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## **Contracts, Consent, And Fate: Framing The Chinese Civil Service Examinations As Mechanisms Of Social Conditioning And Political Domination**

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CONTRACTS, CONSENT, AND FATE: FRAMING THE CHINESE CIVIL SERVICE  
EXAMINATIONS AS MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CONDITIONING AND  
POLITICAL DOMINATION.

by

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A THESIS

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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2011

# CONTRACTS, CONSENT, AND FATE: FRAMING THE CHINESE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS AS MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CONDITIONING AND POLITICAL DOMINATION.

FORREST CALE MCSWEENEY

HISTORY

ABSTRACT

Though the form of civil service examinations in pre-modern Imperial China was dynamic, their function was comparatively static. In every era, they were principally an institution designed to either assist or outright effect the creation of an economy of social hierarchy designed to ensure social and economic domination. This function changed only with respect to what kind of hierarchy was to be created: either aristocratic, gentry, or just as often ethnic. The exams' evolution culminated in an era of understood autocracy after the Song characterized by the state's structure as one ultimately tailored to enable the despotic rule of one man, though only incidentally this was not always the result. The practice of state myth-creation also served not only to validate the infinite power of the superstructure to socially and economically enable all persons regardless of background, but also to legitimize the divinity of the system and elevate it above suspicion and criticism. Ultimately, the examinations produced a system characterized by a high degree of contextualized meritocracy. That is, a meritocracy of conformity to hierarchy. Scholars can legitimately isolate the security this system provided Imperial elites in late Imperial China as a reason for China's inability to industrialize after 1850, when other countries, namely Japan, successfully used the sheer force of governance to make up for lost time in the race for technological and institutional development.

Keywords: China, Examinations, Civil Service, Confucianism

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A historically unknown author once said, “When the right men are available, government flourishes. When the right men are not available, government declines.”<sup>1</sup> These words come from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, a section from the *Classic of Rites*. No one passage from the colossal tradition of Chinese philosophy has been more relevant to the progress of Chinese institutions for nearly two and a half millennia. Fittingly, in the tradition of William Theodore De Bary’s pathfinding interpretation of Chinese history, the Chinese state and its institutions necessary progress through a series of philosophical influences. Indeed, China as a political entity is almost irreducibly defined by its ideas. This interpretation has provided scholars of China and East Asia a method by which to effectively describe power dynamics as a competition of those ideas. This is useful to an extent, but only in so far as scholars describe Chinese people themselves as the origin of the frameworks by which ideas emerge. This applies to the civil service examinations, which themselves often receive a distinct Confucian identity.

Instead of seeing the examinations as a result of ideology, this paper will present them as a result of Chinese Imperial, gentry, and scholarly elites attempting to reconcile and fulfill historically grounded political, social, and economic needs. Scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Menzel. *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), Introduction, vii. This is not to be confused with the similar quote by Machiavelli from *The Prince* Chapter 22, “The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.”

prodigiously analyzed the political and economic. Thus, generally narratives of China focus on the examinations' role as means of finding talented and literate individuals to run state administration. Throughout immense portions of Chinese history, though, those needs were also social, and rarely do scholars attribute the actions of the Chinese state and the examination system, indeed their ultimate purposes, to a need to effect ethnic inequality and domination.

Usually the narrative focuses on the role of Han Chinese gentry. In so doing, scholars have, without explicitly stating it, to a degree successfully portrayed the Imperial Chinese state as a colossal mechanism for creating and sustaining hierarchy in elite and wider society among Han Chinese. The exams, though, do not feature in the typical narrative as a functional device in multiple Chinese Dynasties by which to serve a conspiracy to construct ethnic hierarchy. Even independent of the ethnic question, scholars typically do not present the examinations as part of that complex structure designed to manufacture consent to a system that elevated the throne and the gentry. Usually scholars speak solely of the direct relationship between the throne and the examinees, and this is incomplete. This paper will instead portray the examinations as at first evolving from a marginal role into the principle mechanism of the Chinese state that fixed the throne atop an economy of domination (usually ethnically defined) that changed in form periodically.

This economy was characterized by a combination of common factors that served to create a common mode of government after the Song Dynasty until the end of the Imperial era. These included the illusion of strict meritocracy, inter-class struggle and domination to distract peoples from a will to resist, and state myth-creation. Scholars

have long since identified this common mode of government in place from the Song Dynasty to the Qing. However, they have usually treated power dynamics with a degree of extremism. Karl Wittfogel's hydraulic despotic model and Iona Cheong's reciprocal dynamicism present absolute power centralization in late Imperial China as far too predictable or far too unpredictable. A synthesis of both to create a model of understood autocracy is in order to project a descriptive model of power-holding in Late Imperial government.

*Weaving Narratives: Traditional and Modern Narratives of Chinese History and Ideas*

So complex are the institutions in question that any explanation capable of providing clarity must be told in the context of their development. The famous Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220A.D.) historian Sima Qian lived from roughly 145 to 86 B.C. He stands alone as China's preeminent historical scholar for his recounting of the beginning of Chinese civilization, an era of myth and demigods, to the time of China's first expansionist emperor. In between, the Grand Historian provides what is today the earliest account of the story of Confucius, China's most influential philosopher. From these records of Sima Qian, supplemented with previous records and with 20<sup>th</sup> century archeological evidence, historians have constructed a narrative that to this day continues to dominate perceptions of the course of Chinese history and institutions. To tell this narrative is to weave in and out of the comfort zone of concrete historical authenticity, lending credibility to plausible yet still highly unverified claims. However, in framing a discussion on the social function of the civil service examinations, it is best to begin on a path well-trodden.



The boldest and most unqualified statement concerning the origin of Chinese civilization comes from a tortuous skeleton of myths and stories, usually involving the presence of imperial demigods who founded the Chinese people and their traditions.<sup>2</sup> After juxtaposing the claims of written records with archeological findings, historians can identify from 2,200 B.C. to around 1050 B.C. as many as three distinct partially politicized cultural entities (known as Xia, Shang and Zhou) who dominated the Yellow River Valley region in modern day northern China. Each overlapped to an extent both chronologically and geographically. Starting around 1050 B.C.E., the one now known as *zhou* 周 assumed complete dominance and maintained at least nominal authority for a period longer than any succeeding political structure in Chinese history. This “dynasty,” featured social structures akin to feudalism characterized by a relatively low degree of power centralization. Eventually the entire framework descended into all out civil war by 475 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

History gradually becomes less obscure as time passes due to the increasing prevalence of primary sources and archeological evidence. After the civil war that broke apart the Zhou Dynasty began in 475 B.C., its central ruling house, already limited in strength, grew so progressively weak that it soon possessed no *defacto* authority. In 256 B.C. the last Zhou king died, and none of his sons attempted to assert claim to a

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2001), Ch. 3 for an analysis of the Classic of History, one of the *Five Classics* and collections of myths tracing the origin of the early Chinese kingdoms.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Chinese ancient history, consult John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006), Chapter 1

powerless throne. The Zhou Dynasty by all interpretations as a political agent was gone.<sup>4</sup>

In 221 B.C a single man, Qin Shi Huang Di, unified vast swaths of modern day China-proper, including all of the north. This conqueror was unlike any previous. He dared call himself *huangdi*, “the first emperor,” marking himself as the very beginning of a new history. He was a micromanager, armed with a very specific vision of society. Like himself, he made his Qin Dynasty unlike any before. Aggressively expansionist and highly bureaucratized, the new order centralized all authority onto a single autocrat who ruled with the long arm of law and administration. Through military force and many times outright terror this first emperor of China physically and culturally remolded the once competing fiefdoms into a solid, singular polity whose very identity rested upon an ideal of concrete unity. The contemporary linguistic diversity and regional variation of the modern People’s Republic of China reveals his success certainly had its limits. Nevertheless, The Qin Dynasty marked this huge area as a singularly defined prize that could, indeed should, be ruled by one man.<sup>5</sup>

The Qin Dynasty lasted as long as its first Emperor, but its legacy remains. It laid the framework for all succeeding dynasties, which themselves could be ruled by Chinese or not, that sought to reclaim this realm—and they did. From 206 B.C. to 1911 A.D. the Han, the Sui, the Tang, the Song, the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing Dynasties all forcibly unified both the territory of the Qin and those beyond it, or as the Grand Historian himself said, “Now the house of Han has arisen and all the world is now united under one

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Dawson, *Sima Qian, The First Emperor: Selections from the Historical Records* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxviii

<sup>5</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 54-57

rule.”<sup>6</sup> The hubris of the Han State projects itself through the mouth of its famous historian. Indeed, more than simply all Chinese, the whole *world* was now one. A common Chinese identity ponderously developed around both this worldview and the common written language first sanctioned by the *huangdi*.<sup>7</sup> Looking back, the progress of Chinese history even appears cyclical for this very reason. One dynasty rises, creates a complex state apparatus, and falls to give way to another.

The emperors of China saw their office as a sacred one connected to the substantial harmony of the Universe, where they were bound to a claim to provide civil service.<sup>8</sup> To administer these states, in which government administrations levied taxes, constructed public works, drafted legislation, held court, raised militaries, conducted ceremonies to appease divine powers, and even sponsored public education, the right men were needed. Massive nation-wide examination systems eventually determined their selection. Before analyzing this history, though, we must address the most important question concerning China’s preoccupation with determining the ranks of the political structure: what exactly should these exams test? This is a question of state orthodoxy, and as early as the first successor to the Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty, Chinese elites found their answer to this question within the teachings of a man they believed died in 479 B.C.

Here is where the story of Confucius begins and Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* comes into some of its fullest influence. In D.C. Lau’s words

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<sup>6</sup> *Autobiography of Sima Qian* quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 370

<sup>7</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 56

<sup>8</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 237

concerning the origin of Confucius, “the facts are few.”<sup>9</sup> Drifting from the highly probable to the somewhat plausible, scholars have found themselves telling a tale largely constructed in the Han Dynasty. In 551 or 552 B.C. in what is now known as the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history, a man one of whose many names is Kongzi 孔子 was born. From 497 to 479 B.C., the date of his death, the man is said to have been a sporadic civil servant and prolific teacher of his system of ethics as he wandered between fiefdoms. Along the way his disciples took charge of recording his words. His teachings influenced many and started a movement. However he and his immediate students died before seeing their worldview take over to the extent it would in later dynasties. Along with teaching, this man also compiled a massive collection of preexisting rituals, histories, songs, parables, and divinations into the *Five Classics*, five books when that, when taken together, are the most influential of all Chinese texts for their domination of philosophical discourse in Chinese literature and political institutions until arguably past the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Scholars have not fully verified the historical accuracy of many of these claims. Jesuits in the 17<sup>th</sup> century not only invented the name “Confucius,” but also derived it from the least used of his many names.<sup>10</sup> There is also no evidence that a single person compiled the *Five Classics*.<sup>11</sup> Using these common assumptions as a starting point for historical analysis is extremely problematic, playing into the hands of interest groups relying on such notions as essential religion and absolute nationhood. The term “Confucian,” though, can still retain some efficacy.

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<sup>9</sup> D.C. Lau, *Confucius, The Analects* (London: Penguin Books. 1979), 9

<sup>10</sup> Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Chapters 1-3

<sup>11</sup> Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics*. p. 73, 121, 175, 202, 257

*The Primacy of Human Relationships: A Functional Definition of Confucianism*

Defining Confucianism to the extent that it principally describes historically observed people renders its definition to that of a code of ethics emerging from cloudy historical origins, quickly made metaphysical, that was eventually absorbed by extant political structures and institutionalized and systematized to serve those structures and the people involved in them in their historically grounded political and economic needs. Originally defined by a singular founder of historical speculation, this system was later expanded upon by a variety of influential thinkers who may or may not have been influential at the times of their writing who inevitably served its evolving institutionalization. Roughly speaking, Confucian thinkers were preoccupied with human relationships and their influence on the metaphysical connection between the material world and Heaven. First and foremost, they are obsessed with reviving the ethical and political status quo of the early Zhou Dynasty, which they liberally sanction as a golden age of Chinese society wherein conduct between political elites and overall metaphysical harmony reached a historic peak.

The nature of this historical ideal rests upon a foundation of rigid adherence to ritualized behavior, otherwise known as *li* 禮. This concept, also known as ‘the rites,’ is as much a higher principle as it is a specific reference. Broadly they describe the proper form of conduct an individual is expected to conform to within the framework of a hierarchical, feudalistic society. They also specifically reference a massive collection of highly detailed ceremonial practices for all manner of purposes, ranging from the veneration of ancestors to the appeasement of higher powers. Many of these rites are

listed in the *Classic of Rites*, one of the aforementioned *Five Classics* that over centuries the scholarly literati claimed as part of their tradition.

Confucianism as a philosophy assumes social rank and near-absolute authority of elites. In fact, Confucians often describe society as a gigantic family wherein proper social roles are defined by gender, the deference of women to men who serve as heads of families; by age, the deference of the young to the old; and by political position, the deference of all Chinese to their lords. The emperor retains ultimate loyalty and is subject only to Heaven which, as the Zhou Dynasty rulers claimed, bestowed its mandate upon the deserving.

In regards to maintaining this system, Confucius's own *Analects* say it best, "The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend."<sup>12</sup> Benevolent gentlemen can exude an almost ethereal influence upon the masses. Though Confucius, unlike Mencius and Xunzi, never distinctly said whether human nature was good or evil, he did allow that human beings naturally possess a desire to be led into virtue. These gentlemen, or sages to describe the greatest of them, emerge only from a intense study and ritual observance. Once there were enough who dotted the population of a kingdom, and perhaps a few of the rulers as well, society would automatically reconstitute itself into an ordered polity. In other words, this class of scholarly gentlemen would naturally lead the masses, naturally primed to follow, into an ordered society. Furthermore, Heaven would be less willing to punish humans by sending famine, floods, and disasters of many kinds, thus bestowing its mandate. Dozens of thinkers over the next 1,500 years following

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<sup>12</sup> From *The Analects* quoted in Phillip Ivanhoe and Bryan Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 37

Confucius's death would expand upon this framework, principally Mengzi and Zhu-Xi. The latter eventually justified this system of understanding by consolidating many commentators' works into an esoteric ontological discourse.<sup>13</sup>

*Products of Partition: Confucianism Constrained by Historical Needs.*

This paper presents Confucians as generally part of a class of literati who eventually became part of a larger gentry-class. They devoted themselves to studying and applying in society, depending on the time period, ideology emerging from texts such as *The Five Classics*, *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great Learning*, and a host of others from Neo-Confucian thinkers who bent themselves to redefining the school itself. If scholars extend the time in question to the moment Confucius supposedly began to teach to the end of China's imperial era in 1911, then one quickly finds that no two eras contain establishments in full agreement on which of these texts represent the ideas they most needed to transmit to society and government. At times these thinkers split to the point of ideological warfare over this issue. Nevertheless, scholars can successfully apply an objective moniker "Confucian" to historically rooted people in this time period because of the very real overlap in their thought processes, generally defined by the aforementioned description of the Confucian philosophy.

