Chapter 9
Late Traditional Chinese Civilization in Motion, 1400–1900

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Abstract Scholars often contend that civil examinations were an important part of what made imperial China a political meritocracy. They point to the examination system to show that the selection process served more as a common training program for literati than as a gate-keeper to keep non-elites out. Despite the symbiotic relations between the court and its literati, the emperor played the final card in the selection process. The asymmetrical relations between the throne and its elites nevertheless empowered elites to seek upward mobility as scholar-officials through the system. But true social mobility, peasants becoming officials, was never the goal of state policy in late imperial China; a modest level of social circulation was an unexpected consequence of the meritocratic civil service. Moreover, the merit-based bureaucracy never broke free of its dependence on an authoritarian imperial system. A modern political system might be more compatible with meritocracy, however.

9.1 Introduction

Late imperial Chinese literati were on the move from 1400 to 1900. They regularly traveled along the myriad waterways and roads of their extensive empire, moving up from villages to counties, townships, prefectures, provinces, and the capital. Why? To take civil service examinations! The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was internally the most mobile empire in the early modern world. Already a massive society of at least 150 million by 1500, 10 % of them (some 1.5 million local Chinese) gathered biennially in 1 of 1,350 Ming counties for the privilege to be locked up inside testing grounds to take civil examinations. Those who passed,

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some 75,000, registered in 1 of 17 provincial capitals to take the heavily-policed triennial provincial examinations. The 6,000 who survived that cut then travelled every 3 years to the capital in Beijing for the dynasty-wide metropolitan and palace examinations for the right to become *jinshi* (palace graduates entering officialdom).

Under the sprawling Qing empire (1644–1911), the number of Chinese moving through these regional and hierarchical gates by 1850, tripled to 4.5 million at the local level. From these millions, 150 thousand survived to take the provincial examinations. Civil examinations in late imperial China thus marked one of the most traveled – and policed – intersections between politics, society, economy, and Chinese intellectual life. This article is about pre-modern Chinese society and civilization in motion – upward and downward – from 1400 to 1850. The power of classical learning and statecraft to motivate millions of Chinese to want to become public officials serving far from home and family is one part of the story. Only 5 % would see their hopes realized, however. Success was at a premium. A more important part of the story of civil examinations is the one about the 95 % who failed to become officials. The authority of the classical language empowered the civil examinations to gain traction as a cultural gyroscope even in the minds of millions who failed. More than the thousands of classical literate officials, the classical knowledge system produced millions of literates who after repeated failures became doctors, Buddhist priests, pettifoggers, teachers, notaries, merchants, and lineage managers, not to mention astronomers, mathematicians, printers and publishers.

Civil examinations reflected the larger literati culture because state institutions were already penetrated by that culture through a political and social partnership between imperial interests and local elites. Together they had formed and promulgated a classical curriculum of unprecedented scope and magnitude for the selection of officials and the production of classically literate failures. Both 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, tied the dynasty and its elites together bureaucratically via culture.

In the realm of culture a broader secret lay hidden. The state, the ruler, and his ministers, were dimly aware that Chinese elites encompassed not only those who passed the final palace examination and became high officials, some 50,000 total for both the Ming and Qing dynasties. The fate of the millions of failures, the "lesser lights" in the classically educated strata of the society, worried the emperors and their courts. Would they become rebels and outlaws and challenge the legitimacy of their rulers? Or would they find suitable social niches for their lives, which a classical education both enabled and encouraged? Emperors also worried when the numbers of old men over 80 *sui* (Chinese added a year at a new born's first new year celebration) taking local examinations went up precipitously. Was it really an honor for a grandfather and father, who had failed for decades, to accompany their younger grandson/son into the local examination halls to take the same licensing examination?

9.2 Classical Education and Civil Examinations

Compared to other civilizations, China placed a high value on education since the ancient classical era (600–250 BCE). Influential Chinese thinkers from the moralists Confucius (551–479) and Mencius (372–289), to the pragmatists Mozi (ca. 470–ca. 391) and Xunzi (ca. 298–238), advanced the unprecedented notion that merit and ability measured by training should take precedence over race or birth in state appointments. Since the early empire (200 BCE–ACE 200), clans and families had mobilized their resources to provide young boys (and in some cases girls) with the tools of classical literacy. For the most part, however, a society based on merit remained an unattained ideal, and for much of the early empire an education remained the privilege of landed aristocrats and, to a lesser degree, prosperous merchants.[1]

