynastic solidarity as the sprawling, multiethnic Manchu empire became a struggling Chinese republic. It was later refashioned as a multiethnic communist nation

in 1949. With the Republican Revolution of 1911, the imperial system ended abruptly, but its demise was already assured in 1904 when the Qing state lost control of the education system.

Power, Politics, and Examinations

Classical philosophy and imperial politics were dubious partners during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties when Song classical interpretations became the orthodox guidelines for the examination system. Ming and Qing appropriations of that orthodoxy as a single-minded and monocular political ideology affected politically and socially how literati learning would be interpreted and used. The mark of the late imperial civil service system was its elaboration of the examination model through the impact of commercialization and demographic growth when the reach of the process expanded from metropolitan and provincial capitals to all thirteen counties. In addition, the upsurge in numbers of candidates was marked by degree inflation at the lower levels. Palace graduate degree-holders dominated most positions of higher office. Officialdom became the prerogative of a slim minority. As the door to official appointment, civil service examinations also conferred social and cultural status on families seeking to become or maintain their status as local elites.

Competitive tensions in the examination market explain the police-like rigor of the civil service examinations as a systematic and stylized educational form of cultural hegemony (influence) that elites and rulers could both support. Imperial power and bureaucratic authority were conveyed through the accredited cultural institutions of the Ministry of Rites, the Hanlin Academy, and civil service examinations. Political legitimation transmitted through education succeeded because enhanced social status and legal privileges were an important byproduct of the examination competition to enter the civil service.

Fixed quotas based on the ratio between successful and failed candidates demonstrated that the state saw educational access to the civil service as a means to regulate the power of elites. Government control of civil and military selection quotas was most keenly felt at the initial licensing stages for the privilege to enter the examination selection process at the county level. In 1600 China had

perhaps 500,000 civil licentiates in a population of 150 million, or a ratio of 1 licentiate per 300 persons. By 1850, with a population of 350 million, China had only 800,000 civil and military licentiates, but still only about a half-million were civil, a ratio of 1 per 1,000 persons.

Because of economic advantages in south China (especially the Yangzi [Chang] River delta but including the southeast), candidates from the south performed better on the civil service examinations than candidates from less-prosperous regions in the north, northwest, and southwest. To keep the south's domination of the examinations within acceptable bounds, Qing education officials maintained the official ratio of 60:40 for allocations of the highest *jinshi* (literati eligible for appointments) degree to candidates from the south versus the north, which was slightly modified to 55:10:35 by allocating 10 percent for the central region.

The overcrowded examination hall became a contested site, where the political interests of the dynasty, the social interests of its elites, and the cultural ideals of classical learning were all compromised. Moreover, examination halls empirewide were supervised by literati officials, who were in charge of the military and police apparatus when so many men were brought together to be tested at a single place. Forms of resistance to imperial prerogative emerged among examiners, and widespread dissatisfaction and corruption among the candidates at times triumphed over the high-minded goals of the classical examinations.

Literacy and Social Dimensions

The monopolization of “cultural resources” by local elites depended on their linguistic mastery of nonvernacular classical texts tested by the state. Imperial examinations created a written language barrier that stood between those who were allowed into the empire's examination compounds and those classical illiterates who were kept out. In a society with no “public” schools, education was monopolized by gentry and merchants who organized into lineages and clans to provide superior classical educations. The Mandarin vernacular and classical literacy played central roles in culturally defining high and low social status in Chinese society. The selection process

permitted some circulation of elites in and out of the total pool, but the educational curriculum and its formidable linguistic requirements effectively eliminated the lower classes from the selection process. In addition, an unstated gender ideology simply assumed that women were ineligible.

Literati regularly turned to religion and the mantic (relating to the faculty of divination) arts to understand and rationalize their chances of success in the competitive local, provincial, and metropolitan examinations. Examination dreams and popular lore spawned a remarkable literature about the temples that candidates visited, the dreams that they or members of their family had, and the magical events in their early lives that were premonitions of later success. Both elites and commoners used fate to describe the forces operating in the examination marketplace. The anxiety produced by examinations was a historical phenomenon that was experienced most personally and deeply by boys and men. They encoded fate using cultural glosses that had unconscious ties to popular religion.

