Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919

Edited by

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Unintended Consequences of Classical Literacies for the Early Modern Chinese Civil Examinations

Benjamin A. Elman

Introduction

Since the classical era (600–250 BCE), China has placed a higher value on education than other civilizations have. 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 (Qin to Han, 200 BCE–200 CE), clans and families have 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 (Sui to Tang, 600–900), the Chinese state dramatically increased its expenditures on education and created the world's first large-scale examination system for selecting civil officials. Such developments, which challenged the medieval educational monopoly held by northwestern aristocratic clans, climaxed during the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960–1280), when the government erected an empire-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 of learning, 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. Beginning in the Song dynasties, large-scale examination compounds, an odd sort of "cultural prison," dotted the landscape, while actual prisons for lawbreakers were scarce. Small-scale jails in the county yamens sufficed for criminals. The official language of social order and moral rehabilitation was largely cultural.[2]

1 Elman 2000.

2 Des Rotours 1932; Herbert 1988; Kracke 1968. Cf. Dikotter 2000.

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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), which others mistranslate as "Neo-Confucianism." Way Learning became orthodox—in name more than in practice—when the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1206/1280–1368) belatedly renewed the civil service curriculum at a controlled level in 1313. Only eleven hundred high degrees were conferred under the Mongols, whereas there were over twenty-five thousand palace graduates under the following Ming dynasty (1368–1644). But the Mongol co-option of Way Learning served as an important model for both the Ming and Manchu Qing dynasties (1644–1911), which made Way Learning the cornerstone of classical orthodoxy.[3]

After the restrictions of the Mongol era, Ming China tried to reinvent a meritocracy in which social prestige and political appointment depended 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. Somewhat-diluted forms of classical learning also extended outward geographically and downward socially into local culture, riding on the heels of failed examination candidates, who increasingly participated in the huge production of so-called "vulgar writing" (*suwen xue* 俗文學) during the Ming–Qing transition. The explosion of popular literature led to the huge extension of the regional popular printing industry under the Qing dynasty, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[4]

The Song and 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 po-

3 De Bary and Chaffee 1989; Elman 1991.

4 Roddy 1998, 85–108; Brokaw 2007, passim.

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etry and literary flair among literati groups, which decisively demonstrates the cultural limits of the classical curriculum in influencing intellectual life.[5]

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 from local counties to the capital 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.[6] 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. The wider scope of policy questions on the civil examinations administered during the early fifteenth century often reflected the dynasty's and public's interest in astrology, calendrical precision, mathematical harmonics, and natural anomalies. The "first" Western learning that entered Ming China via the Jesuits after 1600 enhanced the focus on these technical fields of natural studies.[7]

These occupational alternatives remained available when the odds of success for the many on the Ming examinations became prohibitive after 1500. The number who failed in Ming provincial examinations empire-wide, for example, rose from 850 per examination in 1441, to 3,200 in 1495, and then to 4,200 in 1573, a fourfold increase in 132 years. The levels of competition in provincial civil examinations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries increased so much that a late Ming popular song in the Yangzi delta declared that in Nanjing provincial examinations "gold went to the provincial graduate (*juren*), and [only] silver to the palace graduate (*jinshi*)," because the competition was much keener in the provinces. By 1630, about 49,200 candidates empire-wide, 45 percent less than in the "High Qing," triennially competed for 1,278 provincial degrees. Only 2.6 percent would succeed. Residualism, that is, repeated failures, became an even more typical feature of "examination life" during the Qing.[8]

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 was always tempered by the numerous local traditions of

5 Zi 1894. See also Yu 1997; Elman and Woodside 1994. Cf. Woodside 2006.

6 Tillman 1992.

7 Elman 2005, chaps. 2 and 6.

8 Elman 2013, 95–125.

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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, rustic and colloquial phrases, and the stylistic anarchy of popular novels. Subsequently, famous writers who failed the examinations, such as Pu Songling (1640–1715) and Wu Jingzi (1701–1754), in their more popular vernacular and literary writings mocked the examiners and scholars for such pretensions.

