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Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China

BENJAMIN A. ELMAN

“K’ung I-chi, do you really know how to read?” When K’ung looked as if such a question were beneath contempt, they would continue: “How is it you never passed even the lowest official examination?” At that K’ung would look disconsolate and ill at ease. His face would turn pale and his lips move, but only to utter those unintelligible classical expressions. Then everyone would laugh heartily again, and the whole tavern would be merry.

(Lu Hsun 1972:21)

Prologue

MOST PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT the civil service examination system in imperial China has emphasized the degree of social mobility such examinations permitted in a premodern society. In the same vein, historians have evaluated the examination process in late imperial China from the perspective of the modernization process in modern Europe and the United States. They have thereby successfully exposed the failure of the Confucian system to advance the specialization and training in science

Benjamin A. Elman is Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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that are deemed essential for nation-states to progress beyond their premodern institutions and autocratic political traditions. In this article, I caution against such contemporary, ahistorical standards for political, cultural, and social formation. These a priori judgments are often expressed teleologically when tied to the "modernization narrative" that still pervades our historiography of Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) dynasty China.¹

Through its duration and elaboration from 1400 to 1900, the civil service examination system in late imperial China became a dominant force in determining the character of Chinese society on the state and cultural terms that Chinese and Manchus set for themselves before the onset of Western imperialism. Confucian learning, literati prestige, state power, and cultural practice were all accommodated to the educational testing system to a degree that the examination system in the Ming-Ch'ing era functioned as a measurable arbiter of elite culture, politics, and society. Starting in the T'ang (618–906) dynasty as a modest mechanism to broaden the social base for selecting officials, civil examinations under the Sung dynasty (960–1279) became a powerful "educational gyroscope" whose intense, self-centered motion was the sine qua non for gentry officials and aristocratic rulers to maintain their proper balance and direction vis-à-vis society at large.

The Chinese examination system, then, was not a premodern anachronism or an antimodern monolith. Classical examinations were an effective intellectual, social, and political construction that met the needs of the state bureaucracy while simultaneously supporting late imperial class structure. Cultural construction of neo-Confucian orthodoxy through the required educational curriculum for examination candidates guaranteed the long-term dominance of neo-Confucianism in intellectual life. The imperial state, gentry society, and neo-Confucian culture were tightly intertwined by the "educational gyroscope" that centered on civil service examinations. Through their interdependence, all three dimensions were thereby perpetuated and stabilized for 500 years. When they fell in the twentieth century, they fell together, leaving only disconnected strands cast askew from the sinews of imperial power and Confucian hegemony they had reinforced. To be properly evaluated, civil service examinations in China should not be disaggregated from their educational, social, and political forms of practice during Ming and Ch'ing times.

Before 750, T'ang China, like Europe until the modern era, was dominated by a landed aristocracy. The latter was organized in China into families and clans strategically located in the Northwest near the centers of political power in the Wei River Valley, the western and eastern capitals of Ch'ang-an, and Lo-yang. By 1250, however, the transition to a southern-based Chinese empire, whose capital was in the Yangtze delta city of Hang-chou, symbolized the growing economic dominance of South China and the emergence of the bureaucratized *shih* (gentry-literatus) as the "best and brightest" in the land.²

Composition of the elite in China had changed in revolutionary ways between 750 and 1250. Decline of the great aristocratic clans, which began in the years after the An Lu-shan Rebellion (755–763), coincided with the rise to prominence

¹Cf. Schwartz 1972:71–88, which has probed perceptively beneath the self-assurance of modernization theory.

²On Europe, see Hexter 1979:45–70; Stone 1964:41–80; Stone 1969:69–139; and McClelland 1976:146–73. On China, see Johnson 1977; Ebrey 1978; Grafflin 1981: 65–74; and Hartwell 1982:365–442.

of southern literati in national politics in the late tenth century, when Northern Sung (960–1126) emperors promulgated civil service reforms unprecedented in Chinese and, indeed, world history. The disruption of the continuity of the great families of medieval China was complete. The few from the Northwest that survived were forced to adapt to new social conditions which they could no longer control (Hymes 1987:29–61; Lo 1987:1–34; Lee 1982:287–97).

Before the Northern Sung, the principal means of entry into the social and political elite had been through the mechanisms of official recommendations or kinship relations. During the Han dynasties (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), for example, textual expertise on a particular Classic was a prerequisite for appointment as an erudite (*po-shih*) in the prestigious and politically powerful Han Imperial Academy (*T'ai-hsueh*). The latter had been formed to ensure the transmission of orthodox texts under state sponsorship. After completing their course of study, disciples of erudites (the latter typically were specialists on one of the Five Classics) were orally examined and then granted government positions. In essence, this simple recruitment process was the precursor of the elaborate Confucian civil service examination system set up during the T'ang and Sung dynasties (Houn 1956:138–64).

Although civil service examinations that went well beyond the less formalized selection process used in the Han empire had been instituted in the sixth century by the Sui dynasty (581–618) and reinstated under the T'ang by Emperors Kao-tsu (r. 618–26) and T'ai-tsung (r. 627–50) in the seventh century, it was not until Empress Wu (r. 690–705) that rulers in China discovered that officials selected by open examinations served as a useful countervailing force to the power of entrenched aristocrats in capital politics. Japanese scholars such as Araki Toshikazu and Miyazaki Ichisada, building on Naitō Konan's views, have interpreted such changes as reflecting in part the rise of late imperial autocracy. Still, however, the great majority of Confucian officials during T'ang times were not products of the examination system. Moreover, the examination system was a simple two-tiered process instituted only in the capital and based either on local recommendation of qualified candidates or school attendance in capital schools (Teng Ssu-yü 1967:25–49, 77–134; des Rotours 1932; Waley 1949; Miyazaki 1981:111–16; Wechsler 1974:57, 99; Araki 1969; Miyakawa 1954–5:533ff.; Chaffee 1985:14–15, 182).