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<sup>13</sup> My description of the basic tenets of what has been labeled Confucianism comes from my own readings of Kongzi, Xunzi, Mengzi, and Zhu Xi, along with many other historical thinkers, buttressed with the commentaries of: Phillip Ivanhoe and Bryan Norden. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, D.C. Lau *Confucius, The Analects*. London: Penguin Books. 1979, Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2001), and William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*

Most importantly, though, Confucianism ceases presenting as much of a problem when scholars refuse to explain China's development as a result of the ideology and worldview derived by people from certain texts. Confucians certainly thought they could principally shape the world with their ideas. To an extent they did exactly this. Chinese people believed the emperor stayed Heaven's wrath on his annual trips to the Temple of Heaven as much because Confucians said they should as for any other reason. However, the Confucians found themselves in these positions of authority largely because militaristic men of swords thought they could be of use to them. Thus Confucians, exerting their own limited influence on institutions and people, were to a larger extent products of a system characterized by the historical struggle of elites for power over both the dispossessed and other elites.

In light of these observations, the Confucian scholarly literati, the examination system which eventually became their principle avenue to service in the imperial government, and their effects on larger society were first and foremost products of empowered elites seeking to establish sustainable modes of behavior between different classes of people. In other words, to establish social contracts to the ends of further partitioning and stratifying political and economic power. The nature and extent of that stratification and the success in attaining it depended on the historical conditions and elites in question.



## CHAPTER 2

### ECONOMY OF DOMINATION

Rather than immediately turning to the specific testing methodologies and formalities Chinese Imperial states employed, it is instead best to begin an understanding of the Chinese civil service examinations as functional mechanisms. Principally they served the interests of dynamic elites—Imperial, aristocratic, and later gentry. However, this understanding is impossible without placing the exams in relation to other institutions and even myths Chinese elites also utilized to achieve very simple state goals—to create and sustain hierarchy. As previously stated, this hierarchy was very often, as much as it was not, blatant ethnic hierarchy.

#### *The Dynastic Framework*

Presenting Chinese history as a series of centralized authorities separated by varying eras of chaos produces the illusion of the dynastic cycle. Though there actually is no hidden force, cultural or otherwise, propelling Chinese history along this path, the coincidence is nonetheless striking, partially because of what historians choose to identify as ‘China.’ If a scholar selectively omits from the narrative political structures and social groups occupying the particular territory under examination, he/she may then legitimize the primacy of the historical place of a selected people. Thus, the progression of dynasties from Xia to Qing becomes a story of legitimate authorities all originating from mystical origins who successfully demonstrate and maintain the Mandate of Heaven.

This “Zhou interpretation of history” was first established in this ancient era when the Mandate of Heaven became something to worry about.<sup>14</sup> This framework conveniently supports contemporary territorial claims of dominant social and political groups. Though the current government of China may have differing perspectives on the Mandate of Heaven as previous authorities, they are still subject to the perception of legitimacy coupled with it. The territories the People’s Republic of China currently strive to extend dominance over match very closely with that of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) with their claim having been justified by those of the Ming (1368-1644). The further this process unfolds one invariably arrives at the founding deities of the Chinese race who were most thoroughly chronicled in the Zhou Dynasty. Nevertheless, this dynastic understanding of Chinese history can still be useful to scholars due to each dynasty’s incalculable impact on the evolution of Chinese society. To not allow the succession of Dynasties to frame the narrative is to simply ignore the very central place of the state.

The civil service examinations were a part of larger struggles. They were more than anything instruments of the state, their examinees creatures of the very same. As the state changed hands so did the mechanism. As the hand changed the mechanism so did the people within it, and thus analysis of one cannot proceed independently of the other. The history of Chinese civil service examinations is tied to the history of the civil service itself. Imperial dynastic elites depended on them for the necessary services to administer an empire without equal in size and complexity for the vast majority of human history. Their relationship shifted between symbiotic and parasitic, the stakes being the largest empire of humanity. The examinations first and foremost were, for thousands of years,

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<sup>14</sup> Endymoin Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000.), 7

enablers of this shifting. Scholars should not consolidate these civil service exams into a monolithic entity with a 2,200-year history as many have done. Their structure, functions, and roles in the state were immensely dynamic, emerging from an almost obscure origin. However, what would become a truly colossal state examination system that ceased in the majority of its functional evolution by the 14<sup>th</sup> century can lay claim to an origin story that is indeed around two millennia old.

*Correlative Cosmology: A Justification for Power Distribution*

If one searches for the earliest evidence of examination systems determining appointments to civil bureaucracy in Chinese History, then it may lie within the massive volumes of the *Hanshu*, the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. The authors of this bold second century A.D. undertaking stated that:

Upon the founding of the Han Dynasty, *Hsiao Ho* set himself to draft the laws of the Empire. He also adopted the law that the imperial Commissioners should examine the young candidates and that only those who could recognize nine thousand characters might become civil officials.<sup>15</sup>

Franklin Houn may reach slightly in suggesting the phrase “also adopted the law” is evidence of the presence of pre-Han civil service examinations, though the Qin Dynasty’s complexity should never be underestimated. He does, however, successfully demonstrate the fluidity and ease by which Han Dynasty Imperial elites came to see them as a possible route of selection for their officials.

The process did not begin with examinations, though. As early as 178 B.C., and later in 165 and 135, the central government issued edicts calling for men of outstanding

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<sup>15</sup> From the *Hanshu* quoted in Franklin Houn, “The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty” *Tsing hua journal of Chinese Studies*., No. 1 (1956) 138-64; 149.

virtue to be presented to the throne.<sup>16</sup> It was a call for recommendations from local authorities. No scholar has successfully observed any apparent rules or systematic strictures to define this complex method of reproducing the bureaucracy. It is known however that it accounted for the majority of officials in the Han Dynasty if one considers the recommendations needed to access the even more complex academy system. The specific qualities demanded in an individual from any one call for recommendations, whether coming from the emperor himself for national-level officials or local authorities to fill their staffs, always varied, generally highlighting traits such as “Filially Pious, Incorruptible, Virtuous and Upright.”<sup>17</sup>

Many of these officials were tested, as can be seen by the above literacy requirement. Even this precedent, though, wavered in its enforcement, and no uniform curriculum ever defined the exams’ contents.<sup>18</sup> At times exams covered more specialized subjects for equally specialized officials. Given the reality that Han Dynasty rulers selected this recommendation method, they often requested help on a case-by-case basis. Naturally whatever subsequent examinations emerged from this process were biased towards a more situational context rather than a standardized one. However, local officials presented their recommended candidates to the capital based on their guarantee that the subject in question carried a perceived ability of statesmanship tempered by these often broadly defined character traits.

Defining these characteristics of virtue and statesmanship, and why they were

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” in *The Cambridge History of China: The Qin and Han Empires I*, Denis Twitchett, John King Fairbank, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 153

<sup>17</sup> Franklin Houn, “The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty,” 138-64, 140

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 149

defined that way in the Han Dynasty is key to understanding the power dynamics of the Han State, the historical development of the early Civil Service, and the social and political function of their examinations. These aspects cannot be explored without mentioning the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (195-105 B.C.), who was crucial in the rise of Confucianism as state ideology during the reign of Emperor Wu (141-87 BC.).

Dong envisioned a society reflected in *the Analects*, plucking the tallest leaves of grass for civil service from the great plain of Chinese society:

The marquises, governors of commanderies, and officials of two thousand piculs salary all select those of worth among the officials and common people and once a year send to the capital two men each who will be housed there and taken care of...In this way all will do their best in seeking out men of worth, and scholars of the empire can be obtained, given official posts, and used in government.<sup>19</sup>

These calls for scholars would also couple capital academies “for the upbringing of scholars,” wherein future officials would train for future posts.<sup>20</sup> The first that opened in 124 B.C. would later enroll thirty thousand students. To Dong, the responsibility of the ruler was tied to Heaven and Earth’s metaphysical structure wherein the relationship between the two manifested in the behaviors of the emperor and his ministers:

Heaven clings to the Way and acts as the master of all living things. The ruler maintains constant norms and acts as the master of a single state...Earth manifests its principles and acts as the mother of all living things. The minister manifests his duties and acts as the counselor of a single.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> from the *Hanshu* quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I.*, 312

<sup>20</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I.*, 312

<sup>21</sup> Dong Zhongshu, “The Conduct of Heaven and Earth” quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I.*, 296

From this correlative cosmology, where the actions of elites quite literally affected the physical harmony of being, the ruler owed a duty to Heaven and man to preserve order by means of just rule characterized by humaneness, patience, and a keen awareness to fulfill social justice. Most of all, the ruler was to promote a certain virtue of character most clearly defined in the *Classic of Rites*.<sup>22</sup> Dong's intent, though, served even broader purposes.

What Dong intended to accomplish in the establishment of academies, the sounding of the throne's call for scholars, the promotion of the *Five Classics*, and why it caught the attention of the Emperor Wu was not just based on a fear of Heavenly disorder. Dong was competing in an ideological battle with the Legalists, another branch of Chinese philosophy whose scholars still occupied a place within the royal court. In short, Legalism was the philosophy of the Qin Dynasty and its ruler Qin Shi Huang Di. In application it was less than kind to Confucians, or to anyone for that matter. The first emperor of China used this proto-Machiavellian doctrine, championed by Han-Feizi, stressing the usurpation of a naturally conniving population through force to exact harsh and often brutally violent treatment of the scholarly class and anyone broadly interpreted as a dissident.<sup>23</sup> Han Dynasty Confucians like Dong Zhongshu codified their ideology as one promoting a unique dissemination of power, where rulers were bound by divine contract to ensure the primacy of the place of the scholar minister.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dong Zhongshu, "The Responsibilities of Rulership" quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 298

<sup>23</sup> Burton Watson, *Basic Writings of Mozi, Xunzi, and Han Feizi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) See Han Feizi section

<sup>24</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 284

As an instrument of statecraft, Dong Zhongshu's cosmological Confucianism operated as a compromise with all future Chinese emperors. The wandering mass of Confucian scholars represented the largest, best trained, and best organized group of literate men in the empire. They possessed the necessary skills of rhetoric and record-keeping needed to administer the kind of bureaucratic machine the Han Dynasty was, and the Imperial super-elite came gradually to see them as an indispensable commodity. In the words of Theodore de Bary, "As a famous Confucian pointed out to the founder of the Han, though he might have won the empire on horseback, he assuredly could not rule it from horseback."<sup>25</sup> By the time of Emperor Wu's great great grandson, Emperor Yuan (r. 49-33 B.C.), the emperors of China had as a sign of their sanction begun to mold themselves in day-to-day activity as models of the Confucian paragon interpolated from the *Five Classics*.<sup>26</sup> Slowly but surely the Han state expelled Legalism as a ruling philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Dong's model of Confucianism provided for a system wherein political power could be divvied in a way that did not result in the violent and unsustainable micromanagement of the Qin Dynasty, yet still preserve the ultimate prestige and symbolic authority the Imperial family demanded. His cosmological expression was, among many things, an effort at survival.

In this way the examinations functioned as instances of reaffirmation of this social contract between elite and super elite. The highest priority placed on recommended individuals, when in the few times the state sought not to test very specific skills, was

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<sup>25</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 317

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 313-317

<sup>27</sup> Michael Loewe, "The Former Han Dynasty" in *The Cambridge History of China: The Qin and Han Empires I*, Denis Twitchett, John King Fairbank, 154

their capacity for the aforementioned ideals of conduct. The exams most often tested them on the very texts that scholars like Dong Zhongshu deemed were the proper archives of this behavior—*The Five Classics*.<sup>28</sup> The ritualized nature of the testing is also highly reflexive of Dong's specific interpretation of Confucian texts. Very often in the Han Dynasty, the emperor himself proctored the examinations given to his future officials, confirming the intimate connection between ruler and minister Dong's philosophy demanded of Imperial administration.

Furthermore, the timing of various calls for recommended officials often coincided with natural disasters and other phenomena. In 178 B.C. and 70 B.C., an eclipse and an earthquake, respectively, alarmed the Chinese population and convinced emperors in both times that more ministers were needed to remind the emperor of his duties.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, these instances reflect a certain fear of the unknown and awe of the perceived power of an omnipotent Heaven. At the same time, though, the call for recommendations at these times of uncertainty reinforced the bonds between power holders who were unwilling to test their dependency on power sustainers. The latter, however, were fully aware of their inability survive the wrath of the former should they not prove useful.

This process of reaffirmation established the crucial mutual dependency of both the scholarly bureaucracy and the ruling elite that would characterize to an extent every subsequent Dynasty. Examinations would continue to play an increasingly prominent role in the selection of the former by the latter in a process coined by Benjamin Elman as

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<sup>28</sup> Franklin Houn, "The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty," 149

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 139



cultural, social, and political reproduction, the ritualistic affirmation of the social contract of authority and dependency that sustained the state apparatus.<sup>30</sup>

*Prima inter Pares: The Throne as First Among Equals*

Even as the process of examinations and recommendations on paper served to affirm the relationship between ruler and minister, in the Han Dynasty it never achieved its theoretical ideal form. As stated, the system was as much parasitic as it was symbiotic. The rise of China's landed aristocracy in this era certainly ties in to this discussion. As enhanced social stratification characterized by increased land owning started to replace the previous more egalitarian clan-based village system in Han China, lower class commoners started to find themselves indebted to their newly entitled social betters.<sup>31</sup>

This new aristocracy prided itself on living a "gentlemanly" lifestyle characterized by familiar models of behavior,

In his youth [Mr. K'ung] studied the *Classic of ritual* [sic.] When he encountered a period of general hardship, in which people took to eating human flesh, he made a hut of dirt and thatch and wore himself out gathering wild vegetables to feed his parents. He was kind benevolent, straightforward, quiet, and faithful, all virtues which were part of his nature, not ones acquired by learning. [Later] he prospered a little and he called to mind his grandmother...He refashioned her coffin, built a temple and planted cypress trees around it...His youngest brother...was rich in virtue but poor in worldly goods. [Mr. K'ung] invited him to live with him for over forty years. Even when he had to borrow money himself, he was generous to his brother...His fame spread widely, the county asked him to

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Elman, "Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China" *The Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Feb., 1991), 7-28

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Ebrey, "The Economic and Social History of Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China: The Qin and Han Empires I*, Denis Twitchett, John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 643

be master of records (*chu'pu*), then to serve in the bureau of merit (*kung-ts'ao*)...<sup>32</sup>

Mr. Kung's educational background is of no coincidence, nor is the glorification of his specific character traits. This filial piety and knowledge of the classics marked not only one of the most crucial social expectations of the upper class in this period, but also virtues the Civil Service held in the highest demand during recommendation and examinations. As the co-dependant scholar-ruler system emerged in Han China, so did the landed aristocracy and the privileged families of the empire come to identify with these Classical ideals.

These families were not mere sheep of doctrine, though. Han Dynasty elites sought to project their influence onto the bureaucracy by filling its ranks with their own. Soon officials along the chain of command demanded payment for recommendation, examination, and office-holding.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, rampant nepotism marred the bureaucracy as the first century B.C. scholar Wang Chi complained:

Now, the officials may have their sons or brothers appointed to government posts by virtue of their own position, but men so appointed are in most instances contemptuous and ignorant. In terms of rendering useful service to the people, they are good for nothing. On the other hand, this practice has already caused the rise of aristocratic families. It will be therefore highly beneficial to the country, if officials are selected solely on the ground of their own ability and virtue and if the *jen-tzu* (patronage) system is abolished.<sup>34</sup>

This may be one of the earliest examples of Chinese intellectuals struggling with the

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<sup>32</sup> *Li-shih* 5, pp. 5a-7a quoted in Patricia Ebrey, "The Economic and Social History of Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China: The Qin and Han Empires I*. Denis Twitchett, John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 643

<sup>33</sup> Franklin Houn, "The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty," 151-160

<sup>34</sup> Pan Ku, *History of the Former Han Dynasty* quoted in Franklin Houn "The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty," 153

sobering realities of achieving the *Doctrine of the Mean*'s ideal of right man for the right job.