Beginning in the middle empire (600–900), the Chinese state dramatically increased its expenditures on education and created the first large-scale examination system for selecting civil officials in the world. Such developments, which challenged the medieval educational monopoly for advancement in official life held by northwestern aristocratic clans, climaxed during the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960–1280), when the government erected a dynasty-wide school system at the county level to mainstream bright young men from commoner families into public service. In addition, Buddhist monasteries in medieval China created new local institutions for education, namely the Buddhist schools educating many commoners – male and female. Thereafter, state and society, except for the occasional Daoist eccentric, agreed that education, particularly a classical education, was one of the foundations of public order and civilized life. Large-scale examination compounds, an odd sort of "cultural prison," dotted the landscape since the Song dynasties. "Actual prisons" for lawbreakers were scarce. Small-scale jails in the county yamens sufficed for criminals. The language of social order and moral rehabilitation was largely cultural.[2]

These pioneering educational achievements gathered momentum during the Song dynasties, when various strands of classical statecraft and moral thought were reinvigorated, particularly the metaphysical strands that Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (1130–1200) derived in part from classical responses to Buddhist challenges. These literati views later were synthesized under the name of "Way learning" (*Daoxue*, what others mistranslate as "Neo-Confucianism"). The latter became orthodox – in name more than in practice – when the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1280–1368) belatedly renewed the civil service curriculum at a controlled level in 1313. Only 11 hundred high degrees were conferred under the Mongols, compared to over 25,000 palace graduates under the following Ming. But the Mongol cooption of "Way learning" served as important models for the both the Ming and Manchu

[1] Elman 2000.

[2] See des Rotours 1932 and Herbert 1988 and compare Dikotter 2000.

Qing dynasty, which again made the Cheng-Zhu persuasion the cornerstone of classical orthodoxy.[3]

After the restricted Mongol era, Ming China tried to reinvent a meritocracy in which social prestige and political appointment depended for the most part on written classical examinations to establish legitimate public credentials. Elite political status and social prerogatives were corroborated through more extensive trials by examination, which in turn produced new literati social groups that endured from 1400 to the twentieth century. Classical learning became the empire-wide examination curriculum, which reached into 1,350 counties and tens of thousands of villages for the first time.

The Song-Yuan "Way learning" orthodoxy was mastered by millions of civil service examination candidates from 1400 until 1900. In the first Ming provincial and metropolitan examinations of 1370 and 1371, the medieval emphasis on poetry was ended. The new curriculum still required classical essays on the Four Books and Five Classics. The complete removal of poetry by the examination bureaucracy lasted from 1370 to 1756, when the examination curriculum pendulum swung decisively back to balance the essay with a poetry question again. But examination policy never hindered the popularity of poetry and literary flair among literati groups, which decisively demonstrates the cultural limits of the classical curriculum in influencing intellectual life.[4]

In Ming times, the Song dynasty "Way learning" tradition became an empire-wide orthodoxy both geographically and demographically among upper and middle level literati. Later followers created an imperial curriculum of learning at all levels of society that could be linked to the elitist civil examination system. Although the classically educated were marked by a characteristic set of moralistic predispositions favored in the civil examinations, alternative and dissenting views proliferated.[5] Natural studies, particularly medical learning became a legitimate focus of private study when literati sought alternatives to official careers under a Mongol rule that disdained sweeping civil examinations. Such occupational alternatives continued to be available when the odds of success for the many on the Ming examinations became prohibitive after 1500. The wider scope of policy questions on the civil examinations dating from the early fifteenth century often reflected the dynasty's and public interest in astrology, calendrical precision, mathematical harmonics, and natural anomalies. The "first" Western learning that entered Ming China via the Jesuits after 1600 enhanced focus on these technical fields of natural studies.[6]

Most Chinese agreed that learning was guided by examples of past worthies and sages and encouraged by good companions and teachers. In traditional schools, learning led to far more regimentation than many literati might have wished, but this

[3] See de Bary and Chaffee 1989 and Elman 1991.

[4] See Zi 1894. See also Yu 1997 and Elman and Woodside 1994 and Woodside 2006.

[5] Tillman 1992.

[6] Elman 2005.

was always tempered by the numerous local traditions of learning outside the control of the bureaucratically limited state. Many members of literary schools held that because literature and governing were not separate, writers should avoid Buddhist and Daoist vocabulary, or rustic and colloquial phrases, or the stylistic anarchy of popular novels. Knowledge of numbers in tax-related economic transactions, debates about "hot" and "cold" medical therapies to deal with epidemics, and needed reforms of the official calendar by the mid-sixteenth century were also common.

Europeans first marveled at the educational achievements of the Chinese in the sixteenth century when Catholic missionaries, especially the Jesuits wrote approvingly of the civil examinations then regularly held under Ming-Qing government auspices. Such admiration carried over into the accounts of China prepared by eighteenth century *philosophes*, who praised the "Mightie Kingdome" for its enlightened education.[7] In the absence of alternative careers of comparable social status and political prestige, the goal of becoming an official took priority. The civil service recruitment system achieved for education in imperial China a degree of standardization and local importance unprecedented in the early modern world.