Fearing repetition of the centrifugal power of regional clans and military leaders after the reunification of China in 960, Sung emperors promulgated civil service examinations as the measurement of talent in the empire. They were faced with ruling an empire of extraordinary economic strength undergoing decisive demographic change. As part of the process of developing a broad range of new institutional mechanisms by which to govern over 60 million subjects (100 million by 1100), Northern Sung rulers chose civil service examinations to limit the development of alternative military and aristocratic power centers and to draw into their government the sons of elites from newly emerging regions in South China. Deftly appropriating the civilian values of Confucianism to legitimate the institution of fair and impartial bureaucratic channels to select officials, which theoretically were open to almost all Chinese regardless of social background, Sung emperors put in place an examination system that would occupy a central institutional position in Chinese government and society until 1905, when the civil service examinations were abolished (Eberhard 1962:22–25; Kracke 1968:1–27; Franke 1960:1–15; Lo 1987:4–15; Lee 1985:19–45; Chaffee 1985:13–17, 182–88).

What was unique about this conscious effort by the state to develop new instruments for social control and political efficacy was its remarkable success in accomplishing the goals for which it was designed. Seen in terms of its own essential

functions, the civil service recruitment process effectively restructured the complex relations between social status, political power, and cultural prestige throughout late imperial China. Because elite education became almost totally identified with its primary goal of selection, it is missing the point to evaluate the examination system, as so many contemporaries have, solely according to its economic or scientific sterility.³

Although it has become sinological cant to dismiss the examination system as an institutional obstacle to modernization in China, a more comprehensive view reveals that there are no a priori reasons the gentry-official managerial elite reproduced by the system were by definition inefficient as "power managers" in a preindustrial society. In fact, a classical education based on "nontechnical" Confucian moral and political theory may have been as suitable in China for the selection of elites to serve the imperial state at its highest echelons of power as humanism and a classical education were in the nation-states of early modern Europe. If we evaluate Confucian education solely in light of modern goals of academic specialization and economic productivity, then the social and political dynamics of this cultural and institutional enterprise are misrepresented (Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 1959:28. Cf. Grafton and Jardine 1986:161-220).

Despite centuries of repeated criticism and constant efforts at reform, the "examination life," like death and taxes, became one of the fixtures of elite society and popular culture. The examinations represented the focal point through which state interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations were directed. In the absence of alternative careers of comparable social status and political prestige, the goal of becoming an official took priority. Once set in place and granted full legitimacy, the civil service recruitment system achieved for education a degree of national standardization and local importance unprecedented in the premodern world. Moreover, the examination ethos carried over for a time into the domains of medicine, law, fiscal policy, and military affairs. After the Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1279), however, only military examinations still remained institutional fixtures parallel to the civil service in the recruitment of military officers (Needham 1970:379-95; Hartwell 1971:281-314; McKnight 1989:493-516; Miyazaki 1981:102-06; Nivison 1960:177-201).

The civil service examinations, in turn, engendered a national school system down to the prefectural level during the Sung and further down to counties in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. These high-level public schools initially prepared candidates for the written tests devised by state-appointed examiners. Fully seven centuries before Europe, the imperial Chinese state committed itself financially to support an empire-wide school network.

For a brief period in the eleventh century, for example, the Shen-tsung Emperor's (r. 1068-86) chief minister Wang An-shih (1021-86) tried to replace examination success with graduation from state schools as the basis for selection of officials. Such reforms did not take hold, however, and examination success triumphed over formal training in imperial institutions of higher education. Despite their initial success, state schools eventually were absorbed into the examination system and during the

³The late imperial Chinese "state" was in important ways separate (that is, semiautonomous) from the gentry-officials who filled its bureaucratic precincts. The ruling house maintained its private pedigrees for a royal aristocracy whose interests were at times asymmetrical with the class-based interests of gentry elites. Especially during conquest dynasties (Yuan, 1280-1368, and Ch'ing, 1644-1911), when first Mongols and then Manchus became the dynastic rulers, state interests serving the aristocratic elite did not always correlate exactly with the interests of bureaucratic or local elites.

Ming and Ch'ing dynasties remained schools in name only. Little actual teaching took place in them, and state schools became simply way-stations for students to prepare on their own for civil service examinations (Teng 1967:140–48; Lee 1985:55–137; Miyazaki 1981:18–19, 116–17, 124).

Moreover, entry into state schools presupposed classical literacy. Because training in both vernacular and classical literacy was left to the private domain, state schools in China never entertained goals of mass education until the twentieth century. Designed to recruit talent into what Ping-ti Ho has aptly described as the “ladder of success” in imperial China, a classical education became the *sine qua non* for social and political prestige in national and local affairs. Confucianized themselves, imperial rulers recognized elite education based on the Classics as an essential task of government, and Chinese gentry perceived a classical education as the correct measure of their moral and social worth. Both believed that ancient wisdom, properly generalized and inculcated, tempered men as leaders and prepared them for wielding political power in the central and provincial bureaucracy and in local *yamens* (Woodside 1983:3–35; Ho 1962:255–66).

Imperial control over elite education was premised on the state's prerogative to select and promote officials. In fact, the state was more concerned with organizing and codifying examination competitions than it was with setting up schools or training teachers. After creating functional units in officialdom to be filled through competitive selection, the emperor was willing to allow the actual process of education in classical Chinese and training for the examinations to drift out of state schools into the private domain of tutors, academies, or lineage schools.

It is interesting that the autonomy of education from political and social control rarely became an issue of contention in the late empire, although Ming and Ch'ing emperors and their cronies frequently tried to set limits on the proliferation of private academies outside the national school system. In the minds of both rulers and subjects, the connection between education and public order was never a matter of doubt. Whether for idealistic ends or realistic means of control, rulers and elites equated social and political order with moral and political indoctrination through education. Remonstrating censors might challenge imperial prerogative but not imperial control of examinations. Not until the twentieth century did calls for the autonomy of education from the state become popular, with predictably disastrous results for politically disenfranchised intellectuals in Republican and Communist China. From 1000 until 1900, learned Confucians became government officials; after 1911, they were increasingly replaced by party functionaries. Twentieth-century intellectuals thus were subjected to political forces they no longer could effectively influence (Wakeman 1972:35–70; Keenan 1974:226–37; Goldman 1981).