Thus, the examinations take on yet another role in the Han Dynasty. Certainly they were the crucial affirmation of the role between rulers and officials. However, as Wang Chi observed, they also inevitably functioned in several composite social, economic, and political roles. The new gentlemanly character traits glorified by this upper class unified the aristocracy in their sense of identity. The accumulated wealth and political power associated with dominating the bureaucracy also solidified their position of strength in Chinese society. In this way, early examinations not only helped in creating a new and powerful aristocratic class, but also sustained it and affirmed its powerful position, one that conceded to the emperor the *defacto* position of first among equals.<sup>35</sup>

#### *New Unity, New Precedents: Realization of Ethnic Hierarchy*

Reunification under the Sui Dynasty (581-618) after centuries of in-fighting immediately following the Han brought back the advancement of grand visions of Chinese society last seen under Qin Shi Huang Di, regardless of the monetary or humanitarian expense. In reconstituting the Han Dynasty's model of unity, the Sui emperors used the same philosophical basis but with a new ethnic twist.

Though Mark Elliot may reserve his best work for the much later Qing Dynasty, many of the issues he raises in his scholarship apply to the Sui, particularly in attempting to classify the Sui Dynasty as a foreign or Chinese political entity. The ruling house of

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<sup>35</sup> Patricia Ebrey, "The Economic and Social History of Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China: The Qin and Han Empires I*, Denis Twitchett, John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 637-643

the dynasty, founded by Emperor Wen, declared itself a Chinese polity. However the house in total was thoroughly intermarried with the families of Northwestern semi-nomads who in the era of disunity after the fall of the Han were among the most formidable of competitors for power. Eventually these non-Chinese aristocratic families, many of whom were Turkish, started to assume Chinese customs, but only to a limited extent. By the time of his conquest, Wen's own personal lineage and those of his entourage, his armies, his political advisors, and even his wife, were mostly non-Han Chinese or to some degree mixed, who all professed immediate cultural and ideological loyalty to Chinese customs and traditions.<sup>36</sup> However, their customs aligned only to a degree that would have made these horse-riding, largely Chinese-illiterate, and non-scholarly military men a simulacrum to virtually any Chinese living further towards the Yellow and Yangzi rivers.<sup>37</sup>

Emperor Wen simply could not afford to so easily dismiss both those who had such tremendous familial influence on his entire house as well as those who were militarily and administratively responsible for his rise. The northwest aristocratic families who had matrimonial ties to the emperor's house would inevitably demand and receive their elevated place within the Sui's administrative apparatus, along with those not necessarily related to the imperial line but sharing the same puzzling ethnic background. In this way Mark Eliot's model of understanding ethnic ascription applies, wherein "difference—in and of itself does not constitute ethnicity; rather, ethnicity is found in the

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<sup>36</sup> John Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 77

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Wright, "The Sui Dynasty" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 83

signification assigned to such difference.”<sup>38</sup> This denial of strict objective ethnicity, which will have even greater implications in analyzing the Qing Dynasty, shifts the historical importance of ‘essential’ cultural traits to the political and social implications of selecting which traits count for inclusion in the social group. The Sui Dynasty’s chief aim was to foster this perceived inclusion while simultaneously allowing their minority benefactors both privileged access to political power while limiting their conformity to majority cultural norms.

The emperor Wen and his extended benefactors prostrated themselves as far as they could to the Confucian scholarly ideal set in the Han under Dong Zhongshu’s correlative cosmological model of ruler/minister co-dependence. The potential stability this framework offered was certainly enticing, but the careful illusion it perpetuated was just as crucial. Here, the examinations come into the picture. Emperor Wen in 582 made the first of what would be very similar calls for recommendations the Han started.<sup>39</sup> As expected, examinations usually followed them. For the first time, these exams were often tied to degrees given titles that perpetuated until 1905, *ming ching* (Clarifying the Classics) and the more famous *jin shi* (presented scholar), for its ascension to preeminence in later Dynasties.<sup>40</sup> The Sui may have even been the first to appoint scholars to positions based on their results as opposed to using the exams merely as a ritualistic social-bonding formality.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Elliot, *The Manchu Way* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 17

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Wright, “The Sui Dynasty” in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I*, Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 86

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 85-86

The Imperial elite this time imposed upon every prefecture a quota to meet, ensuring that Han Chinese would fill the polity to at least a significant degree.<sup>42</sup> On the top, though, the Sui became a state totally ruled by those who called themselves Han Chinese, but, through observation they were strikingly different. Thus, the primary social and political role of the recommendation system in the Sui, and the exams which often followed that process, was to ultimately serve a non-Chinese minority's claim to privileged status by perpetuating a state-sponsored myth that the Dynasty legitimately represented Han Chinese through rulers and civil service bureaucrats who were themselves in totality Han Chinese. It was an exercise in social pacification through myth-creation. It would not be the last time myths would be used for purposes of manipulating human activity.

The Sui Dynasty ended in 618 before it could really begin, but as Arthur Wright suggests, "All later empires were indebted to its accomplishments."<sup>43</sup> The precedents it set, whether through physical investiture or institutional practice would further influence future dynasties every bit as much as the Han. Within the reigns of two emperors it folded under the weight of its over-ambition. Debt brought on by warfare and unrestrained public works construction undercut its popular legitimacy.<sup>44</sup> With no money and no support, the last Sui emperor was assassinated by his own rebelling general who, in turn, was eliminated by the rebelling aristocratic house of the future emperor Gaozu, the first emperor of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). One of the largest, most powerful, most stable, and economically dynamic nations of its time, the Tang represented prosperity and

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Wright, "The Sui Dynasty" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I*, Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 86

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 48

<sup>44</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*, 78

territorial expansion the likes of which had not been seen in Chinese history. However, many of the ethnic themes that pervaded Sui rule colored the reigns of the Tang's imperial house.

*The Foundations of Autocracy: Empress Wu Changes the State*

The Tang Dynasty founders literally walked right into the slot the Sui occupied, adopting its predecessors' basic central government scheme and absorbing vast bulks of the Sui's administrative and military personnel into the fold.<sup>45</sup> Emperor Gaozu and his Li family were themselves similar to the families of the Sui rulers, claiming an allegiance to Chinese cultural traditions, going as far to fabricate a distinctly Han-Chinese genealogy for himself (another example of myth creation), while clearly intimately connected to northwestern nomadic aristocratic clans through extensive intermarriage.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the bureaucracy the Tang structured, which initially was largely the same personnel who comprised the Sui, served many of the same purposes of their predecessors. Along with the all-important cosmological legitimacy, which founded a basis of co-dependency, Gaozu also unapologetically extended the ethnic nepotism that had been so rampant in the Sui.

In order to perpetuate the bureaucracy the Tang structured a far more systematic and standardized system than the seemingly arbitrary calls for recommendations seen so far. To gain access to the Civil Service, and the political power and economic security its

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<sup>45</sup> Howard Wechsler "The Founding of the Tang Dynasty: Kao-tsu (reign 618-26)" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 161, 169

<sup>46</sup> Howard Wechsler, "The Founding of the Tang Dynasty: Kao-tsu (reign 618-26)" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 151

highest ranks promised, one had to first become an official candidate for selection on a massive roll. Gaining entry to this roll was multifaceted, and most of the time involved subtle requirements of elite hereditary privilege. Once a position opened, candidates from the roll would be contacted and subject to selection examinations proctored by a committee from the upper bureaucracy.<sup>47</sup> For the most part, it was a system once again designed to serve the interests of the landed aristocracy who very often were non-Han Chinese.

However, one of the methods employed to access the candidacy roll involved standardized examinations wherein a candidate could obtain one of the specific degrees first created in the Sui. Once on the roll, the candidate would then need only to pass the selection examinations on an equal footing with his aristocratic peers.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the Tang continued the Sui's precedent of assigning degrees to its licentiates. Those in raw pursuit of these degrees started to account for more occupiers of the bureaucracy, though privilege and access through the high social channels was still *the* avenue to success.<sup>49</sup> However, political developments around the throne led to a monumental shakeup between the state and the aristocracy. This in turn would dramatically alter the role of the examinations from largely a peripheral pawn of competing aristocratic and imperial elites, into a bloated institution of outright aggressive social and political domination.

The most powerful and influential woman in Chinese history was the Empress Wu (624-705) of the Tang Dynasty. She started as a gift from an influential aristocratic

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<sup>47</sup> Denis Twitchett, *The Birth of the Chinese Meritocracy: Bureaucrats and Examinations in Tang China*, The substance of a lecture delivered to the China Society in London on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1974. Printed Bendles (Torquay) Ltd. 15/16 George Street, Torquay, 8

<sup>48</sup> Denis Twitchett, *The Birth of the Chinese Meritocracy: Bureaucrats and Examinations in Tang China*, 17

<sup>49</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*, 84



clan to the emperor Taizong. In a web of palace intrigue she found herself in the harem of his son, Gaozong. She proved to be his ample superior. The young and beautiful Wu dominated the Son of Heaven and systematically garnered control of the most powerful state of the human race.<sup>50</sup> Confucian historians, unable to recognize the viability of a female ruler, vilified her every legacy. Contemporary historians still differ. After all, regardless of her unlikely rise she still represented violent instability. Her impact, though, has never been questioned.

Empress Wu's most immediately shocking precedent was to change the name of the Tang to the latter Zhou, a convention lasting only as long as her lifetime. This allowed her to assume direct possession of the throne as historically China's only *defacto* and *dejure* woman empress (she had demonstrated control over China for many years before she ascended to the throne.)<sup>51</sup> The second and most important precedent was her war on the role of aristocrats in the Imperial court. Certainly modern historians may question the bias of male Confucian historians for portraying the empress as a power hungry maniac. The evidence is clear, though, that the empress did centralize power around the throne in a way not done before. Her chief tool was the examination system. More than ever before the throne sponsored officials from a background featuring one of the degrees initially created in the Sui Dynasty.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Empress Wu's husband was the first emperor who started the crucial selection examination system, which unlike the

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<sup>50</sup> Richard W.L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684-712)" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 290-306

<sup>51</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman *China: A New History*, 82

<sup>52</sup> Richard W.L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684-712)" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 311

Han and Sui Dynasties, mandated that *all* candidates for office, not just an arbitrary few, participate in an imperially proctored examination.<sup>53</sup> The benefits of this system to a centralized power structure was obvious to the empress, who necessarily felt threatened at every turn due to the uncertain times of her rule.

Empress Wu remade the bureaucracy into one loyal to her and her interests.<sup>54</sup> For the first time, the throne began to assert itself as more than just a first among equals. One of the popular narratives dominating this era of Chinese history places immense importance on Empress Wu and the latter Tang Dynasty as a whole in shifting the role of the landed aristocracy in China. By this interpretation, the throne was able to replace the established aristocracy literally with a new-blood scholarly gentry-class drawn from the lower ranks of society, based more on intellectual merit than familial connection.<sup>55</sup>

No doubt this is extremely problematic. The necessary resources to support the educational requirements and lifetime devotion to study needed to pass these exams necessarily precluded much of the lower ranks. What is known, however, is that at the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907, through the following fifty-three year period of disunion, and into the Song Dynasty, the upper class of China totally transformed into one completely dissimilar to the one before it. Unlike before, this new gentry became totally dependant on their family members accessing the most privileged ranks of the civil

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<sup>53</sup> Richard W.L. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684-712)” in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 277

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 309

<sup>55</sup> Denis Twitchett, *The Birth of the Chinese Meritocracy: Bureaucrats and Examinations in Tang China*, 6

service to maintain their social, political, and economic power.<sup>56</sup> Conveniently for the throne, the Imperial families dominated this selection process.

Certainly the “new-blood” of the Tang Dynasty was not so new, and the bulk of this elite change occurred later than Empress Wu. She did establish a new loyalty, though. Her unique position, threatened by unprecedented palace family politics, legitimized the concept of emperors systematically gathering political power to their feet, making the empire truly their own. She undoubtedly started the process of transforming China into the autocratic regime it had not been since Qin Shi Huang Di. This time, however, the system would be sustainable. The concept of a post-Qin Dynasty, fully autocratic China was born, and once it matured it would never deviate until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.

Thus, the principal role of the exams in the Tang was more than as just one method by which civil servants would be slotted into the polity. Instead, their function was to accelerate the signing of a new social contract, similar to Dong Zhongshu’s in its correlative cosmology, yet conceding to the reality of the throne’s superior position. Co-dependency still marked this relationship, but the throne would never accept co-dominance. The ritual of emperors signing off on all of their official’s examinations was nothing less than an oath of loyalty, and it fostered the theoretical dominance of a bureaucratic elite by an Imperial super-elite. As far as this contract was to operate in practice, though, depended on the times. The Imperial houses of China, after assuming Empress Wu’s model of governance, would never again relinquish their claim to total autocratic rule. The era of the *prima inter pares* emperor was rapidly coming to a close.

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<sup>56</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 84-85

However, the scholarly elite could still game the system and reduce the throne's claim to absolutism as merely that—a claim. They would find all manner of methods to do so.

*Infused with Merit: New Myths of Equity Sustain the System*

Just as important as the changing socio-economic background of the elite was the perception of the examinations in the late Tang. For the first time the Chinese as a whole began to see the Civil Service, and especially the exams, as a legitimate avenue to success specifically for the lower classes. Surviving collections of anecdotes from this era demonstrate the credibility people lent to the Tang Civil Service recruitment system and the exams. Consider the story of Lu Zhao and Huang Po, which serves as a warning to local officials seeking to curry too much favor with their local upper class. Both of the young men were fortunate to earn an invitation to be examined. The local prefect, though, invited only the wealthy Huang Po to a good luck celebration. Lu Zhao, however, not only passed the exams, but placed overall as the *optimus*. Lu Zhao would have his opportunity upon return to compose a poem to scold the offending prefect.<sup>57</sup>

Sometimes talent lies in the humblest of places. Xu Tang was very experienced at taking the examinations, having devoted his life to the cause of becoming a great Civil Service scholar. Surely he would eventually pass with his superior experience. Wang Zun was just a minor clerk, yet he had great talent, just never an outlet to display it. One day Wang Zun decided to walk to the capital and take the exams upon first opportunity. He passed five years before Xu Tang.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization and Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), 129, anecdote #2

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization and Society*, 130; anecdote #6

Most revealing, however, is the story of Lu Hui, who was orphaned at an early age. This was a deeply profound stigma in this era especially considering that the examinations tested on the *Five Classics* and all manner of Confucian doctrine, which sedulously stressed the primacy of the position ideal family in society as a metaphysical harmonizer. Lu Hui was raised by his uncle, and after seeing his cousins quickly rise to prominence in all avenues, was determined more than ever to attain success through the exams. However, Lu Hui lived in a time of turmoil in China's history. Bandits besieged the capital in 880, delaying Lu Hui's opportunity. He sauntered through life waiting patiently for his chance, but destitute he remained. He found himself trapped in the middle of one instance of social turmoil after another, each time ruining his shot to travel to the capital and pass the exams. His cousin Zhen Xu told him to give up and concentrate on other avenues, yet Lu Hui was adamant and said something strikingly revealing about the times,

Our great nation has established the examination system for the outstanding and the talented. I do not have the ability and dare not dream of such honors. However, when he was alive, my uncle again and again encouraged me to take the examinations. Now with his study empty and quiet, I cannot bring myself to break our agreement. If I have to die as a mere student, it is my fate. But I will not change my mind for the sake of wealth. I would sooner die.<sup>59</sup>

Lu Hui eventually passed the examinations and became one of the greatest officials in the land.