This ethos carried over into the domains of medicine, law, fiscal policy, and military affairs. Imperial rulers and Chinese elites believed that ancient wisdom, properly inculcated, tempered men as leaders and prepared them for wielding political power. Both the Ming and Qing dynasties encouraged the widespread publication and circulation of acceptable materials dealing with the Four Books, Five Classics, and Dynastic Histories because the latter were the basis of the civil service curriculum and literati learning empire-wide. Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, more classically-literate Chinese read or had access to the literati canon than literate Europeans had access to the Bible's Old and New Testaments.[8]

Imperial support of elite cultural symbols, which were defined in terms of classical learning, painting, literature, and calligraphy, enabled the civil service hierarchy to reproduce acceptable social hierarchies by redirecting wealth and power derived from commerce or military success into education to prepare for the civil and military service. The selection of a "writing elite," not the enlargement of a "reading public," was the government's goal in using civil examinations to select officials. By producing too many candidates, however, the civil service market also yielded a broader pool of failed literates who turned to producing legal plaints, novellas, medical tracts, and bawdy plays for a de facto reading public.

Teaching in late imperial times generally meant the reproduction of classically literate elites, and the socialization by means of exhortations and rituals of the far less literate, or even illiterate, common people. The civilizing goal of "teaching and transforming" (*jiaohua*) never hardened into a tidy formula, given the dissatisfactions with the educational status quo that characterized Chinese history. Wang Yangming (1472–1528) and his late Ming followers, for example, opened schools

[7] See Lach 1965 and Elman 2005.

[8] See Ozment 1980, 202 and Elman 2001, 140–169.

and academies for commoners on a wider scale than ever before. On the other hand, the line between elites and commoners could also be blurred by political turmoil. When emperors feared that heterodox popular religions were spreading because of the excessive numbers of unlearned people in the empire, they often conflated learning with indoctrination from above. Consequently, many literati accused Wang Yangming and his more radical followers of heterodoxy and deceiving the people.[9]

Separate from official studies, "schools" of learning among literati included poetry societies, private academies, or lineages of teachings associated with classical, medical, or statecraft traditions peculiar to a particular region. Medical and statecraft traditions, in particular, were usually tied to a specific master, who bequeathed his teachings to his disciples. Without "public" schools, a classical education took place in private lineage schools, charity and temple schools, or at home, not in the solitary official county, provincial or capital school that licentiates tested into. Large numbers of teachers, often examination failures, transmitted the classical or technical training needed by young men to pass local civil or military examinations or practice their trades in counties, townships, or prefectures.

9.3 Meritocracy and Examinations

After the mid-seventeenth century fall of the Ming to Manchu armies, civil service examinations were immediately instituted by the succeeding Qing dynasty and its savvier Manchu rulers without skipping a beat. Unlike the Mongol Yuan government, the Manchu state regularly held Ming-style classical examinations in 140 prefectures and about 1,350 counties. Medieval examinations were held only in the capital, while from 1,000 to 1,360 regular examinations, when held, took place only in the provincial and imperial capitals. Fearing repetition of the Mongol failure to remain in power for very long, Manchu emperors favored civil service examinations to cope with ruling an empire of extraordinary economic strength undergoing resurgent demographic change. Qing emperors put in place an empire-wide examination system that occupied a central educational position in Chinese government and society until 1905, when the examinations were abolished.

What was unique about this effort to develop institutions for classical consensus and political efficacy was its remarkable success in accomplishing the goals for which it was designed. Education effectively restructured the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige. A classical education based on non-technical moral and statecraft theory was as suitable for selection of elites in China to serve the imperial state at its highest echelons of power as humanism and a classical education served elites in the nation-states of early-modern Europe. The examination life, like death and taxes, became one of the fixtures of elite education and popular culture. Examinations represented the focal

[9]See Kuhn 1990 and Rowe 2001.

point through which imperial interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations were directed. Moreover, the education ethos carried over into the domains of medicine, law, fiscal policy, and military affairs. The examinations engendered an empire-wide school system down to the county level. Several centuries before Europe, the Chinese imperial state committed itself financially to support a county level school network.

Despite their initial success, dynastic schools, one per county or township, were eventually absorbed into the examination system and remained schools in name only. Because the classical curriculum was routinized, little actual teaching took place in such schools. Dynastic schools became way-stations, that is, "testing centers," for students preparing for the more prestigious civil service examinations. Imagine if American students seeking to enter medical school only needed to pass the Medical Boards prepared by the Princeton Educational Testing Service (ETS) and were not required to attend college before entering medical school! Song and later Ming-Qing schools of classical learning were trumped by the civil examinations. The schools became "waiting stations" for those who had not passed.