What did become a bone of contention, however, was the differing views Confucian literati had of the kind of education best suited for the fulfillment of their social and political roles. High-minded officials often appealed for the relative autonomy of education in private academies as an antidote to the warping of Confucian educational goals by the cut-throat examination process. During the late Ming, for example, private academies briefly became centers for dissenting political views. These challenges themselves were institutionally channeled through examination success into the civil service before factional infighting and eunuch political power precipitated the fall of the dynasty (Meskill 1982:66–138; Mizoguchi 1978:111–341; Ono 1980:563–94, 1983:307–15).

Even in its most stridently expressed form, however, literati dissent never challenged the process of social selection that the civil service produced or the right of the state to determine social hierarchies through educational policies. Education

was premised on social distinctions among literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Until the Ming, for instance, sons of merchants were not legally permitted to take the civil service examinations. Furthermore, occupational prohibitions, which extended from so-called “mean peoples” to all Taoists and Buddhists, kept many others out of the civil service competition. When this social vision became out of sync with reality, the state’s vision of education changed only enough in the late fourteenth century to enfranchise sons of merchants in the examination competition. Frequently, literati claims for the relative autonomy of their Confucian training from crass political manipulation simply served the political requirements of the state further by concealing the social and political functions of the selection process under the guise of literati autonomy (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:194–210; Carnoy 1982:79–126).⁴

Political Reproduction

More often than not, education in imperial China was simply recognized for what it was, one of several tools in the repertoire of the state to maintain public order and political efficacy. From the point of view of the state, reproduction of well-trained and loyal Confucian officials remained the prime concern. Imperial support of education and examinations was contingent on the success of the examination process in supplying talented and loyal men for the empire to employ.

Because positions in the civil administration carried more prestige, power, and remuneration than corresponding positions in commerce or the army, entry into officialdom became the goal of all who could afford the educational time and expenses required to prepare for the state examinations. Winston Lo has shown that the Sung civil service, for example, operated in terms of a combination of position classification (“job description”) and rank classification (personal “qualifications”). A personnel pool more than twice the size of the number of actual positions was rendered tolerable by an equitable system of work rationing. In this way, all civil service graduates were guaranteed a minimal level of employment and remuneration. Since the bureaucracy underwent one-hundred-percent turnover every three of four years, allocation of jobs and the remuneration that went with them were determined, for the most part, by position classification, that is, the importance of the position to be filled (Lo 1987:115–70).

Rank classification during the Sung governed nominal salary, status, and fringe benefits for bureaucratic personnel. Work rationing accomplished considerable savings because appointments based on job classification were the real basis for remuneration; one’s base pay, tied to rank, eventually became little more than token remuneration. Insufficient funding of the civil service was resolved by an elaborate system of ranks

⁴Although their externalist structural analysis is very useful as a functional description of educational institutions within a particular social and political setting, Bourdieu and Passeron seriously undervalue how and why institutions, and the ideas that legitimize them, change. For discussion of the internal ideological process of educational change in the content of Chinese civil service examinations, see Elman forthcoming. Bourdieu and Passeron tend to overdetermine the functional linkage in education between the intentions of agents and the institutional consequences, even when the intentions and consequences in question are separated by long periods of time. They fail to allow sufficient scope to the common finding that intentions and consequences over the long term are analytically distinct and are not locked automatically into an iron law of functionalism. See Boudon 1989:156–57, 223 n. 26, 226 n. 17.

and assignments tied to definite terms of office. Because the civil service operated in an employer's market, work rationing inhibited the medieval (European, as well as Chinese) tendency to regard office as a piece of private property to be sold or left to one's heirs. During the Ming and Ch'ing, however, as provinces in the empire became full-fledged administrative units, the civil service dropped a fully functional dual rank system and depended mainly on position classification. Much of the responsibility for official appointments shifted from the capital to provincial governments (Lo 1987:217–25).

The Sung, Ming, and Ch'ing bureaucracies all affirmed the rule of seniority as an ideological bulwark of bureaucratic autonomy. Strict bureaucratic procedure was supposed to prevail over personal taste in appointments and promotions. Such relative autonomy from imperial intervention reduced, but did not eliminate, the capricious leverage of the ruler in public affairs. Through fixed personnel rules, Confucian officials achieved a modicum of "self-respect" appropriate to their professional status as determined by impartial examination success. In effect, the dynasty accommodated elite interests, and "the elite in turn provided the dynasty with political legitimation and trained manpower" (Metzger 1973:397–417; Lo 1987:19–22, 217–18).

In both political and social terms, then, the Confucian educational agenda served state interests. In its early stages, the Sung examination system contributed to a social transformation from a medieval aristocracy to a gentry society. Thereafter, during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, the imperial state no longer entertained any aims to use education to transform society again. The state's minimum requirement that the educational system must serve to reinforce and inculcate political, social, and moral values that would maintain the dynasty in its present form was inseparable from Confucian rhetoric exalting the sanctity of learning and the priority of civilian values as the measure of social and moral worth.

Political reproduction through egalitarian selection of Confucian officials imbued with an unquestioned loyalty to the ruling house was cemented by Emperor T'ai-tsu's (r. 960–76) decision in the late tenth century (973) to require that a final "palace examination" (*tien-shih*) be administered by the emperor himself to test all those who had successfully passed the highest-level capital examination. For all subsequent dynasties, the emperor became, in effect, the nation's premier examiner, symbolically demanding oaths of unswerving allegiance from successful candidates for public office.⁵

Political legitimacy was an assumed byproduct of preparation for the civil service. To be an official of more than one dynasty represented a moral breach of this ideal, though often broken, code of loyalty. Political legitimation of the imperial Confucian order by state examinations, in fact, presupposed social recognition of the legitimacy of the selection process itself. In a convoluted but tightly woven ideological canvas of loyalties encompassing state and society, even emperors became educated in the Confucian rationale for their imperial legitimacy—by tutors selected from the civil service examinations! (Miyazaki 1981:74–101; Chaffee 1985:49, 100; Kahn 1971:115–81; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:11–67).