No one may know if stories like these were true, but one thing is certain. Chinese believed they were based on realities, though, and they took these lessons to heart. In the Tang Dynasty, Chinese people believed in not only the capacity of the state and its

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 130; anecdote #3

institutions to provide for a unified nation, but also in the capacity of this structure to raise the position of those it governed. Hard work, determination, a shockingly uncompromising devotion to a studious lifestyle, filial piety, and a selfless desire to serve society over acquiring material wealth were the keys to long term material and spiritual success and happiness. Failure in demonstrating these qualities in life was the sole cause of social and economic failure broadly defined.

The Sui Dynasty may be the first era of the state in its innerworkings demonstrating evidence of a furious preoccupation with finding talented men through meritocratic means.<sup>60</sup> It was in the Tang, though, when this preoccupation seeped into all levels of society and began the myth of the immaculate Chinese meritocracy, a powerful force in legitimizing the state's near-infallibility. The presence of the degrees helped bolster this myth, ultimately enabling the throne to more easily effect the ethnic nepotism that characterized the very purpose of the state. How successful China was at establishing the *Doctrine of the Mean's* call for the *defacto* realization of this status quo will be examined later. For now, though, Chinese people believed in the infinite perfectibility of the state and society through this system of triumphant fairness. Later Dynasties would exploit it into the late Imperial era, when evidence of a far more pervasive sense of manufactured consent permeated the scholarly class.

Anecdotes like these are the origins of these later developments, when the Imperial elite laid the foundations for belief in the infinite possibilities of system. I stress the role of the leaders in these developments. Though the ritualistic ideological reproduction of the Tang was nothing compared to what China would see from the 14<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Arthur Wright, "The Sui Dynasty" in *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China: Part I* Denis Twitchett, John Fairbank, 85-86

through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these sentiments and their connection to the exams so conveniently served the interests of the throne in its aggressive quest, started by those such as Empress Wu, for absolute domination.

What Empress Wu set in motion would have to wait until after the conclusion of the Tang Dynasty to be realized. In 755 the horrific An Lushan rebellion, one of the worst in history, and its possible 30 million casualties nearly broke the Tang Dynasty. The remainder of the reign was characterized by imperial impotence as local military powers came to be the real force of authority in China. One of these governor militants eventually formally ended the limping state in 907. China would remain fractioned until 960, during which time almost twenty different states flourished in constant competition with one another.

#### *Accelerating the Transition: A Tolerant Autocracy*

The capable emperor Taizu rapidly coalesced a new empire, comprising of nearly the sum total of China proper but not the vast territorial expanse of the Tang. This Song Dynasty, contending to its end with northern steppe peoples of many kinds, never extended its power to all those who spoke the Han language. Northern Khitan rulers who themselves dared to insult the throne by claiming for themselves the title of Son of Heaven would aggravate Song Dynasty rulers for the sum total of its existence.

Despite its troubles, there can be no debate that the Song Dynasty represents the beginning of a different era in Chinese history, a transition period. The political forces that Empress Wu gave birth to began to accelerate in their influence. The increasing ability of the throne to dominate the gentry through the examinations gave it ever more

and more power. From now on, if non-imperial Chinese elites were to have influence, it would come from their ability to take it from the throne through frank appeal or clever subterfuge. The role of the exams was no longer peripheral in the Song. It was central. Later in the Ming and Qing, it would become overwhelming. The origin story was complete. It was now time for the examinations to literally define the foundation of the state.

The words of the great statesman Wang Anshi to the emperor Shenzong reveal much as to the relationship between the throne and the ministry in his era:

Although Your Majesty is far more sagacious than his predecessors, because you are insufficiently resolute you have not yet succeeded in transforming the civic culture by unifying morality. As a result the cacophony of opinions continues,” the emperor must “awe and intimidate the multitudes into compliance, so that the court can attend to affairs...It is just like Heaven itself, which uses the yang chi to activate the myriad things. Heaven does not let the different things saturate one another, but rather conceives them all with the one essence. Just so, if the imperial resolve is strong, then all under heaven will comply without being commanded; if not, the factions of the vast party of conventionalists will strengthen by the day, while the imperial authority will daily wither.<sup>61</sup>

The frankness of tone utilized by Wang first strikes the reader as well as his total acknowledgement of the battle of competing ideological factions surrounding the throne. Though reminiscent of the struggles between the Legalists and the Confucians in Han Dynasty China, there is still little comparison. By this time the Confucians had finally secured total victory over political matters. Wang merely insisted on silencing the opposition of other Confucians. In effect he was calling for the throne to assert itself even

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<sup>61</sup> Hsu tzu-chih t’ung-chien ch’ang-pien (1979) 215, p. 5232, quoted in Paul Jakov Smith “Shen-Tsung’s Reign and the New Policies of Wang An-shih,” *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 5 Part I: The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907-1279*. Denis Twitchett and John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 364



more against its ministers than it had done so before. The bureaucracy was practically begging to be whipped into rigidity.

Ironically, through this assent to the position of the emperor's right, even obligation, to pacify its advisors, Wang had achieved Dong's ancient ideal of the ruler-minister relationship by perverting it. This relationship, initially started in the Tang, characterized the Song rule as well as the role of the examinations. Never before and never again would each side know its place and believe in it more thoroughly. This is principally because both sides acquired more power from their social and political roles than ever before. In the Song, emperors could staff their bureaucracies almost at will from a swath of men recruited from the examinations in proportions never before seen. thirty percent of the bureaucracy claimed their positions from acquiring a degree, and even that is not a telling enough statistic to reveal how thoroughly the early emperors of the Song Dynasty intended their new civil servant to dominate politics.<sup>62</sup>

The state, however, retreated from the micro-level interference in the economic lives of its people as it had done in the Tang.<sup>63</sup> A fascinating complex of social expectations emerged between the gentry and the throne. The new elite came to organize even the lowest levels of Chinese society in a way that no power had done before. China completed its transformation into what has become known as a gentry state. Though the population of China swelled from Han to Song times, the numerical size of the bureaucracy stayed the same. In order to maintain order and pacify the increasing mass of

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<sup>62</sup>John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 94; Lau Nap-Yin, Huang Kuan-Chung "Founding and Consolidation of the Sung Dynasty under T'ai-tsu (960-976), T'ai-Tsung (976-997), and Chen-Tsung (997-1022)," *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 5 Part I: The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907-1279*, Denis Twitchett and John King Fairbank, 254

<sup>63</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*, 105

human bodies, the throne relied on these gentry families to process tax collection, oversee the construction of public works, publish books, maintain schools, manage welfare systems, organize community events, arbitrate disputes, and even enforce behavioral norms.<sup>64</sup>

The Song Dynasty was a time when elite families began to hold community compacts, or *xiangyue*. Communities across every prefecture would convene around a local high status family where they would engage in all manner of ritualistic affirmation, capped by a great feast. The purpose was to organize the different classes of people along a Confucian ideal. Individuals engaged in mutual criticism while strictly observing deference of seniority. These compacts came into their widest use after the rise of the Ming Dynasty in 1368. Here in the Song, though, these ceremonies allowed the imperial house to enforce its rule by using a gentry intermediary.<sup>65</sup> The key step, though, is that this gentry maintained its social prestige and economic power largely by guiding their sons into the Civil Service, which in turn was now rigorously selected by the throne through the examination system. With the rising authenticity of the exams' claim to strict meritocratic legitimacy, the Song had successfully raised a system that could distract elites from their newfound inequality through the opportunity to more thoroughly socially dominate (not simply economically dominate.) This economy of domination and its basis of distraction from the self's own inequality would later prove significant for the Yuan and Qing Dynasty in effecting their more blatant and unapologetic systems of ethnic hierarchy.

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<sup>64</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*, 104-106

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 99

The fluidity by which factions operated in the Song government is a testament to their rigor. The system was not inherently superior. China was blessed with a series of emperors in this time who themselves were highly disciplined and conscientious of their duties.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, they were legitimately open to criticism and suggestions. The Song was the first era of China's history where the upper level of the ministry actually formed an institution around criticizing and prostrating the autocrat to a symbolic position of intellectual inferiority. This practice of "Classics Mat," referencing the actual physical space where ancient scholars would meditate on classical philosophy, was the institutional practice of Confucian lectures discussing and professing the application of the *Five Classics* and other texts of importance to contemporary issues.<sup>67</sup> Eventually this practice evolved into a position of constant companionship to the emperor. Later it would be used most deviously as a method of usurping the newfound Imperial dominance. Not so in this era. Never in the Song was its application more than an expression of trust extended to the upper bureaucracy.

Ministers and their philosophical and administrative platforms, including those of Wang Anshi, rose and fell, from prominence to heresy, at the whims of the throne.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Song emperors symbolically assented to this remarkable display of political-academic synthesis. Land and wealth distribution, educational reform, crop loan systems, granary construction; the list goes on and on of the perceived projects of social

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<sup>66</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 88

<sup>67</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 628-629

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 626-627

progress the elites of China threw themselves at analyzing.<sup>69</sup> It was a remarkable time where factions struggled for power yet always under a real understanding of national duty.<sup>70</sup>

Powering this entire system was the Mandate of Heaven. Without the perceived divinely inspired right to rule and obligation to serve, the complex of loyalty and duty would have broken down. The emperors of Song needed to demonstrate this Mandate through their own adherence to ritual as well as their successful domination of what they saw as their realm. Their insecurity over the mandate emerged from the fact that the Song originally was but one of many powers trying to lay claim to the divine mandate claimed by the Tang.

In this latter task the Song emperors struggled but ultimately failed. Never would the Song Dynasty press its authority to the far most northern extent of the Han Chinese settlement. They struggled militarily with northern steppe peoples, initially the Liao Dynasty, whose rulers themselves claimed the title of Son of Heaven and ruled over sizable populations of Han Chinese.<sup>71</sup> This was a most grievous insult to the legitimacy of the throne. To not engage this people, though, was to lose the loyalty of the scholarly class who themselves were now actually forming the gentry. In this way, the Song state

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<sup>69</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 609-628

<sup>70</sup> Charles Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1975.), 53

<sup>71</sup> Winston Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.), 4-5

was actually dependant on war against the peoples of the North and the demonstration of irredentist legitimacy it provided.<sup>72</sup>

*Unapologetic Autocracy and Philosophical Reform Under the Horde*

The Song's quest for irredentism proved to be their undoing. Totally outmatched on the field of battle, the much smaller Khitan Liao Dynasty to the North eventually angered the Song to the point of signing a military alliance with the Jurchen people in 1121. These new steppe rivals proceeded to conquer the Liao, the Han Chinese whom they had subjugated, as well as the Northern half of the Song Dynasty and proclaimed themselves the Jin Dynasty. The Song on limped until the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, utterly shocked at the profound tactical error they had made.<sup>73</sup> It was all for naught though, for by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Genghis Khan had united the Mongol tribes to the north and was beginning his great campaign.

Not since Alexander the Great had anyone attempted something so foolishly audacious. It was a complete success. Starting with Genghis and proceeding through his sons and grandsons, the Mongols totally overwhelmed the Jin Dynasty and nearly every surrounding political and military force in Asia. The Southern Song Dynasty fell to Genghis's grandson Kublai in 1271, when he proclaimed the formation of the Yuan Dynasty.<sup>74</sup> This new Chinese state was the largest and most economically significant piece of the Pax Mongolica puzzle—the largest contiguous empire humanity may ever

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<sup>72</sup> Winston Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.), 5

<sup>73</sup> Winston Lo, *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, 6; James T.C. Liu, "How A Neo-Confucian School became the State Orthodoxy?" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Oct., 1973), 489

<sup>74</sup> John Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 121

see. The Mongols would have a profound impact on Chinese political institutions as well as the place of the examinations within them. How they would go about defining this impact, though, would depend on social and political movements in the Southern Song Dynasty.

A new movement started to contend with the established order and place blame of a perceived ideological decay in Confucian thought on the rise of Daoism and Buddhism to popularity. This line of reasoning extends as far back to the early Tang Dynasty to Hanyu, who stressed that true Confucianism had been forgotten after the death of Mencius, one of the most famous Confucian thinkers who produced his work shortly after Confucius's death.<sup>75</sup> Later scholars would expand upon these views, but mostly in obscurity. One of the most influential philosophers in Chinese history, Zhu Xi, would compile what he considered to be the most significant of these thinkers into a new Confucian program in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

These "Neo-Confucians" as the Jesuits would later call them, approached the ancient system of ethics with a new attention to the very stuff of knowledge, perception, and reality. Zhu Xi highlighted Zhou Dunyi, who first stressed the importance of differentiating mind and external substance.<sup>76</sup> Zhang Zai identified this substance as *qi*.<sup>77</sup> The Cheng brothers coupled this with *li*, or principle, the directing ideal forms of

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<sup>75</sup> William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 668

<sup>76</sup> Zhou Dunyi, "The Metaphysics and Practice of Sagehood" quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 671

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, Zhang Zai, "Western Inscription" quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 683

matter.<sup>78</sup> These, in turn, were organized by an ever-present substratal force called the *Dao*, or the Way, already a part of Chinese philosophy, but not in this manner. Zhu Xi compiled all of the aforementioned into a unified voice and added his own “investigation of things.” This was the act of moral self-disciplining, normatively applicable to all social classes, through intense meditation on matters of social propriety and metaphysical principles.<sup>79</sup> Unlike previous Confucians, Zhu Xi did not intend a privileged few to monopolize these practices and then in turn radiate their magnificence onto the populace. Rulers and peasants alike must drive themselves to moral excellence.

These thinkers were unified in their distaste for Daoism and Buddhism, yet ironically shared a preoccupation for transcendental experiences. John Fairbank suggests this was the underlying purpose of the system’s creation, which at first was probably true.<sup>80</sup> The ritualistic value of this worldview and its potential to organize social groups is palpable, potentially making it a strong competitor to Buddhism and Daoism to occupy the same social roles. It is here where Neo-Confucianism’s initial influence can be traced. As stated, the Song never increased its total number of Civil Service positions realized under the Han and the Tang, yet China’s population exploded. At the same time the prestige of the Civil Service and the examinations only swelled, thanks in part to the Song’s insistence on drastically expanding China’s network of state school systems and

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, The Cheng Brothers, “Principle and the Universe” quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 690

<sup>79</sup> Zhu Xi, “Principle and Material Force” quoted in William Theodore De Bary & Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from the earliest times to 1600. Second Edition, Volume I*, 699

<sup>80</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman *China: A New History*, 98

tying the curriculum to the examinations systems.<sup>81</sup> With increasing numbers of potential licentiates, and a static number of positions available, the number of discontented scholars also increased creating a class of local scholars tasked with privately educating the more affluent.<sup>82</sup>

The first Neo-Confucians found a place within this new class of private academics. They were among the first and most vigorous at injecting themselves into the community compacts, due their stress on all-inclusiveness of ritual. By the fall of the Northern half of the Song Dynasty to the Jin, Neo-Confucians played a role in furthering the influence of the gentry upon wider society, principally through the social compacts, thus playing into the wider social contract between the throne and the new gentry.<sup>83</sup> As for the bureaucratic establishment, though, they remained a perceived threat, and thus anathema. Even Zhu Xi at first was declared a follower of “False Learning” in 1188 when he was denied his rightful appointment position at the capital even though he had passed the highest examination levels with flying colors.<sup>84</sup>

By this time the Jin had already conquered Northern China and sent the political establishment into a tailspin. Utterly shocked by the how easily the most Confucian of all Confucian states had fallen to semi-nomadic barbarians, the throne and the upper bureaucracy were willing to try anything to solidify their position of dominance and thus

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<sup>81</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 5

<sup>82</sup> James T.C. Liu, “How A Neo-Confucian School became the State Orthodoxy?” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Oct., 1973) 485, 488, 492

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 492

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 499



remedy their feeling of constant insecurity.<sup>85</sup> A reordering of state orthodoxy was not yet necessary to do that, though, for the Jin was not yet a threat to occupy the Southern Song. The Mongols were, though.