The civil service competition affirmed a classical curriculum that consolidated elite families into a culturally defined status group of degree-holders that shared (1) internalization of a common classical language, (2) memorization of a shared canon of classics, and (3) a literary style of writing known as the “eight-legged essay.” Elite literary culture was in part defined by the civil service examination curriculum, but that curriculum also showed the impact of literati opinions about education. The moral cultivation of the literatus was a perennial concern of the imperial court as it sought to ensure that the officials it chose in the examination market would be loyal to the ruling family. For the literatus it was important that the dynasty conformed to classical ideals that literati themselves had formulated.

The bureaucracy made an enormous financial commitment to staffing and operating the empirewide examination regime. Ironically, the chief consequence was that by 1800 examiners no longer could read each essay carefully. Final rankings, even for the eight-legged essay, appeared haphazard as a result. Although acknowledging the educational impact of the curriculum in force, one should guard against portraying weary examiners with so many papers to read as the dynasty’s “thought police,” operating inside the examination halls trying to impose

orthodoxy from above. Overall, however, examiners as an interpretive community did uphold canonical standards. They marked their cognitive world according to the moral attitudes, social dispositions, and political compulsions of their day.

Fields of Learning

In the nineteenth century the examination curriculum increasingly conformed to the statecraft and evidential research currents then popular. In the late eighteenth century the Qing dynasty had initiated “ancient learning” curricular reforms to make the examinations more difficult for the increasing numbers of candidates by requiring mastery of not one but all of the Five Classics. In addition, the formalistic requirements of a new poetry question after 1787 gave examiners an additional tool, along with the 8-legged essay “grid,” to grade papers more efficiently. Later rulers failed to recognize that an important aspect of the civil service examinations was the periodic questioning of the system from within that gave it credibility from without.

Literati fields of learning, such as natural studies and history, were also represented in late imperial civil examinations, particularly in the reformist era after 1860. Such inclusion showed the influence of the Qing court and its regional officials, who for political reasons widened the scope of policy questions on examinations in the 1880s and 1890s.

Delegitimation and Decanonization

Radical reforms were initiated to meet the challenges of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and Western imperialism. Even the Taipings instituted their own Christian-based civil service examinations in the 1850s. When the examinations lost their cultural luster and became an object of ridicule even among literati-officials, the system was derided as an “unnatural” educational regime that should be discarded. During the 1890s and 1900s new political, institutional, and cultural forms emerged that challenged the creedal system of the late empire and internationalized its educational institutions.

The emperor, his bureaucracy, and literati cultural forms quickly became symbols of backwardness. Traditional forms of knowledge were uncritically labeled as “superstition,” whereas “modern science” in its European and U.S. forms was championed by new intellectuals as the path to knowledge, enlightenment, and national power. Perhaps the most representative change occurred in the dismantling of the political, social, and cultural functions of the civil service examination regime in 1904–1905. By dismantling imperial institutions such as the civil service examination system so rapidly, the Chinese reformers and early republican revolutionaries underestimated the public reach of historical institutions that had taken two dynasties and five hundred years to build.

When they delegitimated the imperial system within two decades starting in 1890, Han Chinese literati helped to bring down both the Manchu dynasty and the imperial system of governance. Their fall concluded a millennium of elite belief in Song dynasty literati values and five hundred years of an empirewide civil service examination. A social, political, and cultural nexus of classical values, dynastic power, and gentry status unraveled as Manchu rulers meekly gave up one of their major weapons of cultural control that had for centuries induced popular acceptance of the imperial system. The radical reforms establishing new schools initially failed, however, because they could not readily replace the public institutions for mobilizing millions of literati in examination compounds based on a classical education.

Traditionalists who tried to reform classical learning after 1898 paid a form of symbolic compensation to classical thought by unilaterally declaring its moral superiority as a reward for its historical failure. The modern invention of “Confucianism” was completed in the twentieth century despite the decline of classical learning in public schools after 1905. In China and the West “Confucianism” became instead a venue for academic scholarship, when the “modern Chinese intellectual” irrevocably replaced

the “late Qing literatus” in the early republic. However, the demise of traditional education and the rise of modern schools in China were more complicated than just the end of imperial examinations and the rise of modern education because the latter would also subordinate examinations to new forms of schooling. The ghost of the civil service examinations lived on in Chinese public school and college entrance examinations, which have now become universal and are no longer unique to imperial China.

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Further Reading

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