Training in vernacular and classical literacy was left to the private domain. Dynastic schools in China never entertained goals of mass education. Designed to recruit talent into the "ladder of success," a classical education became the sine qua non for social and political prestige in empire-wide and local affairs. Imperial rulers recognized testing their elites on their mastery of a classical education was an essential task of government, and Chinese elites perceived a classical education as the correct measure of their moral and social worth.[10]

When the autonomy of education from political and social control at times became a bone of contention, this revealed the limits of imperial power in the Ming or Qing empires. But both rulers and elites generally equated social and political order with moral and political indoctrination through a civilizing education. High-minded officials often appealed for the relative autonomy of education in private academies as an antidote to the warping of classical educational goals by the cut-throat examination process. Such private academies frequently became centers for dissenting political views, but they often paid a political price for such activism, viz, the late Ming Donglin Academy. Such academies also served as important educational venues for literati who preferred teaching and lecturing to passing on classical learning to their students. When compared to some 500 Song and 400 Yuan dynasty private academies, the Ming overall had in place from 1,000 to 2,000 such academies by its end. The Qing had upwards of 4,000 empire-wide, a small number considering that population reached 300 million by 1800, but in aggregate an influential force.[11]

[10] See Ho 1964.

[11] Bai 1995.

9.4 Social Reproduction

Education was premised on social distinctions between literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Under the Ming, sons of merchants for the first time were legally permitted to take the civil examinations. Occupational prohibitions, which extended from so-called "mean peoples" (those engaged in "unclean" occupations) to all Daoist and Buddhist clergy, however, kept many others out of the civil service competition, not to mention an unstated gender bias against all women.

Civil examination success required substantial investments of time, effort, and training. Because the dynastic school system was limited to candidates already literate in classical Chinese, initial stages in training and preparing a son for the civil service became the private responsibility of "commoner" families seeking to attain or those simply hoping to maintain elite status as "official" or "military" families. Careerism usually won out over idealism among talented young men who occasionally were forced to choose between their social obligations to their parents and relatives and their personal aspirations. Failures, however, because of their classical literacy could choose teaching, pettifoggery, or medicine as alternate careers.

Once legally enfranchised to compete, merchant families also saw in the civil service the route to greater wealth and orthodox success and power. Unlike contemporary Europe and Japan where absolute social barriers between nobility and commoners prevented the translation of commercial wealth into elite status, landed affluence and commercial wealth during the Ming dynasty were intertwined with high educational status. Because of the literary requirements, artisans, peasants, and clerks were poorly equipped to take advantage of the hypothetical openness of the civil service.

Frequently the rites of passage from child to young adult in wealthy families were measured by the number of ancient texts that were mastered at a particular age. Capping of a young boy between the ages of 16 and 21, for example, implied that he had mastered all of the Four Books and one of the Five Classics, the minimum requirement for any aspirant to compete in the civil service examinations up to 1756. Clear boundaries were also erected to demarcate male education from female upbringing, which remained intact until the seventeenth century when education of women in elite families became more common. Nevertheless, when compared with the fatalistic ideologies common among Buddhist or Hindu peasants in South and Southeast Asia, for example, the Chinese ideology of teaching and learning did affect beliefs in the usefulness of education and created a climate of rising expectations for those who dreamed of glory but sometimes rebelled when their hopes were repeatedly dashed.[12]

Looking beyond the official meritocracy of the graduates, we see the larger place of the civil examinations in Chinese society and not just for elite families. One of

[12] See Ko 1994 and Gardner 1989.

the unintended consequences of the civil examinations was the creation of legions of classically literate men (and women) who used their linguistic talents for a variety of non-official purposes. If there was much social "mobility," i.e., the opportunity for members of the lower classes to rise in the social hierarchy, it was likely here. The archives indicate that peasants, traders, and artisans, who made up 90 % of the population, were not among the highest graduates. Nor were they a significant part of about 1.4 (late Ming) to 2.6 million (mid-Qing) local candidates who failed at lower levels every 2 years.

Occupational fluidity among merchants, military families and gentry, however, translated into a substantial "circulation" of lower and upper elites in the examination market. Overall, licentiates were not peasants, traders, artisans, clergy, or women. They were gentry and merchants, who were "commoners," or military men. To reach this level, peasants, traders, and artisans had to begin an economic climb that eventually allowed them to earn enough to provide classical educations for their sons.