As the mighty horde easily annihilated the Jin Dynasty, the Song began to see that this steppe people could conquer them utterly. In a testament to how effectively Neo-Confucians had established themselves within the gentry and lower classes over a century, both the Mongols and the throne began to appeal to this mass movement to affirm each of their positions as the legitimate Confucian state claiming the Mandate. In 1241 the Southern Song court established Neo-Confucianism, called *Daoxue* (Learning of the True Way), as the state orthodoxy.<sup>86</sup> Never again would any Chinese Dynasty, foreign ruled or not, deviate from the understanding that Confucian orthodoxy was necessarily Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, stressed by Zhu Xi and the philosophers he highlighted. In 1279, Kublai Khan destroyed the remaining Song resistance, and the Yuan Dynasty reigned unopposed in China.

The Mongols organized society within their empire by ethnicity, with Han Chinese clearly ranking near the bottom.<sup>87</sup> This is due to the fact that the Khans had to balance the cosmopolitan demands of the peoples of their empire. The Great Khan was simultaneously the highest of all Mongol chieftains, the great Tibetan Buddhist overlord, as well as the Chinese Son of Heaven.<sup>88</sup> They reserved the choicest spots in administration for other Mongols as well as both Uighur West Asians and former Jin

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<sup>85</sup> James T.C. Liu, "How A Neo-Confucian School became the State Orthodoxy?" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Oct., 1973), 502

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, 503

<sup>87</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*. 122

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121

Dynasty Jurchen officials, mostly by their own recommendation system.<sup>89</sup> The Khans had no incentive to buy into correlative cosmology, thus entrusting the selection of their officials to a self-perpetuating apparatus capable of careening out of centralized control. Ethnic mistrust characterized administration within the Yuan state as even in the examinations the Mongols did allow reserved half of their highest degrees to Mongols who comprised less than 3% of all Chinese households.<sup>90</sup> Chinese institutions and practices were to be preserved in governance only for their capacity to guarantee the Khan more power in the context of he and his people remaining forever Mongolian.<sup>91</sup>

Thus it was the fate of the few examinations held in the century the Mongols ruled China to serve many of the same purposes they did in the Sui and Tang. This was to convince a population of Chinese, dominated by non-Chinese, that their ways were still being prioritized, that though the ruler may not exclusively fraternize with Han Chinese, he still legitimately claimed the Mandate that in theory was supposed to belonged to a Han Chinese. At the same time, though, the system would have to disproportionately support those who were ultimately responsible for the Khan's unrivaled power—the Mongol people.<sup>92</sup> In the case of the Yuan, though, the ruler and his people had absolutely no Chinese blood in their veins, nor did they even pretend to assume Chinese ways in a personal context. Even in an official capacity Mongol administration paid scant attention

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<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth Endicott-West, "Yuan Government and Society" in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368*, Herbert Franke, Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994), 611-612

<sup>90</sup> Elman, "Where Is King Cheng?": *Civil Examinations and Confucian Ideology during the Early Ming, 1368-1415*, 29-30

<sup>91</sup> Theodore de Bary. *Sources of East Asia Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 391

<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Endicott-West, "Yuan Government and Society" in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368*. Herbert Franke, Denis Twitchett. p.427, 611-612.

to the necessary ceremonies and court decorum that coupled the title of Son of Heaven.<sup>93</sup> Thus, their domination was far less concealed. Perhaps this is the reason the Yuan fell so quickly. Never able to completely convince the Chinese into abiding by a social contract so blatantly disregarding their feelings of absolute cultural superiority, the Mongols had no way of maintaining consent after their terrifyingly remarkable coercive powers atrophied.

The importance of the Mongol system of government and the rise of Neo-Confucianism would profoundly affect the place of the civil service examinations in Chinese society. Their preoccupation with preserving absolute authority, prioritized above all other concerns, would establish precedents for future Chinese emperors, who themselves would use certain doctrines associated with Neo-Confucianism to push Empress Wu's strategy of imperial autocracy to its furthest logical extent. Their new practice of ethnic domination, that in many ways started in the Jin Dynasty, was far more unapologetic than the Sui and the Tang practiced. It would later establish for the Manchus a methodology by which they created their own model of cosmopolitan rule.

Perhaps the most immediate impact, though, would come from the Mongolian practice of tanistry, where brothers fight over the right to succeed a ruler. Though Kublai Khan never assumed power through outright battle over his brothers, the ancient tribal tradition reflected in the political maneuvering he and his mother carried out that conveniently eliminated his brothers as potential competitors.<sup>94</sup> The first succession crisis

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Endicott-West, "Yuan Government and Society" in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368*, Herbert Franke, Denis Twitchett, 608-609.

<sup>94</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. (Cambridge: Belknap press of Harvard University), 2010. 80

of the Ming Dynasty would reveal how the Chinese imperial elite took to this practice. The significance to the examinations would lie in their role of affirming the legitimacy of this practice.

*Completing the Transition: Terrified Kowtowing and Ming Autocrats*

In 1352, a wandering beggar and Buddhist monk named Zhu Yuanzhang joined the growing conflagration of local insurgencies rebelling against Mongol rule. By 1380 he had assumed control of his own vast army, proclaimed himself emperor of a new Ming Dynasty, and unified all Han Chinese under its rule. Once again a militaristic strongman, bent on personally enforcing his own vision of society, conquered the whole of China. This Hongwu emperor completed China's transformation into full autocracy started by Empress Wu.

The emperor purged his immediate staff.<sup>95</sup> The throne would now press itself to micromanaging a realm twice as big as it had been under the Song. Even Qin Shi Huang Di would have quaked at the impossibility of the task at hand, but Hongwu would have his way. The Civil Service would not disappear. In fact, it would bloat to a level it had never before achieved. However, the system of trust between minister and ruler, where policy was presented and debated by educated men and selected by a divine right ruler gave way to new one where one man spoke and the massive structure reacted to his words. The spirited debate and sacred academic discourse between rulers and scholars that characterized the Song shifted to terrified kowtowing and public floggings. Hundreds of thousands of unfortunate "dissenters" would succumb to horrifying deaths to satisfy

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<sup>95</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 129-30

the paranoid delusions of this extraordinary ruler as all institutions stood to bolster his position and affirm his role as the father of the Chinese race.<sup>96</sup> There was no illusion, no apology, no ritual checks to the system. One man ruled by word and personally sought to administer his will through bureaucrats who principally served, not assisted.

Despite these theoretical changes, the system was structured much like the Song. Hongwu would call upon the gentry elite to organize lower society as it had been done. This was a precarious move for Hongwu. As stated, he was a farmer, a soldier, a beggar, and a monk. His rise was tied to popular Buddhist movements like the Red Turban Rebellion. His justification for his rise was to empower those who had been disenfranchised by the Mongols. His own biographer describes his position best:

When the Red Army arose the most important goal was to realize an equality of position economically, politically, and as a people. The founding of the Great Ming empire had already made the Han people into the ruling people, given the agony of being oppressed by another people. However, with regard to economics and politics, although they had overturned the privilege of the foreign people toward the Han, with regard to the Chinese people themselves the power of the landlords to exploit and oppress the peasants was by no means changed just because the barbarians were driven off.<sup>97</sup>

It is a testament to the influence the Neo-Confucian scholarly elite was able to project upon the new emperor, as he himself had to sell-out to the gentry just to rule his own state.

Two developments occurred of immense importance, though, that affected the way the Civil Service and the throne acted out their roles in the Ming social contract. The

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<sup>96</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, 89-90; From: Edward Farmer, "Social Regulations in the Early Ming: Orthodoxy as a Function of Authority," *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, 112

<sup>97</sup> Wu Han: *Chu Yuan-Chuan chuan* (1949) quoted in Edward Farmer, "Social Regulations in the Early Ming: Orthodoxy as a Function of Authority" in *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, Kwang-Ching Liu, 111

first development is that the riches associated with high office disappeared in a direct sense. The military, the civil service, everything would be self-sufficient and get by only with the bare bones.<sup>98</sup> This, of course, was not acceptable from a society totally convinced of the civil service's prestige and capacity to elevate socio-economic position. Corruption would fill in the gaps as officials of varying degrees of influence would find ways to acquire their piece.<sup>99</sup> This would have no immediate effect on the relationship between Hongwu and his immediate successors and the top end of the bureaucracy. Their talent at violence ensured their unequaled dominance for the extent of their dominions.

Once Hongwu died and emperor Zhu Di took the throne in 1402, the new emperor restored the place of the examination system as the principle means of entry into the civil service. There was no hint of middle ground this time, though. The gentry-elite continued their landowning and merchant enterprising, however they totally depended on the civil service to maintain family stature. The ranks of the civil service would come almost exclusively from the examination system controlled either by the emperor or those closest to him. For the first time in Chinese history, to serve in the state was almost by definition to have passed an exam and received a degree.<sup>100</sup> This placed the entire bureaucracy, and by proxy the upper classes, in a totally subordinate position to the throne more so than it had ever been in the Song.

In this way Hongwu and his immediate successors were in a similar position compared to the earliest of Han Emperors, realizing that they could not run their empires

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<sup>98</sup> Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance* New Haven: Yale University Press. 1981, 88

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 88-90

<sup>100</sup> Hok-Lam Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-his, and Hsuan-te reigns, 1399-1435" *The Cambridge History of China The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) Part I* Frederick Mote, Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986), 212

on horseback. They would choose to dominate much more thoroughly, though, and the examinations' specific role in these developments were as much ideological as they were ritualistic. The secession crisis of 1402 proved this. In a profoundly Mongol fashion, Zhu Di, the nephew of emperor Hongwu, was not content to sit on his laurels and become a mere functionary of the young grandson of the emperor, who was destined by tradition to become the next Son of Heaven.<sup>101</sup> Zhu Di, renaming himself the Yongle emperor (eternal happiness), systematically eliminated all of his familial rivals, executed as many bureaucrats as he could find with ties to his nephew's allies, and usurped the throne for himself, a profound statement of political hubris matched only by the audacity of Empress Wu herself.<sup>102</sup> He then sanctioned the largest class of examination graduates in decades, refilling his bureaucracy with those loyal both to him and Neo-Confucian canon.

Neo-Confucianism as a school stressed the ancient philosopher Mengzi, also known as Mencius. Popular after the era of Confucius's death, Mencius expanded upon Confucius's ethical system, boldly proclaiming that human beings are naturally good and that the ruler was strictly bound to a promise of benevolent rule. Power naturally ascends from the roots of the masses. A sovereign's loss of legitimacy through his own excess was not only possible, but could ultimately justify regicide:

Confucius said: "The Way has only two courses, that of benevolence and that of malevolence. One who carries the oppression of his people to the highest pitch will himself be slain, and his kingdom will perish. If [such a ruler] does not carry oppression to an extreme, his life will still be in jeopardy, and his kingdom will be weakened. He will be called [a tyrant] as You and Li were."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, 81

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Elman, "Where is King Cheng?": Civil Examinations and Confucian Ideology during the Early Ming. 1368-1415," 25-26

<sup>103</sup> *Mencius*— Benjamin Elman. "The Formation of Dao Learning as Imperial Ideology During the Early Ming Dynasty" in *Culture & State In Chinese History: Conventions*,

This was precisely the doctrine The Yongle emperor needed to justify his usurpation of the throne, and thus it monopolized the examination questions as well as the answers of the successful licentiates for the entire dynasty.

The place of the examinations in the Ming Dynasty realized what Benjamin Elman has described as the all-encompassing political, cultural, and social reproduction of state orthodoxy so as to legitimize the dominant position of a singular ruler. Though it had been used partially in this way since the Han Dynasty, it had always served also to establish the influence of other powers. The pervasive prestige of the examinations at this point, though, had caused nearly all social education in the empire, whether state sponsored or not, to orient towards exam preparation.<sup>104</sup> That prestige chained the elite classes of China to the throne, and the ritualistic affirmation that had once served to define the relationship between ruler and minister now defined that between autocrat and subject.

*Unstable Equilibrium: The Limits in Sustaining Absolute Autocracy*

It is useful to think of the relationship between the emperor and the bureaucracy in late Imperial China through the lens of retrograded game theory. In the past, the ruler's mutual reliance on the militaristic semi-nomadic non-Han Chinese aristocracy had created a clear distinction of what each side could and could not do. The emperor needed the aristocracy to survive, while the aristocracy needed the emperor to convince a mass of

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*Accommodations, and Critiques* Theodore Hunters, R. Bin Wong, Pauline Yu (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 72.

<sup>104</sup> Ping-Ti-Ho, *The Ladder of Success In Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962)



Han Chinese that the whole order had the claim of the Mandate of Heaven. The breakdown of the aristocratic influence and their growing dependence on the throne for power in the Song had opened the door to new possibilities. Though the Song was characterized by this harmonious relationship between the scholar gentry and the throne, it did not necessarily have to result in this. Each side, through various means, technically had the ability to abuse the other, but chose not to. The process technically began with equilibrium and progressed into instability.

The throne's new authority to overstep itself was most fully exercised by the Hongwu and Yongle emperors. Before the civil service's eyes, Chinese society became a giant mechanism that preserved the position of the ruler, often fueled by mass executions. The examinations became instances where scholars reproduced the answers expected of them, and no one actually thought they could project real influence unless they could somehow co-opt the power of the throne.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, it was becoming extremely difficult to amass the kind of riches the high-level civil service expected from their offices with the ongoing enforcement of emperor Hongwu's declaration of universal austerity. One side had its turn and made its move. The other side now had its chance at rebuttal.

Ray Huang provides a remarkable account of the results of this collective realization. With no trust embedded in the system or no legally sanctioned system of material rewards to motivate loyal and judicious performance, officials entered into the civil service under the understanding that the system was there to be exploited, because it would never yield dividends on the scholar's lifetime of educational investment.