By the mid-sixteenth century, knowledge of numbers in tax-related economic transactions, debates about "hot" and "cold" medical therapies to deal with smallpox and measles epidemics, and discussion of reforms of the official calendar were also common among those who turned to medicine for careers. Li Shizhen's (1518–1593) biographers have noted that the pharmacologist-physician had at the age of fourteen *sui* (Chinese added one year to a newborn's age after the first new year's day that occurred after the birth) passed the preliminary county civil examinations held in his home province of Hubei. Assuming approximately 1,000 candidates per county for local qualifying examinations, Li was one of some 1.2 million local candidates. After he failed three times in the provincial examinations, like 95 percent of the candidates empire-wide, Li never advanced further. Because he came from a family whose patriarchs had been medical practitioners and had studied pharmacognosy for several generations, Li Shizhen turned to medicine for a livelihood.[9]

The Ming scholar-merchant and Hangzhou bookseller Hu Wenhuan (fl. ca. 1596) had a typical career. Hu was a Nanjing imperial school student who purchased his licentiate status to enable him to compete in local qualifying examinations. Like many others, Hu attained a high level of classical literacy and literary ability, but he never received a higher provincial or metropolitan degree. By the late Ming, of the fifty thousand candidates empire-wide competing triennially for some 1,200 provincial degrees, fewer than 3 percent would succeed. The rolls of local official schools increasingly were filled with candidates who had repeatedly failed higher examinations and had nowhere else to go.[10]

As the southern capital of the Ming, Nanjing was an important publishing center, along with Hangzhou and Suzhou. Hu Wenhuan relied on the Nanjing book market for selling many of his editions, although they were mainly published in Hangzhou. The financial benefits from his printing enterprise, based on selling many different series of his printed works or individual volumes, enabled Hu to maintain the lifestyle of a literati scholar with wide cultural

9 Elman 2005, 29–34.

10 Elman 2005, 35–37.

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interests even though he had failed to gain an official appointment. Hu finally received an appointment in 1613 and served as a low-level county official in Hunan Province, first as a magistrate's aide and then as an administrative clerk. While Hu was away, his publishing enterprise diminished.[11]

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 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. 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.[12]

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 approved 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 throughout the empire. During 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.[13]

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 a classical education to prepare for civil and military service. 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, however, 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 and academies for commoners on a wider scale than ever before. On the other hand, the

11 Elman 2005, 35–37.
12 Lach 1965; Elman 2005.
13 Cf. Ozment 1980, 202; Elman 2001, 140–169.

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line between elites and commoners could 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.[14]

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. There were no "public" schools, and a classical education began in private lineage schools, charity and temple schools, or at home, not in the official county, township, provincial, or capital schools that licentiates tested into after they had been classically trained. 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 to practice their trades in counties, townships, or prefectures.

Early Modern China in Motion

Chinese were on the move between 1400 and 1900. They regularly traveled along the myriad imperial waterways and roads, moving from villages to county, township, prefectural, and provincial centers and the capital to take civil service examinations. During the predominantly Han Chinese Ming dynasty, China was internally the most mobile empire in the early modern world. China was already a massive society of at least 150 million by 1500, and 10 percent of them gathered biennially in one of 1,350 Ming counties for the privilege of being locked up inside testing grounds to take civil examinations. Those who passed, some seventy-five thousand, registered in one of twelve provincial capitals and two capital regions (Beijing and Nanjing) to take the heavily policed triennial provincial examinations. The six thousand who survived that cut then traveled to the capital in Beijing for the metropolitan and palace examinations, which were administered every three years, and the right to become *jinshi* (palace graduates entering officialdom).