The Sung dynasty established as proper a strategy to use examinations for political purposes. Quotas based on the ratio between successful and failed candidates began in 997, further demonstrating that the state saw access to the civil service as an institutional means to confine and regulate the power of elites. Government intervention in elite composition through control of civil and military selection was felt most keenly at the initial stages of the examination competition through licensing

⁵For examples, see Elman forthcoming.

at the prefecture (Sung) and county (Ming and Ch'ing) levels for the privilege of entering the examination selection process (Lee 1982:297-310).

By 1400, for example, it is estimated that there were thirty thousand licentiates (*sheng-yuan*) out of an approximate population of sixty-five million, a ratio of almost one licentiate per 2,200 persons. In 1700, there were perhaps 500 thousand licentiates in a total population of 150 million, or a ratio of one licentiate per three hundred persons. While the ratio of licentiates to population became less competitive over time, the likelihood of licentiates passing higher examinations entitling them to civil appointments became more formidable. In fact, by Ch'ing times licentiate status was much less rare or special and had become a social necessity, perhaps similar in this single aspect to college graduation in the United States today (Ho 1962:173-83; Wiens 1980:9-12).

By 1850, approximately two million candidates sat for county examinations, held twice every three years. Of these, only thirty thousand (1.5 percent) achieved licentiate status. Fifteen hundred of the latter (5 percent) passed the triennial provincial examinations, and of these, only three hundred (20 percent) would pass the triennial metropolitan examinations. Each stage eliminated the vast majority of candidates, and the odds for success in all stages of the selection process was one in six thousand (.01 percent).⁶

As population increased during the late empire, the concomitant increasing roll of potential candidates for a much more slowly enlarging number of national, provincial, and local positions meant that the vast majority of licentiates who were never appointed to a position could pose a local security problem: unfulfilled expectations could lead to rebellion or to unscrupulous manipulation of fiscal tax exemptions from required labor service. Given low bureaucratic densities in state government and increasing population, strict quotas for local, provincial, and national examination competitions were utilized by the state to limit the numbers of candidates to acceptable levels. Officials feared an overproduction of licentiates would lead to a loss of local discipline and weakening of local paternalism.⁷

An almost constant tug of war existed between local elites seeking to expand their influence through state examinations and educational officials hoping to keep the "valve" of social mobility under political control. Calls for lowering quotas after a period of unusual expansion in numbers of licentiates were a constant feature of educational policy debates. Ch'ing rulers, for instance, equated high numbers of licentiates with the fall of the Ming dynasty (Miyazaki 1981:122-24; Wakeman 1975:23-24; Oxnam 1975:84-89; Kessler 1976:154-58; Ayers 1971:44-50).

In addition, the state applied an additional regional quota for metropolitan examinations in the capital to seek geographical balance. Because of economic advantages in South China (especially the Yangtze delta, but including Fu-chien and Kuang-tung provinces), candidates from the south were always performing better on the national examinations than candidates from less prosperous regions in the north (North China plain), northwest (Wei River valley), and southwest (Yun-nan and Kuei-chou). To keep the south's domination of the examinations within acceptable bounds, education officials eventually settled on an official ratio of 60:40 for allocations

⁶Ratios are drawn from Wakeman 1975:21-23. The figures in Miyazaki 1981:121-22 are somewhat less daunting than Wakeman's because Miyazaki includes both the Ming and Ch'ing examinations in his estimates. Cf. Barr 1986:92-103.

⁷Naquin and Rawski 1987:106-14, 123-27, 224-25 suggest, however, that historians have underestimated the expanding size of imperial Chinese administration.

of the highest *chin-shih* (presented candidates) degrees to candidates from the south versus the north (Chaffee 1985:119–56; Ho 1962:222–54).

During the Sung, Ming, and Ch'ing dynasties, the state committed itself to maintaining a system of civil service institutions to transmit Confucian culture in public and private life. State monopoly of most legitimate cultural symbols, defined as classical learning, painting, literature, and calligraphy, enabled it to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions necessary for its own survival. The examination hierarchy, in effect, reproduced acceptable social hierarchies by redirecting wealth and power derived from commerce or military success into the civil service. The ideological function of political legitimation transmitted through education could succeed because enhanced social status was an important byproduct of the examination competition.

Social Reproduction

If the imperial state stressed political reproduction of loyal officials, those who participated in the examination process as loyal subjects perceived the system as the most prestigious means to achieve personal success. Such success, however, required substantial investments of time, effort, and training. For families, clans, and lineages, the state's mechanisms for political selection of examination candidates translated into targets for local strategies of social reproduction.

Because the national school system in late imperial times was limited to candidates already conversant in Mandarin (the official spoken dialect) and literate in classical Chinese, and thus oriented only to the examinations and not to reading, writing, or other more elementary tasks, initial stages in training and preparing a son for the civil service became the private responsibility of families seeking to attain or maintain elite status as "official" families. Designation as an official household brought with it fiscal and legal privileges in the local community once the initial licensing examinations were passed. Even if higher-level provincial and metropolitan examinations were insurmountable hurdles for a young man, achievement of licentiate status in local county-level competition was sufficient social reward to merit the investment of family resources for the required training (Chang 1955:32–51; Freedman 1971:68–96).

To achieve status and prestige, the passport to officialdom and high culture was the Mandarin spoken dialect and classical Chinese. Similar to the Latin/vernacular divide that demarcated secondary from primary education in early modern Europe, the spoken (Mandarin) and written (classical) languages of higher education in late imperial China were alien for most to everyday speech and taught to a minority as elite disciplines. Accordingly, those who could afford the financial and labor sacrifices (read "investments") needed to prepare young men for the examinations did so without question. The linkage between filial piety and examination success is exemplified in the historical record over and over again by references to "sacrificing" families and hard-working sons who passed the examinations and rewarded the efforts of their elders. Careerism usually won out over individual idealism among talented young men who occasionally were forced to choose between social obligations to parents and relatives and personal aspirations (Bol forthcoming; Nivison 1960:177–201; Peterson 1979:18–43; Houston 1988:23–24).