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<sup>105</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 110

Corruption flourished as bureaucrats gnawed at every opportunity to bleed the system of money and treasure. Most importantly, though, the instant an emperor lacking the personal will to dominate came to the throne, the system would breakdown into a new status quo.<sup>106</sup>

Unlike in the Qin, when order collapsed as soon as Qin Shi Huang Di passed, the Ming continued on, but in a bureaucratic morass reflecting that of the later Han. Ray Huang's depiction of the Wanli emperor demonstrates this. Emperor Wanli has been derided as one of the most incompetent rulers in Chinese history. From birth the young sovereign was taught that ruling the Celestial Empire involved an endless commitment to ritualistic tedium. He was personally weak from years of private enfeeblement and emasculation at the hands of his mother, eunuchs, and prime minister. In Wanli's reign, the empress Dowager, his chief of police, and the prime-minister Zhang Juzheng all wielded true power. Wanli's directive only provided a certain religious sanction to the decisions of the lessers. When a scandal erupted in where Zhang's enemies, jealous of his influence, indicted him of treason and corruption, the young emperor realized what the Ming state had become: a political free-for-all. By the end of the Ming, the autocratic social contract had created the conditions necessary for *de facto* administrative chaos. The examinations became an avenue to enter the game and feast upon the plenty.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance*, Chapters 1-3

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, Chapter 1

*Perfecting Alien Rule: The Manchus' Model of National Integration and Ethnic Segregation*

The usual culprits accounted for the fall of the Ming Dynasty. Administrative decline combined with loss of consent among the population resulted in rebellion. Desperate for military aid, loyalists to the state turned northward for assistance from the Manchu people, a designation fraught with its own ontological issues.<sup>108</sup> The term “Manchu” has come to identify a nationally recognized ethnic group within the People’s Republic of China. By the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, though, there were in modern-day Manchuria three tribes generally referred to together as Jurchens, descendants from the same people who formed the Jin Dynasty that conquered half of China in the 12<sup>th</sup> century before the Mongols finished the job. These tribes spoke very similar languages and were culturally very interconnected. The Khan Nurhachi, through warfare, began the process of organizing their society into a mobile war machine, reminiscent of the Mongols, known eventually as the Eight Banner Army.<sup>109</sup>

The Jurchens who formed these eight original armies eventually came to identify the ethnic core of what would become a manufactured “Manchu” identity. The Eight Banner System eventually included 24 different armies, and even before the conquest of China incorporated large numbers of Mongolians, Koreans, and Han Chinese. Membership in this institution, regardless of language, dress, or custom, eventually privileged one with the label of “Manchu,” after Nurhaci’s son Hong Taiji invented the moniker. Thus the “Manchu” people were a mobilized society transformed into a fighting

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<sup>108</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search For Modern China* (New York: Norton and Company, 1991), 32-33

<sup>109</sup> Mark Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, 47-63

force consisting of multiple cultural types, yet, at first, numerically dominated by a core Jurchen mass. After Hong Taiji mandated the creation of an unprecedented Manchu written language, the process was complete. An ethnicity had been manufactured to unify squabbling peoples. Its fighting power had been bolstered with those who could benefit from inclusion in the system yet maintain their own separate identity.<sup>110</sup>

In 1644 these “Manchus” swept into China upon invitation and took all of it for their own, forming a state whose material and cultural success marked it as a colossal monolith of its time. Before ever setting foot in China, though, they declared their reign the Qing Dynasty. The choice of words was not arbitrary. According to the traditional system of Five Elements, the “Ming” 明 Dynasty, associated with fire, would surely be extinguished by the “Qing” 清 Dynasty, whose character was associated with water. It was an admission of the primacy of the tradition of Chinese metaphysics.<sup>111</sup> By framing the very political legitimacy of their kingdom on Chinese terms, the Manchus were proclaiming their right to the Mandate, a gesture of immense cultural accommodation.

These series of events, the creation of an expansive Manchu identity coupled with the marriage of their state to Chinese political theory, reflected a logic the Manchus used in governing China, Mongolia, parts of Korea, Taiwan, Tibet, and parts of Southeast Asia. Their objective was one very much aligned with the Mongols—to rule a vast cosmopolitan expanse through accommodation of extant cultural and political devices. However, they also intended never to shed their own manufactured ethnic identity in order to carve for themselves a privileged space. Far more complexly than what the

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<sup>110</sup> Mark Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, 56-72

<sup>111</sup> William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire; The Great Qing*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009), 18

Mongols or the rulers of the Sui and Tang Dynasty's ever attempted, the Manchus sought to make China proper into a singularly formed yet non-homogenous fluid of national cooperation and ethnic distinction.

Even more so than the Mongols, the Manchurian invasion represented a near total transplant of population southward into China. In order to establish their state model, they used the Eight Banner Armies. Garrisoning these banner soldiers, who benefited from the moniker "Manchu," in hundreds of cities all across the empire involved a direct physical separation between the Han Chinese conquered and the Manchu conquerors, even if some of these "Manchus" acted and spoke Chinese. These walled-in military barracks became one of the most visible reminders to the Chinese people of their subjugation along with the Jurchen queue as required hairdress among all males. This establishment of place within the Chinese world ultimately created a vast system of welfare and privilege for the Manchus and their families, who in turn protected the power of the emperors who were distinctly not Chinese.<sup>112</sup>

Northern nomadic influence had been present in China since the Sui. The Mongols were the first to extend total control of China while rejecting the apologetic assimilative practices of nomads in the Sui and Tang Dynasties. As seen, these Manchus tried the same, only they were far more successful at manufacturing and maintaining consent while producing an economically, militarily, and culturally robust state lasting for nearly 270 years. Garnering this consent to the presence of the Eight Banner System, the ultimate device of Manchu privilege, the Qing utilized political structures similar to the Song and the Ming, though with a few strategic modifications.

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<sup>112</sup> Mark Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, 89-128

After walking into the slot left behind by the Ming Dynasty, the new Manchu emperors preserved many of the offices and authority of the upper bureaucracy. However, they mandated that most positions accommodate ethnic duality with a Manchu (usually Jurchen) and a Han Chinese simultaneously occupying the position.<sup>113</sup> Thus the examinations and other traditional Chinese political institutions played a very similar role as they had before, only with a few more positions added. This widespread accommodation was the great secret of the Manchus in their run of success in dominating China without surrendering culturally. From the very top of the political order, involving the very name of the state itself, the Manchus improvised numerous practices to empower their Chinese subjects as far as they could while never crossing the line of sacrificing the primacy of the Eight Banners, which gave them their elevated position. Their balancing act was certainly the most successful of its kind in Chinese history. The examinations were part of this social pacification.

More so than in the Song or even the Ming era, the civil service examinations expanded to a level of influence and predominance not originally thought to be possible. Whereas in the Ming all levels of the civil service came to receive the vast majority of their staffs through the exams, in the Qing the institution extended its gradual incursion into Chinese private life to the fullest logical extent. The exact process of testing will be examined, but for now the most important aspect of this institution was how it came to dominate the Chinese ideal of upward mobility.

A pervasive social ideal of attaining the necessary economic security to provide for the lifetime educational preparation of a son existed in the late Ming and Qing

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<sup>113</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 148-149

Dynasties. This inevitably was by definition a dream to see this son or sons pass the exams and receive the most prestigious degrees. The Chinese gentry elite was organized into a system of funneling its male children into a system of ideological reproduction that ossified the primacy of the imperial throne. To preserve their immense economic wealth they needed to ensure a son attained high position once every other generation. The lower classes were successfully made to desire upward mobility into this status quo.<sup>114</sup>

One may only read popular 17<sup>th</sup> century novels like Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* to see the place the examinations held in the eyes of Chinese. Printed in the vernacular, giving it a wide readership, it tells the story of the decline of the Jia clan, portrayed as the most prestigious family in the capital. In epically Daoist fashion, the family slowly rots from the inside and loses all of its property and prestige when only in the last few chapters, all hope long since lost, two of its favored sons miraculously pass the highest levels of the examinations, thus receiving their *jin shi* degrees in high standing. The family enters into a new era of social and material preeminence as a result.<sup>115</sup>

For the masses who could not educate their sons, their destiny was to be dominated by the gentry elite who were co-opted by the throne in ruling China. The community compacts still permeated the countryside as the gentry elite continued to organize the local peasants and lower classes into lectures, feasts, and celebrations designed to rehearse the proper conduct of people within a Confucian context. The guidelines behind these compacts continued still to be distributed by the throne who entrusted the gentry to manage this ritual orthodoxy. At the same time, the gentry was

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<sup>114</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, 149

<sup>115</sup> Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone: Volume I* (London: Penguin Books.)

also expected to manage and govern the more practical affairs of their surrounding peasants.<sup>116</sup>

China's gentry society was not simply preserved, it was sponsored by the state. Despite the Eight Banner Armies, ethnic dualism in higher office-holding, and the widespread Banner-garrison cities, the Manchus continued the Song and Ming ideals of limited government. Though the population would peak at over 400 million in the Qing, the bureaucracy was only slightly larger than what it had been the past 700 years.<sup>117</sup> Once again, rulers had played off immense factions with competing interests by investing them with the power to dominate one another. The only difference in this latest state was that the throne sought also to create room for a system of blatant ethnic privilege.

Once again people played as much of a role in the success of the system as the system itself. The Qing Dynasty was blessed from 1662 to 1796 to have had only three emperors: Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, the first and third ruling for sixty years apiece as two of the longest reigning monarchs in human history. All three were motivated, energetic, ruthless, and highly disciplined administrators who devoted their lives to statecraft. A decline in the quality of person fixed atop the structure played as much of a role as any other in the decline of the Qing state. This atrophy created yet another role for the civil service Examination system.

The question of how Imperial China came to its most unflattering end is one tied with the great questions of the rise of industrialization, modernity, and the nation-state. Like in most discussions concerning these topics, there are more questions than answers.

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<sup>116</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman *China: A New History*, 155

<sup>117</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 155; William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire; The Great Qing*, 106



In 1796, the Qing Dynasty was a peaceful, economically successful, culturally blossoming, and socially stable multiethnic great empire. By 1905 it had sustained tens of millions of casualties due to numerous rebellions. On four separate occasions it had suffered embarrassing and resounding military defeat at the hands of people it considered backward barbarians (most notably the Japanese). All of these powers had legal immunity to take and do with as they pleased numerous cities up and down the Chinese coasts along with railways extending deep into China for mining ventures. The nation had been gutted.

In 1905 the throne was willing to destroy the examinations, most powerful institution that both legitimized their position and extended economic, political, and psychological control over the Chinese. They saw it necessary due to the increasing dissidence of the Chinese population and intelligentsia all characterized by a growing cynical nationalism. Chinese overseas and in the treaty ports, which all had become something very different from the surrounding countryside, steadily came to realize their nation had missed something. Their cries for reforms had been in the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century ignored by complacent leaders or, in the case of the hyperconservative Empress Dowager Cixi, brutally stifled. Finally, forced to admit their desperation, the throne erased the examination system in a gesture of submission to the calls for reform. It bought them six years. In 1911, a small revolt in Wuchang sparked every province to declare independence of the Qing state. Replaced by a provisional Republican government doomed to failure, Imperial China was gone forever.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 242-250

Regardless of the era, the civil service examinations were first and foremost a state instrument designed to advance state interests. Those interests were most often aligned with those of the Imperial, aristocratic, and gentry elites. At various points those elites defined themselves ethnically, and thus the exams served ethnic interests. Myth-creation has already featured prominently as a mechanism of manufacturing consent to hierarchical domination, especially the myth of the Chinese meritocracy. The coming sections will see this exercise carried out far more explicitly through the use of the power of fate. The best way to view the function of the examinations, though, is to see them as a part of a process of advancing simple goals through complex means.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONDITIONED RESPONSE AND UNDERSTOOD AUTOCRACY

Consent of the gentry class to the widespread Imperial support structure would deepen to extraordinary levels after the Song transition period. Belief in the meritocracy of the civil service would transform into belief in the system's outright divinity. This was not a coincidence. It was instead an active enterprise of state myth-creation. Though debate would rock the Song Dynasty as to what specific ideologies the exams should evaluate, the psychological conditioning the examination process entailed was the same in the Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties. Even the Yuan Dynasty, to the comparatively slight extent they decided to sponsor the exams, not only employed the same strategies, but also benefitted from proportional results. Once the examination system became standardized and ceased in the majority of its evolution, it became a process by which the throne manufactured consent. For these reasons the entire period from the Song to the end of the Qing can be consolidated as a single era of Chinese history with its own continuous themes.

#### *Methodological Standardization of the Examinations*

Methodical standardization of the exams took over a thousand years in China. The Han's system of recommendations ended with only an oral exam by the emperor on a policy question. Access to the politically influential Hanlin academy, one avenue to the

civil service, involved textual knowledge of one of the *Five Classics*. This and the periodically mentioned literacy requirements are the only evidence of any written requirements in Han examinations, though even these examples are unclear.<sup>119</sup>

The Sui Dynasty introduced the first degrees and the exams to obtain them. The *ming ching* (clarifying the classics) and the *jin shi* (presented scholar) degrees first make their appearance here, the former initially the more prestigious. However, when the short-lived Sui gave way to the Tang we see that the degrees had only a marginal role in determining the composition of the civil service. However, degree or not all Civil Servants did have to take some form of test even if they came from the dominant privileged recommendation system.<sup>120</sup> This Xuan selection process tested candidates, before the eyes of a committee representing the ruler (often changing), on deportment, calligraphy, and legal knowledge. The candidates were largely judged on their gentlemanly demeanor.<sup>121</sup>

Empress Wu was the first to stress the importance of literary examination in selecting candidates. In assembling her cadre of loyalists, she drew more and more from the ranks of the degree holders. *ming ching* recipients were tested on the *Five Classics* and multiple contemporary policy issues. The Jin-shi holders were tested on erudition of literary composition. Eventually their curriculums were fused to an extent, largely favoring the Jin-shi's stress on composition, yet also including material from the *Five Classics*. By the end of the Tang the *ming ching* degree had disappeared. The *jin shi* would last as the preeminent degree until 1905, when the whole system was erased. In

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<sup>119</sup> Houn, Franklin, "The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty," 138-64

<sup>120</sup> Denis Twitchett, *The Birth of the Chinese Meritocracy: Bureaucrats and Examinations in Tang China*, 17

<sup>121</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 7

testing on the Classics candidates would have to completely memorize one of the *Five Classics* and often reproduce it verbatim; yet in composition and policy, dissent was tolerated and there was no uniform commentary or curriculum to standardize responses.<sup>122</sup> Empress Wu only started the practice of using the exams as a tool of curbing the power of the landed aristocracy. She did not use them as mechanisms of thought-control. Many of the practices seen in the Tang would later be recalled in order to achieve this very purpose.