9.5 Political Reproduction

Education in Ming China was recognized as one of several tools in the repertoire of the dynasty to maintain public order and political efficacy. Imperial support of education and examinations was contingent on the examination process in supplying talented and loyal men, some 20,000 officials empire-wide, for the bureaucracy to employ. The dynasty's minimum requirement that the educational system reinforce and inculcate political, social, and moral values, which would maintain the dynasty in its present form, was inseparable from classical rhetoric exalting learning and prioritizing civilian values. Political legitimacy was an assumed and worthy byproduct of preparation for the civil and military service. The legions of local clerks who worked in 1,350 county and 140 prefectural yamens were banned from the civil service, although they passed on their home sinecures to their sons or close relations.[13]

In a tightly woven ideological canvas of loyalties, even emperors became educated in the orthodox rationale for their imperial legitimacy – by special tutors selected from the civil service examinations. A by-product was that the number of classically literate elites able to produce essays, poetry, stories, novels, medical treatises, and scholarly works also increased dramatically. They fed the woodblock printing industry and the rapid growth of a dynamic print culture in South China with classical and vernacular texts read widely in the late Ming.[14] Imperial support of literati-inspired cultural symbols, which were defined in terms of classical learning, painting, literature, and calligraphy, enabled the dynasty in concert with

[13] See Zi 1894 and Miyazaki 1981 and compare Foucault 1977, 170–228.

[14] See Brokaw and Chow 2005.

its elites to reproduce the institutional conditions necessary for their survival. The examination hierarchy reproduced acceptable social hierarchies by redirecting wealth derived from commerce or military success into a classical education.

9.6 Overlaps Between Economic and Cultural Reproduction

Well-organized local lineages translated social and economic advantages into educational success, which correlated with their control of local cultural resources. Such lineages were usually built around corporate estates, which required classically literate and highly placed leaders who moved easily in elite circles and could mediate on behalf of the kin group. Economic surpluses produced by wealthy lineages, particularly in prosperous areas, enabled members of rich segments to have better access to a classical education and success on state examinations, which in turn lead to new sources of political and economic power outside the lineage. Here, economic reproduction lent its traction to social and political forms for the accumulation of power and stature. If one "followed the money," economic resources translated into cultural resources for classical learning.[15]

Because education of elites entailed long-term internalization of orthodox thought, perception, appreciation, and action, the simultaneous processes of social and political reproduction in Ming China yielded both "literati culture" and the literatus as a "man of culture." Classical literacy, i.e., the ability to write elegant essays and poetry, was the crowning achievement for educated men and increasingly for elite women in the seventeenth century. This learning process began with rote memorization during childhood, continued with youthful reading, and concluded with mature writing. Literati believed that the memory was strongest at an early age, while mature understanding was a gradual achievement that derived from mastering the literary language and its moral and historical content.

Educated men, and some women, became a "writing elite" whose essays would mark them as classically trained. The educated man was able to write his way to fame, fortune, and power, and even if unsuccessful in his quest for an official career, he could still publish essays, poetry, novels, medical handbooks, and other works. The limitation, control, and selection of the "writing elite," not the enlargement of the "reading public," was the dynasty's goal in using civil examinations to select officials. By enticing too many candidates, however, the civil examination market also yielded a broader pool of literate writers who upon failing turned their talents to producing other texts, novellas, pornography included, and medical tracts.[16] They compiled genealogies, prepared deeds, provided medical expertise, and wrote settlements for adoption contracts and mortgages. These acts required expertise and contacts that only the elite within a descent group could provide. Merchants

[15] Elman 1990.

[16] See Shang 2003.

in late imperial China also became known as cultured patrons of scholarship and publishing. The result was a merging of literati and merchant social strategies and interests. Classical scholarship flourished due to merchant patronage, and books were printed and collected in larger numbers than ever before.[17]

Dominant lineages and nouveau riche families maintained their high local status through the lineage schools, medical traditions, and merchant academies they funded. Elite education stressed classical erudition, historical knowledge, medical expertise, literary style, and poetry. Classical literacy and proficiency in the literary arts were requirements to socialize with the political elite. The strict enforcement of requirements for civil examination essays further cemented literary culture. The well-publicized rituals for properly writing classical Chinese included cultural paraphernalia long associated with literati culture: the writing brush, ink-stick, ink-slab, stone monuments, fine silk for writing and wearing, and special paper.

Literati prestige, however, more than met its match inside the actual testing sites, which operated as de facto "cultural prisons." Despite the role of police surveillance in the selection process, such "prisons" elicited the voluntary participation of millions of men – women were excluded – and attracted the attention of elites and commoners at all levels of society. Think of such cultural prisons as educational havens that elites sought to break into, so that they could eventually break out of them.

Political and social reproduction through public and private institutions of teaching required the transference of economic resources into education and entailed a degree of cultural and linguistic uniformity among elites that only a classical education could provide. Such uniformity was significantly muted in practice. The classical curriculum represented a cultural repertoire of linguistic signs and conceptual categories that reinforced elite political power and social status. Education in dynastic schools and private academies was a fundamental factor in determining cultural consensus and conditioned the forms of reasoning and rhetoric prevailing in elite literary life of the period.[18]

The reform of education after 1865 and the elimination of examinations in China after 1905 defined new national goals of Western-style change that superseded the conservative imperial goals of reproducing dynastic power, granting gentry prestige, and affirming the classical orthodoxy. National unity replaced dynastic solidarity, as the Manchu empire became a struggling Chinese Republic that was later refashioned as a multi-ethnic communist nation in 1949. Since the Song-Yuan-Ming transition, 1250–1450, the struggle between insiders and outsiders in "China" to unite the empire had resulted in what was over 400 years of so-called "barbarian rule" over the Han Chinese by first Mongols and then Manchus. With the Republican Revolution of 1911, that historical narrative ended.