Under the multiethnic Qing Empire, the number of Chinese moving through these regional and hierarchical gates had, by 1850, tripled to 4.5 million at the local level. From these millions, 150 thousand survived to take one of the by

14 Kuhn 1990; Rowe 2001.

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now seventeen provincial examinations or the one capital-region (Beijing) examination. Civil examinations in late imperial China thus marked one of the most traveled—and policed—intersections between politics, society, economy, and Chinese intellectual life. Study of the classical language and statecraft motivated millions of Chinese to try to enter officialdom, serving far from home and family. Only 5 percent would see their hopes realized during the Ming, even less for the Qing, however (see the table below). Success was at a premium. A more important part of the story of civil examinations concerns the 95 percent 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 the millions who failed. Along with the thousands of classically literate officials, the orthodox knowledge system produced millions of classical literates who, after repeated failures at the examinations, became doctors, Buddhist or Daoist priests, pettifoggers, teachers, notaries, merchants, and lineage managers, not to mention astronomers, mathematicians, printers, and publishers (Table 1).

In the early Qing, it became considerably more difficult than in Ming times for scholars in the Lower Yangzi region to obtain higher degrees, because of restricted regional quotas designed to control the phenomenal success of southern literati on the examinations. Without a degree, advancement in the official hierarchy was generally precluded. As the population rapidly expanded, quotas for officials did not keep pace. The total number of licentiates remained at roughly half a million in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, a substantial number of official positions were taken by Manchus and descendants of Chinese bannermen who had served the Manchus before 1644. While the number of gentry was expanding, not enough new positions in the bureaucracy were created to accommodate the surplus of qualified candidates. An official career was effectively ruled out for most of those who succeeded in the examinations.[15]

Literati who passed the lower examinations were forced into a host of new occupations. Scholars began to seek employment as secretaries to officials, tutors in wealthy families, academy teachers, and the like in order to make a living. By the early nineteenth century, local gentry had moved into other fields as well. These included mediation of legal disputes, supervision of waterworks, recruiting and training local militia, printing classical and vernacular literature, and collection and remittance of local taxes to yamen clerks. Although the scarcity of imperial bureaucratic positions explains the pressure to choose other careers, it does not account for the internal factors that drove seven-

15 Elman 2001, 124–175.

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TABLE 1 *Ming and Qing Ratios of Civil Examination Graduates to Candidates in Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Beijing*

Nanjing

Year	Candidates	Graduates	Percent
1393	800	88	11.0
1453	1,900	205	10.8
1492	2,300	133	5.9
1549	4,500	135	3.0
1630	7,500	130	2.0
1684	10,000	73	0.7
1747	9,800	114	1.2
1864	16,000	114	0.7

Hangzhou

Year	Candidates	Graduates	Percent
1468	1,800	90	5.0
1528	2,800	90	3.2
1582	2,700	90	3.3
1607	3,800	90	2.4
1863	10,000	94	0.9
1870	11,000	112	1.0

Beijing (at Shuntian)

Year	Candidates	Graduates	Percent
1531	1,900	135	7.1
1558	3,500	135	3.9
1609	4,600	140	3.0
1654	6,000	276	4.6
1660	4,000	105	2.6
1748	10,000	229	2.3
1874	13,000	229	1.8

Note: See Elman 2000, 661–665 (for the sources), 666–668 (for career patterns).

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teenth-century literati toward these particular occupations. Teaching in particular became a welcome alternative career.[16]

We have numerous examples of scholars who during the eighteenth century spent major portions of their lives, despite even high degree status, teaching in official academies, in lower level philanthropic charity schools, and in private schools in the educational hierarchy. During the eighteenth century, teaching was a source of both income and prestige, and it allowed time for research and writing. Chungli Chang has indicated that the upper gentry (all gentry above licentiates and holders of purchased degrees) monopolized teaching positions in official and private academies. Through most of the nineteenth century, according to Chang, "a sizable proportion of gentry were deriving an income from their work in the teaching profession." What Chang is describing is the continuation of an earlier phenomenon. In Chang's calculations, about one third of the gentry whose biographies contain relevant data were teachers. Although Chang's sources are somewhat biased, his count has value as an indication of the changing activities of the upper gentry.[17]

Unfortunately, the general tendency to focus on social mobility since the Song dynasty by researching the social status of graduates of the civil examinations has meant that scholars have misunderstood how the monopolization of "cultural resources" by literati and merchant elites actually worked. The process was premised on a system of inclusion and exclusion based on tests of classical literacy that restricted the access of those partially or classically illiterate. For those whose levels of literacy were too vernacular to master the classical frames of language and writing required in the local licensing examinations, the civil examinations concealed the process of social selection that resulted. By requiring mastery of nonvernacular classical texts, imperial examinations created a written barrier between those allowed into the empire's examination compounds and those who were classically illiterate and kept out.