So successful were the civil service examinations in capturing the fancy of ambitious men and their families that one of the defining characteristics for gentry status

became examination success. Social advantages could be transmuted easily into academic advantages (what Pierre Bourdieu would label "symbolic capital"). Wealth and power provided the resources for adequate linguistic and cultural training that would, in turn, legitimate and add to the wealth and power of a successful candidate in the examination cycle. Once legally enfranchised to compete, merchant families as much as official families saw in the civil service the route to greater wealth and orthodox success and power. Unlike contemporary Europe and Japan, where strong social barriers between nobility and commoners prevented the translation of commercial wealth into elite status, landed affluence and commercial wealth during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties were intertwined with examination status, thereby releasing some of the potential for class-based revolt in China (Elman 1990:chapter 1; Bourdieu 1977:159-97).

Gentry social status and official political position were dual products of the Sung decision to institutionalize civil service examinations in Chinese society. Political reproduction of state officials coincided with social reproduction of local gentry. The state, in effect, created its elite. Despite the rhetoric of impartiality and egalitarian Confucian ideals that successfully suppressed the reality of the unequal chances of candidates in the exclusive civil service, success on the examinations evolved as a prerogative of the wealthy and powerful in local communities. In the contest for local quotas and examination success, artisans, peasants, and clerks were outflanked and poorly equipped to take advantage of the theoretical openness of the civil service. It was therefore no accident that during the late empire only 1.6 to 1.9 percent of the total population of China belonged to the gentry class (Eberhard 1962:22-23; Lo 1987:22-34; Wakeman 1975:22, 36 n. 7; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 152-64).

Because the civil service examinations tested classical learning based on ancient texts drawn from an antiquity datable to the Chou (1122?-221 B.C.) and Han dynasties (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) nearly fifteen hundred years earlier, they were essentially tests administered in a written language that diverged from the vernacular Chinese of late imperial China. In addition, the Mandarin vernacular required of candidates diverged from other spoken dialects, which were treated as subordinate languages. Such policies condemned most who spoke only local or regional dialects to deep illiteracy. To acquire the legitimate cultural training necessary to qualify for the civil service, most students preparing for the examinations were essentially mastering a new spoken dialect (Mandarin) as a second language and a written language (classical Chinese) whose linguistic terseness, thousands of unusual written graphs, and archaic grammatical forms required memorization and constant attention from childhood to manhood (Fei 1953:71-72; Houston 1988:138-39).

Miyazaki Ichisada has estimated that over 400 thousand characters of textual material had to be memorized to master the examination curriculum of the Four Books and Five Classics, which "required exactly six years of memorizing, at the rate of two hundred characters a day." This count does not include the voluminous pages in the Dynastic Histories (by the Sung there were seventeen, by the Ch'ing twenty-two "legitimate" dynasties), mastery of which was also expected of examination candidates. Frederic Wakeman has noted: "A better-than-average apprenticeship for the examinations meant beginning to learn to write characters at the age of five, memorizing the Four Books and the Five Classics by the age of eleven, mastering poetry composition at age twelve, and studying *pa-ku* [eight-legged] essay style thereafter"⁸ (Miyazaki 1981:16-17; Wakeman 1975:23).

⁸Before the abolition of the Confucian examination system in 1905, the Five Classics and Four Books were the backbone of the education system. The Five Classics included the

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 sixteen and twenty-one, 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. If he could cope with such rote training, a student could try his hand at passing the licensing examinations as early as age fifteen, although most young men rarely achieved licentiate status before age twenty-one. (Dardess 1987:5-21).

In this way the civil service required cultural and linguistic resources few could provide their children. Licensing examinations stood as a purposive barrier sealing in at best semi-literate masses from fully classically literate elites. Clear boundaries were also erected in elite families to demarcate male education from female upbringing, which remained intact until the seventeenth century when education of women in elite families became more common. Throughout the late empire, the civil service competition remained a symbol of male supremacy in Confucian society (Elvin 1984:111-52; Handlin 1975:13-38; Wolf 1970:37-62).

Certainly, to expect that artisan or peasant mothers and fathers could afford the luxury of years of training for their sons in a "foreign" language divorced from vernacular grammar and native speech was naïve. The occasional peasant boy who toiled in the fields by day and read by oil lamp late into the night in order to pass the examinations was celebrated precisely because he was so rare. Although theoretically open to all, the content of the civil service competition clearly excluded over 90 percent of China's people from even the first step on the ladder to success. Unequal social distribution of linguistic and cultural resources meant that those from families with limited traditions of literacy were unlikely to compete successfully in the degree market with those whose family traditions included classical literacy⁹ (Fei 1953:71-72; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:114-30).

Rare successes by a few humble candidates were the stuff of legends, stories, and propaganda for the mystification of the examination process. In the popular imagination, fate, typically articulated among the populace in karmic terms or according to the logic of moral retribution, was used to justify (that is, "explain away") the inherent social inequities at the heart of the selection process. The educational mortality of the lower classes was ideologically legitimated by obtaining from them (with the important exceptions of militant Taoists and Buddhists) the recognition that a classical education represented legitimate grounds for measuring examination success. Those commoners who were legally eligible but in fact linguistically excluded from the selection process were asked to acknowledge that their nonacademic fates were due to their lack of mental gifts. The classically trained elites, in turn, could blame the classically illiterate for their ignorance. Such elites, when unsuccessful in the examination competition themselves, however, could therapeutically invoke fate to explain away their own failure and why others succeeded. Invoking fate in this manner, failed candidates could claim that those who passed

Change, Documents, Poetry, Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. A *Music Classic* had been lost in the classical period. The Four Books were the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the "Great Learning," and the "Doctrine of the Mean." The latter two were drawn from the *Rites Classic*.