[17] See Elman 2001.

[18] Elman 2000, chapter 7.

9.7 Power, Politics, and Examinations

The mark of the late imperial civil system was its elaboration of earlier civil examination models through the impact of commercialization and demographic growth when the reach of the process expanded from metropolitan and provincial capitals to all 1,350 counties. In addition, the upsurge in numbers of candidates was marked by the dominance of palace graduate degree-holders in high office starting in the late sixteenth century. Officialdom was the prerogative of a very slim minority. As the door to official appointment closed, civil examinations till 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 practice that Han Chinese insiders and Manchu warrior outsiders could both support. There were political forces and cultural fears pushing Han Chinese and their non-Han rulers to agree publicly how imperial and bureaucratic authority was conveyed through the accredited cultural institutions of the Ministry of Rites, the Hanlin Academy, and civil examinations. Political legitimation transmitted through education succeeded because enhanced social status and legal privileges guaranteed by code were an important byproduct of the examination competition for the civil service.[19]

Establishing quotas based on the ratio between successful and failed candidates further demonstrated that the state saw control of access via quotas to the civil service as an educational means to regulate the power of elites. Government control of civil and military quotas was most keenly felt at the initial stages of the competition: licensing at the county levels for the privilege to enter the examination selection process. By 1400, for example, it is estimated that there were 30,000 classical literate licentiates out of an approximate population of 65 million, a ratio of almost 1 licentiate per 2,200 persons. In 1600, there were perhaps 500 thousand licentiates in a total population of some 200 million, or a ratio of 1 licentiate per 400 persons. Once they were common place, local degrees became victims of cultural inflation. Only a higher degree conferred an official position.

Because of economic advantages in South China (especially the Yangzi delta but including coastal Fujian and Guangdong provinces), candidates from the south performed better on the civil examinations than candidates from less prosperous regions in the north (North China plain), northwest (Wei River valley), and southwest (Yunnan and Guizhou). To keep the south's domination of the examinations within acceptable bounds, Ming education officials eventually settled in 1425 on an official ratio of 60:40 for allocations of appointments for the highest palace graduates from the south versus the north, which was slightly modified to 55:10:35 a year later by adding a central region.[20]

[19] See Chaffee 1995.

[20] Elman 2000, chapter 2.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the state-society partnership that undergirded civil examinations, the examination hall was a contested site, where the political interests of the dynasty, the social interests of its elites, and the cultural ideals of classical learning were meshed. Moreover, literati officials who supervised examination halls empire-wide also 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 some of the examiners in charge of the classical examinations.[21]

9.8 Literacy and Social Dimensions

Imperial examinations created a written linguistic barrier that stood between those who were allowed into the empire's examination "prisons" and those classical illiterates who were kept out. In a society where there were no genuine "public" schools, the partnership between the court and the bureaucracy was monopolized by gentry-merchant literati who organized into lineages and clans to maximize the value of their economic investments via superior classical educations. Language and classical literacy were central in culturally defining high and low social status in late imperial 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 forbade all women from entry into the examination compounds.[22]

Literati regularly turned to religion and the mantic arts in their efforts to understand and rationalize their emotional responses to the competitive local, provincial, and metropolitan examinations. Examination dreams and popular lore spawned a remarkable literature about the temples candidates visited, the dreams that they or members of their family had, and the magical events in their early lives that were premonitions of their later success. Both elites and popular culture tempered their own understanding of the forces of "fate" that operated in the examination marketplace by encoding them in cultural glosses with unconscious ties to a common culture and religion. The anxiety produced by examinations was experienced most personally and deeply by boys and men. Fathers and mothers, sisters and extended relatives shared in the experience and offered comfort, solace, and encouragement, but the direct, personal experience of examination success or failure belonged to the millions of male examination candidates who competed with each other against increasingly difficult odds.[23]

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[21] Elman 2000, chapter 8.

[22] C.f. Elman 1990 and compare Bourdieu and Passeron 1977.

[23] Elman 2000, 299–326.

The civil service competition created a dynastic curriculum which consolidated gentry, military, and merchant families into a culturally defined status group of degree-holders that shared: (1) a common classical language; (2) memorization of a shared canon of Classics; and (3) a literary style of writing known as the 8-legged essay. Internalization of elite literary culture was in part defined by the civil examination curriculum, but that curriculum also showed the impact of literati opinion on imperial interests. 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 loyally serve the ruling family.