Great debates characterized the content of examination in the Song Dynasty, even though the Jin-shi degree began its reign of uninterrupted supremacy. To obtain it, candidates had to contend with the political ideologies of the many court factions, all successfully holding the emperor's attention at one time or another. Depending on the period, examination curriculum reflected the faction in favor. There was a very real trend in the Song of the exams increasingly testing on practical policy issues and more from the *Five Classics*. Most importantly the *Analects* the *Mencius* would start to make their own appearances reflecting a gradual shift to the Neo-Confucian persuasion.<sup>123</sup>

Even after the official canonization of Neo-Confucianism, though it would still take centuries for Zhu-Xi's program to more fully define the examination requirements. The most important development in the Song Dynasty in terms of test procedure was the advent of the palace examination. Similar to the Tang committee examination, which placed a candidate in front of a council representing the throne, the palace examinations placed every successful test-taker in front of the emperor himself. He then determined pass/fail rates. Eventually the Song emperors rejected this privilege, but retained the right

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<sup>122</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 10

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 16

of determining final rank. Never again would emperors directly determine passing or failing, but the rankings they determined could highly influence placement. The ritualistic affirmation also transformed the exams into the oath of loyalty they effectively functioned as for the remainder of their existence.<sup>124</sup>

During the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols were difficult to persuade to continue the examination system, which they suspended in the 1270s after their complete takeover of China. Only in 1313 did they reappear, and never in the Yuan would they account for a significant proportion of the civil bureaucracy. The years they did hold examinations the Mongols disproportionately favored both Mongols and non-Han minorities for key civil positions, reflecting the overarching ethnic hierarchy by which they governed the sum total of Pax Mongolica. The examinations that did occur during the Yuan featured the first instances of questions stressing the principle repositories of Neo-Confucian wisdom, the Four Books (the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Great Learning*). Candidates were still tested on their literary abilities, though, with poetry counting as much as politics.<sup>125</sup>

In 1370, The Hongwu emperor of the Ming Dynasty completed the process of poetry's death in the examinations.<sup>126</sup> The Ming's first emperor, in order to "observe" his candidates "abilities," also administered his own tests of gentlemanly disposition, highlighting "calligraphy, numerical calculations, horsemanship, and archery."<sup>127</sup>

However, the first emperor of the Ming, coming from an extraordinarily humble

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<sup>124</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 14

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, 33

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, 37

<sup>127</sup> Huang Ing kung-chu kao (survey of civil examinations during the Ming Dynasty), compiled by Chang Chao-jui, Ming Wan-li edition, i.17b. quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 38

background, had no love for scholars and examinations and repeatedly cancelled them because his skepticism of Neo-Confucian doctrine. As examined, Hongwu feared Mencius's view of ascending political power, and he knew that with the scholarly class utterly dominated by the Neo-Confucians they would not easily comply with curriculum not including this philosopher's discourse.<sup>128</sup>

The exams Hongwu did sponsor continued the process of increasing focus on memorization of the *Five Classics* and policy questions. They were the first to feature scholars lionizing the emperor as the ideological and metaphysical descendant of many various ancient thinkers and rulers Neo-Confucians often lauded as the true origin of China's philosophical tradition, like the optimus for the 1404 examinations who declared that "the emperor's mind is the mind of the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun."<sup>129</sup> This trend survived until 1905. Even with this stroke of the ego, however, Hongwu refused to be satisfied, scolding his graduates as "immature youths" too preoccupied with poetry to be of any use.<sup>130</sup> Eventually, as the paranoid emperor came to purge more and more officials from his administration, his examinations became characterized by calls for outright reproduction of the primacy of authoritarianism. The Hongwu emperor was particularly fond of the legacy of the infamous Qin Shi Huang Di, whom he admonished as a victim of corrupt and sycophantic ministers who "usurped the ruler's majesty and

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<sup>128</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 80

<sup>129</sup>—Huang-Ming chuang-yuan chuan tse (complete set of policy questions prepared during the Ming Dynasty by optimi for the palace civil examination), 1591 edition, 2.18-19b, 361-b. quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 68

<sup>130</sup>Tin-chia cheng hsin lu (Record of verified and reliable information concerning the top three candidates for the civil examinations), compiled by Yen Hsiang-hui, 1864 edition, i.ia, quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 43

largesse.”<sup>131</sup> Terrified examinees knew the answers expected of them, and unlike their predecessors, these new unfortunate literati had to perform the kowtow and other unprecedentedly absurd displays of fealty.<sup>132</sup>

Like the ministers of the first Ming emperor, death was the fate of many examinees and ministers under the third, who was responsible for the regicide of his brother. Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor, needed justification for this action and thus Mencius and Neo-Confucian ideology once again made its comeback. Hongwu and Yongle’s purges also depleted the bureaucracy of bodies, and so the Yongle emperor reinstituted the examinations in 1404—this time permanently.<sup>133</sup> Examinees were selected and ranked according to their literary capacity to venerate the Yongle emperor as not only the mandated successor of China (literally erasing Hongwu’s son from memory), but also a classical sage king, the legitimate successor of Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition. Examinees would continue this reproduction even after Zhu Di’s death for future Ming emperors.<sup>134</sup>

With the place of Neo-Confucianism firmly established as the final and principle orthodoxy by which emperors would reproduce their subjects, only the examination form needed standardizing. In this respect, Chinese examination procedure literally fossilized after roughly 1470. This marks the era of the eight-legged essay. Though evidence of the new examination form’s style dates back to essay answers as early as the Song Dynasty,

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<sup>131</sup> Ming Tai-tsu yu-chih wen chi, ii.4 a-b. Collection of Emperor Hongwu’s policy questions. Quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 83

<sup>132</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 84

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, 109

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, 111



Ming Dynasty Jin-shi licentiates such as Wang Ao (1450-1524) made the style so pervasively popular that it became law in 1487.<sup>135</sup>

A single eight-legged essay was a complex and highly rigid eight-part response to a series of quotations presented from any given text. Scholars were required to expound upon these quotations from the perspective of those who had written them, thus supposedly demonstrating an intimate familiarity with the text and the ideologies suggested by them. The form seemingly invoked Aristotelian syllogism, with inferences proceeding from sets of propositions.<sup>136</sup> It was ultimately doomed to become a method of limiting subjectivity and standardizing response.

Following the Yongle emperor and extending through the near sum total of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the texts examinees had to study were the *Four Books* (emphasized by Zhu Xi), *The Five Classics*, and whatever Dynastic histories and commentaries that might be in vogue at the time. Scholars had the option to specialize in only one of the Classics through much of the Ming. By the height of the Qing, though, examinees faced examination procedures effectively forcing them to memorize the sum total of the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*.<sup>137</sup>

The civil service examinations came to define the educational establishment in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In the words of Ichisada Miyazaki, if a family had the financial resources to commit a son to education, then preparation began “before

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<sup>135</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 384-388

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, 400

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 735-737

birth.”<sup>138</sup> Learning to read as a child was to learn characters relevant to the *Four Books*. Education was defined by continuous rote memorization until a student had mastered the necessary 400,000 characters verbatim. Through youth and into adulthood, students could expect to study for and attempt seven to eight total examinations before they attained their *jin shi* degrees and became eligible for placement into the very few positions available to them.<sup>139</sup> This tedium produced fascinating psychological responses, the implications of which extend far beyond mere frustrated and sleep-deprived scholar. Here, though, we must turn back to historiography.

It might be fair to say that Chinese civil service examinations realized their final form with the permanent establishment of Neo-Confucianism as state orthodoxy and the ascendance of the eight-legged essays in the early Ming. However, with these changes in mind, it is still very useful to consolidate a large section of the latter part of Chinese Imperial history, beginning well before the Ming Dynasty, into its own epoch, certainly influenced by the transition of dynasties (each of which tasked themselves to differing political ends), yet still characterized by observed historical trends. In this way, Iona Cheong’s statement that a “general mode of government lasted through the late imperial period” comes to define late Chinese Imperial history.<sup>140</sup>

That time period begins with the Song Dynasty and lasts until 1911 with the fall of the Qing. Though China as a society was hardly static through this time, the understood relationship of descending social and political power emanating from the

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<sup>138</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki: *China’s Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1976.), 13

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 659

<sup>140</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 5

throne to the highly manufactured gentry class and ultimately to the lower classes remained astonishingly rigid. As we have examined, and as Cheong herself contends, the emperors of China were only able to sustain *defacto* full autocracy in limited times in this period. This causes her to label the status quo, specifically in the Qing Dynasty, as a “dynamic” characterized by a certain reciprocity.<sup>141</sup> The decline of the Ming Dynasty is evidence of this claim. This rhetoric adequately describes generally what is happening on the ground at any given point. However, this paper shall advocate a blending of this framework with the more traditional characterization, slightly resembling Karl Wittfogel’s, of the great despotisms of China.<sup>142</sup>

Even if the throne had to struggle for its absolute supremacy during this near-millennia long era, inevitably failing at various points, the gentry elite and the lower classes of China always, unless they were in rebellion, knew the framework of power-holding facing them. In late imperial China power had to be attained only at the well-wishes of the throne or from its clever subversion. Regardless of who actually held power and influence, all Chinese with any familiarity with the Imperial system knew that what was really happening at any one time was being done under the understanding of what the structure was inevitably designed to do—enable one man the ability to gather to his feet near unlimited political authority.

Under this rubric of understanding, it is not necessary to reject Cheong’s characterizations. The structure, over a long enough time-frame, indeed assumed a

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<sup>141</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 5

<sup>142</sup> Karl Wittfogel, “Mobility in an Oriental Despotism,” in *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* Johanna Menzel, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963.), 61

reciprocal dynamic. This makes it necessary for scholars to consolidate late Imperial China into its own era through the ubiquitous presence of *understood* autocracy. The strongest foundational support structures behind this social contract were the examinations and the educational superstructure that rapidly solidified during the Song Dynasty. The throne's extraordinary powers of social conditioning started in this era, and the evidence behind a previously unmatched sense of consent, ultimately manufactured, also begins in this time.

*Willing Subjectification: Reinforcing Inequality as an Ideal Condition*

Cheong and Miyazaki principally focus their descriptions of the examination process on the mid-Qing Dynasty. The ultimate goal of the system was to produce among the candidates a willing subjectification to the state. The process started while a child was still in the womb. The mother had to amass luck by sitting properly, avoiding certain foods, even wearing certain colors. Families would celebrate the birth of a boy by performing all manner of rituals to sanctify a child's scholarly destiny, including scattering coins marked with "First Place Graduate" to servants as gifts. At the moment of birth a child's entire family dynamic would have already been primed to encourage and glorify a path leading to the inevitable declaration of loyalty and servitude to a nationally prestigious demigod. Even the very act of learning to read was synonymous with the system.<sup>143</sup>

Young boys were tutored in how to dress, how to speak, and how to act in the manner prescribed by the specific Neo-Confucian texts the state sanctioned (a legacy of

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<sup>143</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, 14

the Yongle emperor.) As the child grew into youth, he took his first examination. This process repeated itself sometimes over eight times in a young man's life, not accounting for the multiple times he certainly failed the higher exams. The process is best described as the reproduction and conformation to a set of implied normative "responses" which "perpetuated the necessarily unequal relationship between the state and the Confucian elite."<sup>144</sup>

All along the way, candidates were ranked and categorized, hierarchically "individualized" as Cheong suggests.<sup>145</sup> An equally fitting description would be institutionalized. Each candidate was tracked with a dossier, containing all relevant information: merits, de-merits, exam results, and previous appointments. The further a candidate progressed within the system, the more invested in it they became. Once a student received the *chu-jen* degree, part of the path to the illustrious *jin-shi* degree, they would first be able to find employment, giving them more immediate returns on their investment. The series of rewards and the promise of fabulous wealth once one passed the highest levels further intoxicated the candidates. The process of ranking the candidates, made easier by the standardized eight-legged essay form, played them off of one another. It set them against their peers in a competition for immediate prestige among an isolated and highly conditioned social group. The knowledge that far fewer official positions existed than degree holders increased personal anxiety, but their will to resist had been tamed by the mollification.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 27

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, 30

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, 30

These terms, “social conditioning” and “social group” very much applied to Chinese identity constructions at the time. The candidates knew they either came from families that were somehow different from the rest of society, or they aspired to advance their families into such a condition. They owned more land, owned more possessions, indeed owned people themselves. These families regulated the micro-level social and economic transactions of the peasants, merchants, and other lessers who lived near them. Their duty to perpetuate their families’ wealth and prestige cut painfully into their consciousnesses. Their own personal pride, the measure of themselves as men, hinged on the tiny numbers that dotted their dossiers as they passed or failed one examination after another.

At the end of the process, after the final examination, candidates internalized the vocabulary of their new identity. They formed permanent friendships and connection networks, as the final few examinations were multi-day affairs characterized by jolly camaraderie. The infamous Chinese phrase “*guanxi*,” loosely defined as “connections” owes much to the civil service examinations. Successful licentiates called each other *tongnian*, or “same year,” as the shared experience of a lifetime of constant stress and discipline unified them in common solidarity. All of this is marginal by comparison, though, to the incalculable influence of linguistic centralization.<sup>147</sup>

The Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties all took great care to extend the examination system’s reach to the furthest reaches of the empire, bringing in representatives of multiple ethnic groups. Even within the Han Chinese majority, though, candidates speaking all manner of dialects descended in common to the capital to make

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<sup>147</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 18-19

their attempt at the Jin-shi metropolitan exam. All of them, though, in order to pass any of these exams had to write in unified Literary Chinese script. This system, utilizing Chinese characters, was organized in an immensely complex and esoteric grammatical structure. It was functionally a language of poetry. Called *wenyanwen*, or *guanhua*, this common language claimed a descent that to this day is largely unknown. Remarkably static, it changed in basic form only once in history from what is commonly referred to as Classical Chinese. This bureaucratic language, as it is directly translated, was the language of the state perhaps as far back as the pre-Qin era. All dynasties, even foreign-ruled ones, used its form for all manner of transactions.<sup>148</sup>

All candidates who made it as far as the metropolitan examinations were fluent in this language, spoken and written. It was the single strongest unifier of their common identity, the one thing more than any other that separated them from the vast majority of others, even those who could read the vernacular. At the same time though it was the strongest sign of the throne's domination over them. Functionally monopolized by the state, knowledge of this language by definition represented subordination to the imagined entity that was the polity. Candidates for Chinese civil service examinations in the late imperial era were comprehensively reared, catalogued, grouped, manipulated, and conditioned to become institutionalized "creatures of the state."<sup>149</sup>

Extending this era backwards in time to the Song is necessary because the social and political structures needed to guide young men through this process were in place by this time, though not in as robust a fashion as the late Ming and especially Qing. Though

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<sup>148</sup> Endymoin Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, 19

<sup>149</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 30

candidates may not have taken dozens of exams, nor been as favored in office holding, nor been forced into expression by a standardized writing format, they nevertheless still learned Literary Chinese. They still had to memorize curriculum standardized by the state. They still experienced much of the same subtle manipulative techniques as thousands competed for only a few job openings, and they all still had to perform the ultimate act of prostration to the throne—taking the palace examination.

Though candidates only failed this portion of the examinations in the Song Dynasty, and then it was only in the earliest manifestations of it, all the way through the Qing Dynasty the throne reserved the power to ascribe final rank to the examinees. It did not matter how the blind and surprisingly impartial examiners ranked them on the metropolitan exams. After a lifetime of work and usually transcendent frustration in memorizing hundreds of thousands of characters, learning an esoteric language, conforming one's calligraphy, composition style, and political persuasion to acceptable standards, and failing despite these efforts usually multiple times, a candidate could see their rank evaporate before their eyes with the arbitrary whim of a demigod. It seems almost unnecessarily cruel that they did, in fact, rank them on the metro exams before they ever made them take the palace exams.<sup>150</sup>

The emperor used this practice to influence the selection of various officials to prominent positions. As it was in late Imperial China, this went far in determining who influenced policy and who amassed the greatest wealth and prestige. This was an oath of loyalty to the throne. Despite all the strict guidelines of impartiality in all previous exams and egregious pass/fail ratios, to have a final examination process where no one actually

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<sup>150</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, 75



failed, yet their prospects of employment after a lifetime of mental labor could be drastically altered at the whim of just one man was at once a powerful means of determining policy as well as an enforced gesture of outright inferiority.