⁹Johnson 1985:59 estimates there were at least five million classically educated male commoners in Ch'ing times, or roughly 5 percent of adult male population in 1800, 10 percent in 1700. Min 1989:43-44 indicates that small farmers aspired to civil examinations through purchased degrees, which became more common in the nineteenth century.

were not superior to themselves in any way¹⁰ (Chaffee 1985:157–81; Miyazaki 1981; Ropp 1981:91–119; 152–91; Barr 1986:103–09).

What social mobility there was in imperial China took place mainly within the strata of Chinese who had the cultural and linguistic resources to prepare their sons for the rigors of an examination cycle based on total memorization of ancient texts in archaic classical Chinese. Edward Kracke and Ping-ti Ho have estimated that officials whose immediate ancestors had commoner status for at least three generations before they passed the metropolitan examinations comprised 53 percent, 49.5 percent, and 37.6 percent, respectively, of the Sung, Ming, and Ch'ing *chin-shih* examination rolls they studied. Recent studies suggest, however, that these figures are highly inflated because they overlook or undervalue the number of those commoners who had officials as relatives from collateral lines in a lineage or from affinal ties to other families. Such collaterals and/or affines could be decisive in determining the likelihood of academic success of those who at first sight seem to be commoners (Kracke 1947:105–23; Ho 1962:70–125, especially 114 (Table 10); Hymes 1987:34–48; Waltner 1983:30–36).

A masterpiece of social, political, and cultural reproduction, the civil examination system persuaded rulers, elites, and commoners of the viability of the Confucian dream of public success and social mobility, thereby inducing misrecognition at all levels of its objective consequences. As an institution that since the Sung dynasties demanded anonymity for examinee test papers while they were being graded by examiners, and which renounced the arbitrary privilege of hereditary transfer of social and political status, the examination system neatly diverted attention from the de facto elimination that took place without examinations. Measurement of social mobility through examinations by Kracke, Ho, and others thus contains an unforeseen trap. By isolating those who were graduates from the larger pool of examination candidates, and then proceeding to reconstruct the social backgrounds of only the former, we are left with a skewed population of "survivors" in the examination process. It would be more useful to stress the role of examinations in creating a broad class of classically literate males that included all who competed in the selection process, including the failures.

As Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have perceptively noted, focus on the opposition between those who passed and failed examinations is the source of a false perspective on the overall function of education in the selection process. Such analysis misses the relation between examination licentiates and those who were excluded because of their inferior educations or legal status. The gatekeeping function of the civil service examinations was an unspoken social goal of the process of selection (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:141–67; Balazs 1964:6–7).

Exclusion of those who lacked cultural and linguistic resources for their sons was successfully disguised by the Confucian ideology of open competition to select the "best and the brightest" in the empire. Illusions of the social neutrality of the state and misrecognition of the cultural autonomy of the educational system papered over the reality of the social structure of classical literacy after the Sung dynasties. Examination selection effected an elimination process that was more thorough the

¹⁰Nevertheless, Alex Woodside has pointed out to me that when compared with the "fatalistic" ideologies common among Buddhist or Hindu peasants in South and Southeast Asia, for example, the Chinese ideology of social mobility did affect peasant beliefs in the usefulness of education and created a climate of rising expectations among low-level licentiates who dreamed of examination glory but frequently rebelled politically when their hopes were repeatedly dashed.

less advantaged the social class (Lockridge 1974:3-7; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 1-27).

Because those who could not qualify to meet the difficult minimal requirements for passing even the lowest-level, three-tiered licentiate examinations were not randomly distributed among the different social classes in imperial society, the examination process concealed social selection under the guise of the selection of talent. Moreover, the stringent requirements of examination and reexamination at the county level to gain admission to prefectural qualifying examinations meant that families dependent on the productive labor of sons in agriculture, crafts, and trade could not provide them with the years of training needed to keep up in the examination process (Miyazaki 1981:18-32; Eberhard 1962:22-23).

Excluding the masses of peasants, artisans, clerks, Buddhists and Taoists—not to mention all women—even from the licensing stage of the selection process eliminated all but the culturally advantaged. This ensured that those who competed in the competition were a self-selected minority of young men from Confucianized families, lineages, or clans with sufficient cultural resources to invest in their male children.¹¹

The “best and the brightest” were advantaged from the very start of the competition. Gentry possession of the cultural and linguistic resources legitimated by the state enabled families of wealth and power to continue to monopolize those resources over several generations. Social differentiation in handling the tools of reading and writing required for the Confucian examinations precluded those who were not classically literate. The hereditary transmission of cultural resources replaced the medieval hereditary transmission of official status. Trial by examination, based on linguistic competence in classical Chinese, concealed the preliminary process of social elimination that took place before the licensing examination was ever administered (Goody and Watt 1968:27-68).

Cultural Reproduction

In addition to its political and social functions, the civil service competition successfully created a national curriculum that consolidated gentry families all over the empire into a culturally defined class. By requiring mastery of archaic forms of classical Chinese, state authorities initiated young males into a select world of political and moral discourse drawn primarily from the Confucian Classics and Four Books. Although no one could deny that moral values such as filial piety and ancestor worship transcended class and cultural barriers in imperial China, or that popular literacy in vernacular Chinese was widely prevalent among non-elites, after the Sung the unbridgeable distance between vernacular and classical Chinese ensured that scholar-officials were entering a world of discourse that few in local society could participate in or understand (Rawski 1979:1-23; Wakeman 1975:23).

The dominant values, ideas, questions, and debates that prevailed in court and among officials were translated into a “semi-secret” classical language whose pronunciation was shrewdly based on the standard Mandarin dialect of the capital region in north China and not on the dialects of the more populous and prosperous south. This policy represented an early form of “linguistic gerrymandering” whereby China was divided into linguistic units to give special advantages to one group.

¹¹For examples of systematic examination success, see Elman 1990.