When we consider that thousands of examination candidates congregated biennially in counties, townships, and prefectures, and triennially in provincial and imperial capitals, we realize that such goings-on took on local significance simultaneously as social, economic, cultural, and political events. Brushes and ink stones served as required cultural paraphernalia at home, while books of examination essays, good-luck charms from temples, soothsayers with otherworldly powers of intercession, parades of examiners, and policing checkpoints for candidates were all part of the market-fair atmosphere that

16 Elman 2001, 167–175.

17 Chang 1955, 217; 1962, 92–93.

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accompanied the examinations. Because it was virtually compulsory to participate in the civil examinations to remain a member of the local elite, the examination hall was a way station to success for a small minority of graduates. The circulation of elites began via periodic examination tournaments, when candidates marched into and out of the prison-like examination compounds for each session of testing. Candidates were locked inside examination cells for several days biennially or triennially until they were well into their thirties or forties.

Particularly in the provincial examinations of the south, where five to ten thousand and, by the nineteenth century, over fifteen thousand candidates would gather every three years in the local capitals of Nanking or Hangzhou, with the likelihood that only one in a hundred would pass, the intersections of commerce, political status, and social prestige yielded an atmosphere of expectation and dread matched only by crowds at famous temples and shrines. Examination protests and riots were not uncommon when candidates were given their only legal opportunity by the government to gather in large groups. Fires, heavy rains, and corruption were periodic additions to the already terrible pressure on candidates, who ranged typically from under twenty to over sixty years of age.

Not trusted by the dynasty, which created and maintained the architecture of surveillance that housed many guards alongside the candidates and their examiners in each compound, the candidates themselves were a hodgepodge of high and low, young sons of the famous and old men on their last try, savvy urban southerners and country bumpkins from northern small towns and villages. What they shared was years of classical study to compete for only a few places in officialdom. Success was alluring; failure was humiliating. Cheating became a cottage industry. "Male anxiety" manifested itself in the candidates' dreams, visions, and mental breakdowns and was a by-product of this unrelenting cycle of tests and competitions. The testing was so much a part of Chinese society after centuries of implementation that the bureaucracy and the rest of society—elites and commoners—viewed the entire spectacle as a "natural" state of affairs whose inequities were refracted through the lens of fate as much as corruption. One could finish first in the difficult southern provincial examinations and plummet to the bottom in less competitive metropolitan examinations in Beijing. Most failed several times at each level before achieving success.

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

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magnitude for the selection of officials and the production of classically literate failures. Both local elites and the imperial court continually called for adjustments in the classical curriculum and improvements in 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 elite culture.

In the realm of culture a broader secret lay hidden. 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 (about fifty thousand during the Ming and Qing dynasties) but also millions of failures, the "lesser lights" in the classically educated strata of the society. The emperors and their courts worried that, instead of finding suitable social niches for their lives, which a classical education both enabled and encouraged, those who failed their examinations would become rebels and outlaws and challenge the legitimacy of their rulers. Emperors also worried when the numbers of old men taking local examinations went up precipitously. Was it really an honor for a grandfather or a father, who had failed for decades, to accompany his grandson or son into the local examination hall to take the same licensing examination?

Meritocracy and Examinations

After the mid-seventeenth-century fall of the Ming to Manchu armies, civil service examinations were continued 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. The much less policed medieval era examinations were held only in the capital, while from the years 1000 to 1360 examinations, when held, took place in both 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 that was undergoing demographic change. Qing emperors put in place an empire-wide examination system of Ming origins 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

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classical education based on nontechnical 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 were for selection of elites to serve 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 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 that extended down to the county level. Several centuries before Europe, the Chinese imperial state committed itself financially to supporting 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, and they became "testing centers" for students preparing for the 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 and were not required to attend college before entering medical school! The dynastic schools also served as "holding stations" for those who had not passed the highest examinations.