The internalization of a literary culture that was in part defined by the civil examination curriculum also influenced the public and private definition of moral character and social conscience. A view of government, society, and the individual's role as an elite servant of the dynasty, was continually reinforced in the memorization process leading up to the examinations. For the literatus, it was important that the dynasty conformed to classical ideals and upheld the classical orthodoxy that literati themselves formulated. Otherwise the ruling family was illegitimate. The bureaucracy made an enormous financial commitment to staffing and operating the empire-wide examination regime. Ironically, the chief consequence was that examiners eventually could not take the time to read each individual essay carefully. The final rankings, even for the 8-legged essay, were very haphazard. While acknowledging the educational impact of the curriculum in force, we must guard against over-interpreting the classical standards of weary examiners inside examination halls as a consistent or coherent attempt to impose mindless orthodoxy from above.

An interpretive community, canonical standards, and institutional control of formal knowledge became key features of the civil examination system and its halls empire-wide. Scrutiny of the continuities and changes in linguistic structures and syllogistic chains of moral argument in the examination system revealed an explicit logic for the formulation of questions and answers and an implicit logic for building semantic and thematic categories of learning. These enabled examiners and students to mark and divide their cognitive world according to the moral attitudes, social dispositions, and political compulsions of their day.[24]

9.9 Fields of Classical Learning

Literati fields of learning, such as natural studies and history, were also represented in late imperial civil examinations. Such inclusion resulted from the court's influence, which for political reasons widened or limited the scope of policy questions on examinations, and the assigned examiners, whose classical knowledge echoed the intellectual trends of their time. In the mid-eighteenth century, new guidelines were

[24]C.f. Johnson 1985 and compare Kermode 1979.

also applied to the civil examination curriculum. As a result, the Song rejection of medieval *belles lettres* in civil examinations was turned back. In the late eighteenth century, the examination curriculum started to conform to the philological and evidential research currents popular among southern literati.

The scope and content of the policy questions on session three increasingly reflected the academic inroads of newer classical scholarship among examiners. Beginning in the 1740s, high officials debated new initiatives that challenged the classical curriculum in place. They restored earlier aspects of the civil examinations that had been eliminated in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, such as classical poetry. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty initiated "ancient learning" curricular reforms to make the examinations more difficult for the increasing numbers of candidates by requiring all Five Classics in 1787. In addition, the formalistic requirements of the poetry question gave examiners an additional tool, along with the 8-legged essay "grid," to grade papers more efficiently. The Qianlong emperor in particular recognized that an important characteristic of the civil examinations was the periodic questioning of the system from within to suit the times.[25]

9.10 De-legitimation and De-canonization

The radical reforms after 1860 to meet the challenges of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and Western imperialism are beyond the scope of this essay.[26] Even the Taipings instituted their own Christian-based civil examinations. In the last years of the Qing dynasty, however, literati-officials ridiculed the civil examinations as an "unnatural" educational regime that should be discarded. During the transition to the Republic of China, new political, institutional, and cultural forms emerged that challenged the creedal system of the late empire and refracted its political institutions.

The emperor, his bureaucracy, and literati cultural forms quickly became symbols of backwardness, especially after the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese War, in which the Qing army and navy were humiliated in battle.[27] Traditional forms of knowledge were uncritically labeled as "superstition," while "modern science" in its European and American 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 examination regime that had lasted from 1370 to 1905. By dismantling imperial institutions such as the civil examination system so rapidly, the Chinese reformers and early Republican revolutionaries underestimated the public reach of historical institutions that had taken two dynasties and 500 years to build. When they delegitimized them

[25] Elman 2000, chapters 9–10.

[26] Elman 2000, chapter 11.

[27] Elman 2003.

all within the space of two decades starting in 1895, Han Chinese literati helped bring down both the Manchu dynasty and the imperial system of classically-based governance. Their joint fall concluded a millennium of elite belief in literati values and 500 years of an empire-wide imperial orthodoxy.[28]

9.11 Reform and Revolution

The demise of traditional education and the rise of modern schools in China was more complicated than just the demise of imperial examinations and the rise of modern education, which would subordinate examinations to new forms of schooling. A social, political, and cultural nexus of classical literati values, dynastic imperial power, and elite gentry status unraveled. The dynamism of late imperial civilization in motion was lost. Rather, stagnation ensued. Manchu rulers meekly gave up one of their major weapons of cultural control that had for centuries successfully induced literati acceptance of the imperial system and herded them into examination compounds. The radical reforms in favor of new schools initially failed because they could not readily replace public institutions for mobilizing millions of literati in examination compounds based on a classical education.