These "state languages" were written and spoken forms that only the privileged could fully grasp after years of training. Preparation for the civil service thus entailed long-term internalization of orthodox and regionalized schemes of classical language, thought, perception, appreciation, and action. In class and individual terms, social and political reproduction yielded both "literati culture" and the literatus as a "man of culture" (*wen-jen*). Inculcation of Confucian culture, when tied to social elites and political success, serially reproduced assimilated individuals through the selection process for officialdom. Southern Chinese whose native dialects differed from the dominant, official language of Mandarin were able to overcome their initial linguistic disadvantages vis-à-vis northern Chinese through the translation of wealth into superior educational resources and facilities but at the price of dispersion from their native tongue (Peterson 1979:25-35; Bol 1989:151-85).

As well-organized kinship groups within gentry society, local lineages, for example, were able to translate social and economic strength into civil service examination success, which, in turn, correlated with their dominant control of local cultural resources. Higher-order lineages, which were built around corporate estates that united a set of component local lineages, required classically literate and highly placed leaders who moved easily in elite circles and could mediate on behalf of the kin group with county, provincial, and national leaders. Economic surpluses produced by wealthy lineages, particularly in the prosperous Yangtze delta, enabled members of rich segments of such lineages to have better access to a classical education and success on state examinations, which led to sources of political and economic power outside the lineage (Elman 1990; Ebrey and Watson 1986; Esherick and Rankin 1990).

Success over time depended on the financial resources needed to pay for the protracted education of bright young males of the lineage in archaic versions of classical Chinese. Coming from a family with a strong tradition of classical scholarship and Mandarin-speaking credentials thus had inherent local advantages for future social and political advancement. Education was not simply a marker of social status. Within a broader society of illiterates and those only literate in vernacular Mandarin Chinese or other regional dialects, control over the spoken word in official life and the written word in classical texts had political advantages. Hence, proficiency in spoken Mandarin and classical literacy was a vital element for kinship strategies. Compilation of genealogies, preparation of deeds, and settlements for adoption contracts and mortgages required expertise and contacts that only the elite within a descent group could provide. A classical education became a seal of cultural approval. Like European elites in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who crossed over from their vernacular to classical Latin as the language of instruction in secondary education, most Ming and Ch'ing Chinese subordinated their native tongues in favor of Mandarin and classical Chinese if they entered higher education (Houston 1988:31; Watson 1982:601).

Merchants in late imperial China also became known as cultured patrons of classical scholarship. In fact, they became almost indistinguishable from the gentry elite, although hereditary designations as "merchant families" remained in force until the eighteenth century. In the Yangtze delta, for instance, they supplied resources for establishing local schools and private academies. The result was a merging of literati and merchant social strategies and interests. During the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, merchants in the Lower Yangtze region and elsewhere were in the forefront of cultural and academic life. Merchant success in local society, particularly in urban centers, pointed to the correlation between profits from trade and high social status. Classical scholarship flourished due to merchant patronage, and books were printed

and collected in larger numbers than ever before (Ho 1954:130–68; Ōkubo 1976:221–361; Freedman 1970:58–59, 128; Peterson 1979:67–72).

Access to a classical education was not the high-minded goal of gentry elites only. Merchants, artisans, and other commoners, however, frequently lacked access to the proper linguistic tools and educational facilities for mastering Confucian political and moral discourse. As the sine qua non for long-term lineage prestige, success on the imperial examinations and subsequent office-holding conferred direct power and prestige on those most closely related to the graduate and the official. The flow of local prestige went further afield, however, following diverse agnatic routes within the lineage and among affines if one married into a lineage that had traditionally monopolized local examination quotas. Lesser members could identify with, and to some degree share in, the prestige of men of their lineage or affines who had achieved much (Twitchett 1959:122–23; Watson 1985:7, 98, 105, 175).

Charitable schools (*i-hsueh*) within lineages represented an example of the intermingling of charitable institutions, education, and philanthropy. Lineage-endowed schooling provided more opportunity for the advancement of lesser families in the lineage than would have been possible where lineages were not prominent. Corporate descent groups as a whole benefited from any degree-holding member of the lineage, no matter how humble in origin. Accordingly, the failure of families in a lineage to maintain their status as degree-holders for several generations could be offset by the academic success of other agnates or affines. The social mobility of lineages, when taken as a corporate whole, was thus distinct from that of individual families.

Dominant lineages and nouveau riche merchant families in the culturally ascendant Lower Yangtze region maintained their high local status through the superior facilities they provided for their talented male children. Lineage schools and merchant academies (in Yang-chou, for example, academies were established for sons of salt merchants) became jealously guarded private possessions whereby the elite of local society competed with each other for social, political, and academic ascendancy. Successful corporate estates thus played a central role in perpetuating an economic and political environment in which gentry and merchants were dominant. The rhetoric of kinship, when translated into local philanthropy, favored those already entrenched in local society (Cohen 1983:11; Freedman 1970:54; Rawski 1979:28–32, 85–88).

With millions of young men competing biennially and triennially in the examination process, mastery of the symbols of legitimate culture not surprisingly stressed classical erudition, historical knowledge, literary style, and poetry. The cultural intent was to recapitulate in the present the classical genres in which the Confucian Classics had been composed. The educational result was to require classical literacy and proficiency in the literary arts for entrance into the political elite. During the Ming and Ch'ing, subordination of the content of the civil service examinations to elite literary culture was further cemented through strict enforcement of requirements that all candidates' essays be composed in the rigid parallel-prose styles known as "eight-legged essays" (*pa-ku-wen*), a genre infamous among examination candidates and baffling for merchants, peasants, and artisans unschooled in elite discourse (Teng 1967:281–82; Tu 1974–75:393–406; Woodside 1983:11–18).