Training in vernacular and classical literacy was left to the private domain. Dynastic schools in China never entertained the goal of mass education. A classical education became the sine qua non for social and political prestige in imperial and local affairs. Emperors recognized that 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.[18]

The autonomy of education from political and social control occasionally became a bone of contention in the Ming and Qing Empires, testing the limits of imperial power. 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 to the relative autonomy of education in private academies as an antidote to the warping of classical educational goals by the cutthroat examination process. Such private academies frequently became centers for dissenting political views, but they often paid a political price for such activism (e.g., the Donglin Academy during the late

18 Ho 1964.

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Ming dynasty). Such academies also served as important educational venues for literati who preferred teaching and lecturing to instructing students on how to pass the civil examinations. There were about five hundred private academies during the Song dynasty and about four hundred during the Yuan. By the end of the Ming dynasty, there were from one to two thousand such academies. The Qing had more than four thousand, a small number considering that the population had reached 300–350 million by 1800, but in aggregate an influential force.[19]

Literacy and Social Dimensions

There were at least 5 million classically educated male literati in early Qing times in a population of 150 million, and perhaps by 1750 as many as 15 million in a population of 300 million. Such rates were lower during Ming times, when there were fewer private schools.[20] The Ming and Qing civil service 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.[21] The failures 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 that candidates visited, the dreams that they or members of their families had, and the magical events in their early lives that were premonitions of their later success.

Both elites and the "lesser lights" 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. Family members shared in the experience and offered 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.[22]

The civil service competition created a dynastic curriculum that consolidated gentry, military, and merchant families into a culturally defined status

19 Bai 1995.

20 Johnson 1985, 59.

21 Elman 1990. Cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977.

22 Elman 2000, 299–326.

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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 eight-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 literati, 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.

To institutionalize this high-minded moral regime, the bureaucracy made a substantial financial commitment in aggregate 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 eight-legged essay, were very haphazard. While acknowledging the educational impact of the curriculum in force, we must guard against overinterpreting 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 were key features of the civil examination system throughout the empire. Scrutiny of the continuities and changes in linguistic structures and syllogistic chains of moral argument in the examination system reveals 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.[23]

Fields of Classical Learning

Literati fields of learning such as natural studies and history were also represented in late imperial civil examinations. For political reasons the court

23 Johnson 1985. Cf. Kermode 1979.

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widened or limited the scope of policy questions on examinations, and the assigned examiners, whose classical knowledge echoed the intellectual trends of their time, also influenced what was included. In the mid-eighteenth century, new guidelines were applied to the civil examination curriculum. As a result, the Song rejection of medieval belles lettres in civil examinations was reversed. 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 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 1787, the Qing dynasty initiated "ancient learning" curricular reforms to make the examinations more difficult for the increasing numbers of candidates by requiring knowledge of all Five Classics. The formalistic requirements of the poetry question gave examiners an additional tool, along with the eight-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 assessment of the system from within to suit the times.[24]

Economic and Cultural Reproduction

Well-organized local lineages translated their 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 led 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" and "did the numbers," economic resources translated into cultural resources for classical learning.[25]

Nouveau riche families maintained their high local status through the lineage schools, medical traditions, and merchant academies that they funded. Elite education stressed classical erudition, historical knowledge, medical

24 Elman 2000, chaps. 9–10.

25 Elman 1990.

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expertise, literary style, and poetry. 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.

