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A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China by Benjamin A. Elman

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laying a foundation for ultimate Communist victory in the lower Chang River region.

The book is the result of extensive research that draws heavily on memoirs and official documents, but is also fully cognizant of the secondary literature. The book does have flaws. A stronger editorial hand might have eliminated the numerous redundant references to, and summaries of, points made elsewhere in the text. The book also devotes nearly 200 pages of text and notes, and a 90 page appendix, to the Wannan Incident, in an attempt, it seems, to provide a comprehensive evaluation of all the political charges and historical debates that have swirled around this affair since its occurrence. In the end, Benton largely absolves the New Fourth Army leader, Xiang Ying, of responsibility for this disaster, laying considerable blame instead on Maoist strategic choices and vacillating instructions from the Party centre. This is an important contribution to the historiography of this incident, which might have deserved its own treatment in a separate work. But the amount of detail on this subject distracts from the book's other more important themes and, in combination with the book's overall length, may discourage the non-expert reader.

Benton's two books are well complemented by Yungfa Chen's *Making Revolution* (1986), which examines Communist mass mobilization in the same area and period (a topic largely ignored by Benton), and Lanxin Xiang's *Mao's Generals* (1998), which focuses more strongly on the military strategies of New Fourth Army commanders. Taken together, these works greatly expand our understanding of the Communist revolution beyond the Mao-centred "Yanan way."

EDWARD A. MCCORD

*A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China.*

By BENJAMIN A. ELMAN [Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000. xiii + 847 pp. ISBN 0-520-21509-5.]

Probably no single institution, not even the monarchy, has done more to shape China over the last seven centuries – through various foreign and native dynasties and even into the 20th century – than the examination system. Indeed, like the Chinese bureaucracy more generally, its effects on world historical trends are incalculable. Built to man the emperor's bureaucracy, the exams shaped local and national society, reflected literati orthodoxy, fostered dynastic ideology, became a focus of great governmental attention and expense, and produced a hyper-literate elite. Benjamin Elman's exhaustive, well-written, and beautifully published study traces the history of the civil exams (not including the less important military exams) since the 14th century. It is must-reading for all students of China; one hopes it will also be read outside the precincts of Sinology.

Elman shows that the exam system was subject to constant change and reform. His study takes not an overarching revisionist view of the exams

but carefully charts a course through the issues that have attracted historical attention, and more as well. Elman essentially traces the origins of the “modern” exam system not to the Song or the Yuan dynasties but to the early Ming (to the 1420s, to be precise), which sorted through the available precedents and decided on the basic elements that set the pattern through the Qing. As is well known, the exams emphasized memorization and orthodox Zhu Xi commentaries on the Four Books and Five Classics, established educational standards, ratified the status of local elites, became by far the most important means of imperial bureaucratic recruitment, and reflected and reproduced dominant moral–cultural attitudes; furthermore, they constantly reaffirmed the “partnership” between gentry–merchant elites and the imperial court. The achievement of this book is to show exactly how the exams did all this through the modifications of the centuries. Elman emphasizes the success of the exams, at least judged in terms of their ability to promote and maintain “a carefully balanced and constantly contested piece of educational and social engineering” (p. 293).

Key to Elman’s conception of the exams themselves is a possibly controversial view of late imperial society which emphasizes the dual dominance of literati and the court (as opposed to the thesis of imperial autocracy). Elman clearly shows that literati standards by and large tended to dominate the content of the exams while of course legitimating imperial power. Imperial attempts to change the exams that lacked widespread literati support generally failed to take. Exam candidates were thought to “speak in the place of the sages” while emperors claimed to inherit the political mantle of the sage-kings (p. 396). The exams were not above politics, but lay at the heart of power – and finance as well, providing for literally millions of candidates to take exams which required tens of thousands of copyists, proofreaders, and examiners up to the emperor himself.

Not every reader will want to read every word of this mountain of a book. Some may wish to skim sections with dozens of sentences like “... after 1450 typically 3,000 to 4,000 *juren* competed triennially in the metropolitan examinations for 250 to 350 places, which meant that only 7.5% to 10% received *jinshi* degrees” (p. 158, romanization modified). And those who are interested in such statistics may wish to skim the sections that rehearse the philosophical background to changing exam questions. This book, then, will function partially as a reference work (cf. 91 pages of tables), as well as a monograph in its own right. Even advanced undergraduates may find it difficult, but graduate students will find it necessary and rewarding. The work represents prodigious scholarship, being based on extant exams, exam reports, and memorials in libraries around the world, as well as Ming and Qing writings on exam issues.

Historians interested in the old question of the relationship between the exams and social mobility may be disappointed in Elman’s treatment. Essentially, Elman argues that the high degree of classical literacy required by the exams limited them to a wealthy elite, and that elite in turn was largely able to reproduce itself through the exams. This is particularly

evident given his emphasis on the importance of those who passed the highest, *jinshi* level of the exams. However, it still levels open the question of how what we might call lesser elites or more local elites used the lower levels of the exams and how many families that managed to rise economically, perhaps over several generations, finally achieved exam success. In any case, Elman shows that the “impartiality” of the exams, if not their fairness in modern terms, was an important piece of their self-legitimation.

Impartiality, however, did not mean that the examiners always knew what they were doing. Indeed, one of the most fascinating motifs of this book is how people reacted to the arbitrariness of the results. This reviewer was not convinced that the strains of exam-taking and failure were as psychologically severe as Elman suggests. Former and future candidates got on with their lives and careers. But, as Elman emphasizes, most men, even the most successful, were literally failures most of the time (very, very few passed every exam the first time, and strict quotas assured that very few succeeded at all). Many turned to religion, fortune-telling, eremitism, literature, and very occasionally rebellion. Indeed, the exams were never without their critics. As the system collapsed at the beginning of the 20th century, it was supposed to be replaced by schools – scarcely a new idea – but without the ability to fund or even properly organize them, schools were no substitute for the old exam system. Indeed, one of the most significant of Elman’s achievement is his tracing of the link between “decanonization” (the collapse of orthodox thought as ratified in the exams) and delegitimation (not only for the Qing court but for the entire sociopolitical system).

Any book of this scale will raise disagreements on specific issues. This reviewer found the term “cultural prisons” for the exam compounds to be misleading for a voluntary and still elitist process that might better be likened to painful initiation ceremonies. Nor does “Dao Learning” seem any more precise or historical a term than the more familiar Neo-Confucianism. It might have been useful to have one complete examination translated, though Elman’s extensive discussions of several particular questions are very enlightening. Some details are not explained: if one of the “six agonies” of taking the exams was sitting near the latrines, what were the other five? But as this example indicates, the book is full of wonderful details. More importantly, it not only illuminates the role of the exam system in late imperial Chinese culture, society, and politics, but it is also highly suggestive on topics ranging from philosophical currents and the publishing industry to class structure and demographic change.

PETER ZARROW

*The Rhetoric and Reality of Mass Education in Mao’s China.* By VILMA SEEBERG. [Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000. 562 pp. ISBN 0-7734-7638-5.]

This is one of the most thorough, detailed and substantive studies to be published on Chinese education in the key period from 1949 to 1979 for