Such cultural expectations were heightened by the gentlemanly requirements that candidates be adept in the art of calligraphy, one of the most esoteric and yet most characteristic cultural forms of training to master written Chinese. 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, and special paper. Chinese high culture demanded both mastery of literary forms and artistic training to write those forms beautifully. State

examinations required expert calligraphy on special paper free of smudges or cut-and-paste graphs. Although students had to prepare calligraphically acceptable answers using only the officially recognized "regular" script, the man of culture was also expected to master "cursive," "running," and, by the Ch'ing, even ancient "seal" forms of writing. Seal and cursive script were unintelligible to all but the most erudite. Accordingly, the secret language of classical Chinese was further mystified by its time-honored rituals of writing (Ledderose 1972, 1979; Elman 1984: 191-97).

Primacy was given to the social function of classical, literary, and calligraphic forms of cultural expression rather than to technical expertise as the measure of the educated man. An "amateur ideal" that equated cultural values with social status took precedence among elites and precluded non-elite participation in the ways of leisure. Although legal, medical, and fiscal specialties were tested during the T'ang and Sung dynasties, the end of specialty examinations in the civil service selection process during the Southern Sung and thereafter marked the state's withdrawal of social and political prestige from technical subjects. Thereafter, training in law, medicine, astronomy, and fiscal affairs became the preserve of commoner clerks, secretaries, aides, and even Muslims and Europeans, who staffed the technically oriented yamens of the bureaucracy.

Confucianized officials basked rhetorically in their moral worth based on years spent in the mastery of Sung interpretations of the Four Books, Five Classics, Dynastic Histories, and calligraphy. Only when faced with alien rule, first under the Mongols and later, briefly, under the Manchus, did significant numbers of literati turn to occupations outside the civil service. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when demographic pressure meant that even provincial and metropolitan examination graduates were not guaranteed official appointments, many Confucians turned to teaching and scholarship as alternative careers (Hymes 1986; Spence 1980; Levenson 1957:320-41; Elman 1984:67-137).

Reproduction of classical values and historical mindsets among candidates for public office, which translated concretely into linguistic and thus ideological hegemony, meant that gentry from all over the empire had more in common culturally with each other than with other social groups in their native areas. After years of classical training, for instance, Cantonese literati from southeast China shared decisive linguistic—Mandarin—and discursive—classical—commonalities with other literati all over the empire, whether from Shan-tung in the north, Ssu-ch'uan in the southwest, or any other area whose native dialect was distinctively different from that of Kuang-tung. In unforeseen ways, the institutionalization of the Mandarin dialect for the official spoken language and ancient Confucian texts in the civil service examination process had generated class cleavages between thoroughly Confucianized elites and non-elite natives. Gentry and peasants living in the same geographic space were conceptually operating in different linguistic and cultural universes. A literatus from Shan-hsi in the northwest would have little trouble bridging the vernacular gap with his southeastern Cantonese colleague, even if communication between them was possible only in written form using a brush (*pi-hua*) (Fei 1953:71-72; Teng 1967:343-47; DeFrancis 1985:53-66).

Political and social reproduction through the civil service examinations entailed a degree of cultural and linguistic uniformity among elites that only a classical education could provide. The Confucian curriculum chosen for the civil service, consequently, represented a cultural repertoire of linguistic signs and conceptual categories that ensured that elite political power and social status throughout the

late imperial period would be defined in prescribed terms acceptable to the state. For good or bad, unintentionally or not, Sung neo-Confucianism provided the cultural content for political legitimation of the dynasty and the social prestige of its dominant status group (de Bary 1981:1–66; Liu 1973).

During the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties in particular, cultural reproduction conveniently supported the political aims of the state. The "culturalism" that was produced was ideologically supportive of the status quo. A hierarchy of conservative values transmitted from one generation to the next through the elevation of spoken Mandarin and the subordination of regional dialects gave content to the methods of instructing young males in legitimate culture. Rote memorization of the Four Books and Classics in Mandarin pronunciation by examination candidates, constantly deplored but never resolved, represented the programmed transmission of the habit-forming rituals and culture of the dominant class in late imperial China (Bourdieu 1971:190–201).

Memorization to internalize exactly the required Confucian curriculum tested in examinations was a cultural act of great meaning for Han Chinese. As in early modern Europe, where stress on order and conformity ensured that rote learning (e.g., the catechism) played a fundamental role in the educational process, late imperial Chinese state educators prized orthodoxy and the rote reception of that orthodoxy. Repetition as a habit of learning was the key to developing the memory as a pedagogic tool to produce uniformity by education. To instill a fixed set of ideas and facts, rulers, officials, and examiners all believed or became convinced that the pious recital of the Four Books and Five Classics by Han Chinese students represented an act of faith in Confucian moral values and submission to imperial political sovereignty (Houston 1988:56–58).

Inculcation of values through durable training yielded what Max Weber might have called "Confucianized sages in the pay of the imperial state." Ming and Ch'ing emperors, for example, adopted for themselves the contemporary pose of ancient sage-kings. Establishment of a process for institutionalizing the transmission of Confucian cultural values through the civil service, which was initiated by Sung rulers and officials tied to social and political structures peculiar to the Sung dynasty, in turn helped to reproduce those structures among Confucians during the Ming and Ch'ing. The examinations were a fundamental factor in determining cultural consensus and conditioned the forms of reasoning and rhetoric that prevailed in elite society (Weber 1954, 1958:104–17; Bourdieu 1971:190–91).

Unwittingly, a brilliant piece of educational and social engineering had been achieved. Despite shortcomings in fairness due to special facilitated degrees for licentiates, hereditary privileges for some officials, purchase of degrees by merchants, and disparities in the geography of success, whether regional or rural-urban in form, the civil service examinations remained the main avenue to wealth and power in late imperial China until the nineteenth century. The homology between state officials and Confucianized gentry that resulted disguised, through the ideology of social mobility, the de facto elimination from officialdom of the lower classes. Chances of success in the examinations were glorified while the prohibitive chances against entry into the selection process were concealed. As a political, social, and cultural institution, the educational system designed for the civil service in China served to defend and legitimate the differentiation of Chinese society into autocratic rulers (even if non-Chinese in origin), Confucian gentry-officials, and illiterate or non-classically literate commoners (Chaffee 1985:95–115; Hsiao 1960:67–72; Huang 1985:231–33).

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