Because the 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—that is, 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 marked 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," were the dynasty's goals 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, such as novellas (pornography included) and medical tracts.[26] They also compiled genealogies, prepared deeds, provided medical expertise, and wrote contracts for adoptions and mortgages. Merchants in late imperial China also became known as cultured patrons of scholarship and publishing. A merging of literati and merchant social strategies and interests ensued, especially in print culture. Classical scholarship flourished due to merchant patronage; books were printed and collected in larger numbers than ever before.[27]

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, millions of men (women were excluded), including elites and commoners at all levels of society, voluntarily entered

26 Shang 2003.

27 Elman 2001.

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such "prisons." 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 when the new teachings of Wang Yangming in the sixteenth century and the rise of evidential learning in the eighteenth gainsaid the Song-Ming consensus. 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.[28]

Social Reproduction

Education was also 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" (i.e., those engaged in "unclean" occupations) to all Daoist and Buddhist clergy, however, kept many others out of the civil service competition, not to mention the 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 who were already literate in classical Chinese, the initial stages of training and preparing a son for the civil service were the private responsibility of "commoner" families seeking to attain or simply 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 among alternative careers, such as teaching, medicine, or pettifoggery.

Once legally enfranchised to compete, merchant families saw in the civil service the route to greater wealth and orthodox success and power. Unlike in 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. But because of the literary re-

28 Elman 2000, chap. 7.

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quirements, 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. The 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 up to 1756. Clear boundaries were also erected to demarcate male education from female upbringing, which remained intact until the seventeenth century, when the education of women in elite families became more common. Unlike the fatalistic ideologies common among Buddhist and Hindu peasants in South and Southeast Asia, for example, the Chinese ideology of teaching and learning cultivated belief in the usefulness of education and created a climate of rising expectations—although those who dreamed of glory at times rebelled when their hopes were dashed. Moreover, given the level of examination failures, there was no shortage of schoolteachers.[29]

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 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 nonofficial purposes. There was only very limited social mobility through the examinations themselves (i.e., the opportunity for members of the lower classes to rise in the social hierarchy). Moreover, the archives indicate that peasants, traders, and artisans, who made up 90 percent of the population, were not among the highest graduates. Nor were they a significant part of about 1.4 (late Ming) to 2.6 (mid-Qing) million local candidates who failed at lower levels every two years.

Occupational fluidity among merchants, military families, and gentry, however, translated into a substantial "circulation" of lower and upper elites outside the examination market. Overall, licentiates were not peasants, traders, artisans, clergy, or women. They were gentry, merchants (who were all classified as "commoners" by the bureaucracy), 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.

29 Dardess 1991; Ko 1994; Gardner 1989.

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Political Reproduction

The Ming dynasty saw education as one of several tools in its repertoire to maintain public order and political efficacy. Imperial support of education and examinations was contingent on the examination process supplying talented and loyal officials, some twenty to twenty-five thousand 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 civic values. Political legitimacy was a worthy by-product of preparation for the civil and military service. Outside the realm of gentry-elites and the examinations, however, a different form of social and political reproduction operated: 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 local political sinecures to their sons or close relations.[30]

Over the long term, the Ming and Qing civil service system built on and elaborated earlier Tang and Song civil examination models. Through the unprecedented impact of commercialization and demographic growth, however, the reach of the imperial state expanded from metropolitan and provincial capitals to all 1,350 counties. The upsurge in the number of lower-level candidates, however, was inversely proportional to the dominant power of palace graduate degree-holders in high office starting in the late sixteenth century—so much so that once-powerful provincial graduates were downclassed. Officialdom increasingly was the prerogative of a very slim minority.

A by-product of the examinations 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 that were read widely in the late Ming. The classical texts and primers tailored toward those preparing for the civil examinations were a major part of the book market since the Song dynasty.[31] 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 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. In a tightly woven ideological canvas of loyalties,

30 Zi 1894; Miyazaki 1981. Cf. Foucault 1977, 170–228.

31 Brokaw and Chow 2005.

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even emperors became educated in the orthodox rationale for their imperial legitimacy by special tutors selected by the civil service examinations! Moreover, novelists who failed examinations usually interwove in their story lines the tried and true sub-plot of the "talented son and beautiful maiden" (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人). Unlike Europe, the classically literate young scholar in Ming-Qing China always got the girl, usually after passing the highest examinations.

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