Traditionalists who tried to reform classical learning as "Confucianism" after 1898 paid a form of "symbolic compensation" to classical literati thought by unilaterally declaring its moral superiority as a reward for its historical failure. The modern reinvention 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 new venue for traditional scholarship, when the "modern Chinese intellectual" irrevocably replaced the late Qing literatus in the early Republic.[29]

The rise of "Chinese learning" as a counterpart to "Western learning" indicated that classical Learning was translated into a form of native studies that amalgamated ancient and modern China under the banner of reform. Traditional learning was equivalent to "Chinese learning." The English translation that resulted from this linguistic change was "sinology," which became the standard term referring to a "China specialist" in the twentieth century. Increasingly, traditional education was dissolving within a Westernizing reformist project.

Shu Xincheng (1892–1960), an early Republican educator and historian, recalled the pressure of the times to change: "The changeover to a new system of education at the end of the Qing appeared on the surface to be a voluntary move by educational circles, but in reality what happened was that foreign relations and domestic pressures were everywhere running up against dead ends. Unless reforms were

[28] Elman 2000, chapter 11.

[29] Elman 2002.

undertaken, China would have no basis for survival. Education simply happened to be caught up in a situation in which there was no choice" (Shu 1932, 6–7).

The floodgates broke open wide in 1905 in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, which was largely fought on Chinese soil in Manchuria. Given the frantic, political climate of the time, the dynamism of the classical educational system was by 1905 a convenient scapegoat for stagnation. Court and provincial officials submitted a common memorial calling for the immediate abolition of the civil examinations at all levels. The civil examinations in particular were perceived as an insuperable obstacle to new schools because a classical degree still outweighed new Western school degrees and prevented the ideal of universal education.

New schools became the focus of educational and political reformers after 1905, but examinations remained an important feature of a student's life. Others, however, saw the shift from civil examinations to the new schools as simply a displacement from the late imperial form of examination control to school-based examinations. A separate Education Board was established in December 1905 to administer the new schools and oversee the many semi-official educational associations that emerged at the local, provincial, and regional levels. The Board reflected the increasing influence of Han Chinese officials in lieu of Manchus.

A deep educational chasm was emerging between literati traditionalists and new educators about the role of classical learning in twentieth century China. Increasingly, the Education Board served the interests of the modernists in first forgetting the carefully formulated cultural dynamism of a late imperial classical education and then undoing the schooling mechanisms under which classical literacy and essay writing had been achieved. A vital component was still missing, however: the need to address the dominating role of the written classical language and the invention of an alternative vernacular spoken language for school instruction and in written examinations. Full-scale educational reform would require champions of a "literary revolution" who became vocal during the early Republic. Once the Republican Ministry of Education bought into the need to address the written language of education, the new government could increasingly invoke popular education as a move from ideal to practical reality in instruction.

To confirm a school's performance and to measure a student's abilities according to a national standard, the Education Board from the beginning used examinations to test all levels of schools. Private and public school entrance examinations were already ubiquitous, as were graduation examinations. Many unofficial organizations and groups entered the fray of education and school reform at all levels, which further eroded the Manchu court's control over education policy. Increasingly, unofficial elites took over the dynasty's monopoly control of educational institutions, thereby gaining the upper hand in determining the future of education after 1905.

Through the portal of local education, local official and unofficial elites took over the educational bureaus of the central bureaucracy. As the Qing court and its upper levels of bureaucratic power grew weaker, regional and local tiers of power began to create the educational institutions that would accelerate the demise of the dynasty and form the educational motor of the Republic in motion after 1911. The Education Board established in 1905 continued into the Republican period,

although renamed as a "Ministry," and remained on the side of new schools and a new curriculum.[30] The educational institutions of the Republic of China after 1911 were the direct legacy of the late Qing reforms. Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) creation of the Examination Bureau as part of the Republic's 1920s "five-power constitution" was also a twentieth century echo of traditional institutions. The twentieth century "examination life," which became associated with university and public school entrance examinations in China and later in Taiwan is the cultural heir of a life in motion under the imperial examination regime.[31]

Despite these continuities, a complete break between longstanding, internalized expectations of Chinese families for prestige based on traditional educational preparation for sons and the dynasty's objective political institutions occurred. The new institutions were increasingly reformed based on Western and Japanese models. The devaluation of classical degrees when compared to those from new schools in China or from foreign schools precipitated a generalized down classing of most traditional education and the classical curriculum. Growing disparity between old expectations and new objective opportunities increasingly meant the failure of many conservative families to convert their inherited educational and literary cultural resources into new academic degrees for their children. A revolutionary transformation in student dispositions towards education accompanied the radical change in the conditions of recruitment of public officials after 1905. The ancient regime, virtually lifeless after 1900, stopped dead in its tracks by 1911, its corpse reconstituted as a republican state whose hardware ran new programs for a modern civilization.[32]

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[30] Elman 2000, chapter 11.

[31] Strauss 1994.

[32] Depierre 1987.

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