Cheong suggests that the central crux in this endless cycle of social programming began largely with the Song Dynasty's efforts at extending state school systems into the provinces.<sup>151</sup> Clearly for such a system to continually reconstitute itself, a sophisticated structure of ideological programming intertwined with preexisting familial networks must ideally surround the candidates from childhood. If we look back to popular anecdotes from the Tang and their tendency to glorify the examinations' capacity to accommodate even the dispossessed and misfortunate, we see that the prestige needed to continually fuel this process predates that of the Song Dynasty or even the Five Dynasties period when the new-gentry came into existence. Instead of a state aggressively orienting a population to a certain bureaucratized routine, the state merely profited from the pre-existing prestige of the examinations by channeling it into more widespread participation. The origin of this prestige can only be attributed to the hard work of the scholarly literati in early China and the ritualistic social ideal, based on the *Five Classics*, they successfully inculcated into the throne and large portions of the scholarly elite. As stated, this started in ancient China, even before the Han Dynasty.

#### *The Power of Fate: Disassociating Inequity with the System*

If it is useful to think of late imperial China as a distinct era because of the rise of the gentry-society social contract and the dominant role examinations played in

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<sup>151</sup> Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth Century China*, 5

organizing people into this superstructure, then it is equally useful to qualify this period for the observed social effects on the people themselves most involved in the system's perpetuation. Starting in the Song and continuing through the Qing, examination candidates turned to fate to both enhance their prospects of success and justify their reasons for failure. Carried out through increased participation in Buddhist and Daoist rituals as well as through myth-creation of benevolent and malevolent spirits bolstering and sabotaging their examination experiences, the power of fate became one of the central explanations for the specific operation of the examination system.

One of the earliest examples of connecting the examinations to the power of fate can be found with the Daoist cult of Wen-chang, a Daoist patron deity of the literary arts. When followers of this cult in the Song Dynasty released a revelation from the god known as the Cinnamon Record, Wen-Chang became a spiritual governor of proper behavior, which in turn would lead to examination success:

The Cinnamon Record of scholars is administered by the Heavenly Bureau. Success or failure, glory or decline, none escape their fate. Dreams reveal the examination topic according to degree of one's sincerity. Hidden merit determined one's position on the placard of successful candidates. A man of humble heritage may bring his wife enfeoffment and his son an assured office.<sup>152</sup>

The story of Li Teng fully demonstrates the power of this god. Li Tang was a blessed man, fated to a lifetime of uninterrupted career success due to the mystical power of a jade seal given to him as a child. However, Li Teng fell under the disfavor of Wen-Chang as he embarked upon a series of terrible misdeeds ranging from multiple instances of sexual harassment and assault to false accusation and robbery. Wen Chang systematically

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<sup>152</sup> Kleeman, trans., *A God's Own Tale*, 290-91 quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 300

dismantled the power of his luck each time he committed a moral failure, resulting in his promised success being delayed permanently.<sup>153</sup> Stories such as these reinforced the power of Wen-Chang as his cult grew in prestige especially in the Ming Dynasty. Countless examination candidates flocked to his many temples, sacrificed to his image, and took care, at least on the face, to discipline their deeds on the model of Wen-Chang's choosing.

The cult of Kuan-ti was much the same. This deity was a legendary demigod, first lionized in the epic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the most famous works in all of Chinese fiction. Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties this former war hero and his cult, according to Benjamin Elman, "glorified the loyal and rewarded the good" by measuring human acts according to the 'standards of merit and evil.'<sup>154</sup> Kuanti was said to have spoken to a successful examination candidate in a dream begging him to clean his ear infection. The candidate noticed after he woke and approached the temple that Kuanti's idol had debris caught in its ear. After clearing it, Kuanti rewarded him with success.<sup>155</sup> Needless to say, the candidate was not the only one to patronize this deity.

Some of the most revealing stories of the power of fate come from tales circulated within the examination compounds on both the provincial and metropolitan level, particularly in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. One story featured a man who suddenly went insane, repeatedly screaming "Forgive me, Forgive me!" and drawing only a pair of women's shoes for his answer. He had been haunted by the ghost of a young woman he

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<sup>153</sup> from C.Y Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 270-271 quoted in Benjamin Elman. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 301

<sup>154</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 302

<sup>155</sup> from the Chi'ien-Ming k'o-ch'ang i-wen-lu, A. 46a, quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 302

had seduced and driven to commit suicide.<sup>156</sup> One ghost follows a candidate to an inn before the exams and is noticed by the innkeeper. The candidate cannot see the ghost and flees, postponing his attempt. The disgusted ghost declares that she, another wronged woman, could only exact revenge in the examinations.<sup>157</sup> Still another vengeful female ghost confused her target with someone else, and when she appeared to the unoffending candidate he, in good Confucian fashion, offered to arbitrate the dispute. Both parties were appeased and both candidates experienced lifetime success.<sup>158</sup>

Instances such as these highlighted the particular vulnerability of candidates once they began examination. However, a candidate was in danger of more than just death from vengeful spirits and gods. Sometimes they would spare the flesh and target the tests themselves. One examiner left a poem behind after he stained his paper with lamp oil, a prohibitive violation of form. Clearly to him it was the result of his philandering, and upon the wall of the compound he scribbled a long poem ending with, “Beware the beauty and fragrance of quietly blooming flowers!”<sup>159</sup> One examiner while grading was convinced of a test’s credentials and fully intended to pass it. In a dream, though, a particularly infamous Chinese deity called the King of the Dead insisted that the paper committed a violation of form. The mighty god held out his hand and written on it was the character for “licentious.” The examiner awoke and discovered an “X” written on a sentence that, though questionable, did not commit such an obvious violation. The “X”

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<sup>156</sup> from Ichisada Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*. 46, see bibliography for all of Miyazaki’s anecdotes

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*, 46-47

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, 47

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, 49

proved impossible to erase, though, forcing the examiner to fail it. Later the candidate's notorious predisposition for bad behavior was revealed.<sup>160</sup>

Spirits could also reward good deeds and ensure examination success. One ghost bargained with a stranger candidate, promising him high standing and a successful career as long as when he obtained office the candidate would find the ghost's murdered body, perform the proper rights, and expose the guilty party. The candidate failed, to which the ghost replied that he was unable to assist a sexual deviant. The candidate disciplined himself, abstained from sex, and passed the metropolitan exams upon the next try. He became a great magistrate and did as promised on behalf of the ghost's violated body.<sup>161</sup> Still another instance favored a candidate possessing medicinal skills. On his way to take the exams, the candidate stayed in a dying man's house and saved his life. After the man offered his wife to him, the candidate locked himself in a room and resisted her advances. Later his paper appeared before an examiner and was completely unacceptable in quality. A mystic voice distracted the examiner, though, and commanded him to spare the paper. The candidate passed and was appointed to office.<sup>162</sup>

Certainly these stories and ritual practices possessed a social organizational efficacy that could very easily rally individuals into certain modes of acceptable behavior. Spirits and deeds could not only punish but they could reward, thus incentivizing and disincentivizing participants. Stories of favorable and malevolent spirits alike almost always were preoccupied with a candidate's sexual and filial morals. At times, even a candidate's family history could positively or negatively affect his

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<sup>160</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, 54

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, 68-69

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*, 53

outcome.<sup>163</sup> The purposes and ultimate function of selecting this behavior in society could certainly be extensive. However, more important to the state and throne is the effect the stories and the rituals themselves had in what Elman describes as the “valorization” of the exams.

Elman tends to highlight the presence of these stories as evidence of the profound mental anxiety experienced by candidates after a lifetime of preparation. Of this there can be no doubt. Directing the reasons for success or failure in the examination market to forces of “cosmological justice” could therapeutically explain the often unexplainable reasons as to why some elites garnered success from the system and others did not.<sup>164</sup> This interpretation, though, signifies the presence of these stories and practices as principally part of a larger social reaction of “the uncertainties of daily life.”<sup>165</sup> It reserves for the state a very marginal role in perpetuating these stories and practices through active myth-creation. The stories themselves no doubt came from individuals totally convinced of the power of fate. However, in terms of the state the pragmatic social and political effects of these instances must not be ignored.

The redirection of explanation to which Elman refers distanced the throne and its appendages from the fate of the candidates. It fostered an idea of the system as a force of nature, even a force of the gods, whose ultimate results could be as arbitrary or specific as the unknowable eternals deemed necessary. In this way, unlike in the Tang Dynasty, these anecdotes reinforced not simply the meritocratic virtue of the system, but more

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<sup>163</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, 54

<sup>164</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 299, 301

<sup>165</sup> *ibid.*, 299

explicitly its outright divinity. This connected the examinations to the same supernatural forces that justified the right of the emperor to absolute power. The emperor and his institutions ruled naturally, because the order of the universe demanded it. Success and happiness in this system was dependant on a candidate's conformity to the social norms exemplified by the ruler but ultimately enforced by invisible powers.

These explanations distracted examinees from the idiosyncrasies and even inequities of the system. The late imperial period was characterized by the throne's prodigious use of quotas from various population centers to promote regional influence. In the Yuan and Qing Dynasties, those quotas could also be outright ethnically and racially skewed as part of larger state goals in partitioning privileged ethnic space. Finally, candidates could also be distracted from the psychological conditioning involved in the system which they had been exposed to since childbirth.

All of this lubricated the throne's capacity to exercise the kind of arbitrary authority exemplified by the palace examinations, ethnic and regional quotas, and various rulers' promotion of certain doctrines to suit their dynastic needs. By detaching the throne from the explanation of the system's rationality, the emperors could pass off responsibility to the very innerworkings of the universe while maintaining ultimate direction. It further lowered candidates' and their families' wills to resist and bolstered consent. However, none of this was a coincidence. Anecdotes and certain instances of ritual sacrifice in late imperial China were more than a reflections of mass psychic anxiety as Elman prodigiously highlights. The consent they produced was state-manufactured because the stories and practices were themselves state-manufactured.

Even as early as the Yuan Dynasty, the Wen-chang cult, famously known for its ability to predict and ensure examination success, was bestowed state legitimacy:

When the Song perished...the offerings to the god's were suspended. After the examination had been abolished for more than forty years we heard of no supernatural feats from Wen-Chang. In 1314, when the Son of Heaven made an especially sagacious decision and, clearly summoning all within the empire, selected officials through the examinations, the people of Shu gradually began to offer sacrifice to Wen-chang again.<sup>166</sup>

It should be noted that in 1314, the "Son of Heaven" was a Mongol, who like all of his predecessors and ancestors struggled mightily with Han Chinese to produce recognition of their claim to this lofty title. Recognizing the legitimacy of a cult that based much of the purpose of its existence (as well as its material acquisition) on the perpetuation of state institutions was an effort at rekindling Han Chinese participation in the state system that sputtered after the immediate fall of the Song. Participation in the state was, by definition, an act of cooperation and submission to the throne and thus recognition of their lofty claims.

The previously mentioned cult of Kuan ti was itself rigorously organized by the Ming and Qing Dynasties, who for centuries sponsored hundreds of temples for its benefit. None of the previous accounts also mention the vast network of state-constructed Confucian temples that themselves served as way-stations for prayer and reflection, allowing incalculable sums of candidates to beg the ancient sage for examination success.<sup>167</sup> Finally, all of the aforementioned anecdotes, and many more unmentioned, are available to scholars today solely because the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties

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<sup>166</sup> Terry Kleeman "Introduction," pp. 49, 73-75, in Kleeman, trans., *A God's Own Tale* quoted in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* 300

<sup>167</sup> Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 299



all recorded and stored them among official records. They placed them among the collections of official Dynastic histories, edicts, and the many laws and decrees promulgated by the highest echelons of Chinese government, and translated them into Literary Chinese, the language of the throne and the Heavens. Through this, administrations afforded these “unusual matters,” as they were known, a dignity that only very specific information was meant to possess.<sup>168</sup>

If the late imperial era of Chinese history is to be characterized by anything, then it is the increased role of the state in aggressively stratifying and organizing society into a structure designed to establish the primacy of Imperial authority through aggressive psychological conditioning and the glorification of subordination. Some of the many forces supporting this superstructure were the myths and rituals previously examined. However, it should be noted that scholars should engage these stories and historical institutions as instances of state myth-creation as much as anything else. Indeed, they were all a part of a vast effort to manufacture consent to the Imperial State system.

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<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, 303

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MERIT OF THE CAUSE

In evaluating the place of the civil service examinations in Chinese history, historians have largely focused on two questions: First: To what degree did the examinations live up to their reputation for supporting a meritocratic society? Second, What effect did the entire Confucian system have on the development of Chinese society as compared to the Western model of industrialization and modernity? To both questions the answers certainly are unclear and are inevitably charged with logical concerns. This section will attempt to engage both questions and their inherent issues while also addressing the relevant premises behind each one.

#### *The Tallest Leaves of Grass: The Truth About Chinese Meritocracy*

Scholars such as E.A. Kracke, Pan Kuang-Tan, and especially Ping-ti-Ho all have addressed the merit question through direct analysis of the examination answers themselves. From Ming Dynasty onward, candidates' dossiers accompanied their answers on the highest levels of the examinations, each containing crucial biographical information for each candidate including residential information and the number of relatives on the paternal side who themselves occupied a position in the civil service. Both pieces of information are among the most reliable statistics in determining the socio-economic position of a person living in Late Imperial China. The lack of maternal

family employment history is large inconsequential, as Ping-ti Ho observes, due to the convenient tradition of families passing down honorific titles, detected on the dossiers, descending from both lines as well as from collateral lines.<sup>169</sup> The presence of civil service Employment and degree holding within a candidate's family is easy to detect from surviving records.

Unfortunately time has not been kind to such records from specific eras. Though the Ming and Qing Dynasties present a wealth of information, only two years, 1128 and 1256, exist from the Song Dynasty where examination records have been preserved. Kracke's study focuses exclusively on these lists, and his findings are quite surprising. The biographical information on each candidate is scant compared to later Dynasties. However, Kracke was still able to ascertain the family employment history of most of the candidates, and in both years, separated by a century, close to half of the candidates could boast no previous family history of civil service employment.<sup>170</sup>

Pan Kuang-Tan focuses his study on the mid to late Qing Dynasty, with his source material coming from what is known as the "Vermillion Ink Essays." These were a collection of 915 examination answers, complete with detailed dossiers, ranging from 1661 to 1905. Each candidate's residence pattern could be extrapolated from the information in the dossiers along with their family's civil service employment history. Using knowledge concerning the distribution of economically powerful families in each region at the time period, whether in the city or in the rural countryside, Tan was able to

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<sup>169</sup> Ping Ti-Ho, "Family vs. Merit in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties," in *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* Johanna Menzel. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 29

<sup>170</sup> E. A. Kracke, "Family vs. Merit in the Examination System," in *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* (Johanna Menzel. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 6

estimate the likelihood of each candidate coming from privileged or underprivileged backgrounds. The results were more sobering for the Qing Dynasty. The gentry classes seemed to possess far greater influence in the Qing than in the Song in reproducing their ranks within the civil service. Yet for each region, a sizable number of candidates, averaging just over 13%, could not boast any family employment history in the civil service or even a residence pattern that would indicate a likelihood of their privilege.<sup>171</sup> Considering the era in question, even at its most pessimistic the examination system did seem to advance sizable quantities of new blood into the bureaucracy.

There are clearly many issues with these studies. Obviously two years of data from the Song Dynasty are not enough to concretely determine trends over several centuries. Moreover, both of the years represent only the Southern Song Dynasty, a time of great upheaval for the political establishment that would more likely have reflected unusual trends in the civil service, especially with the debates surrounding the establishment of Neo-Confucianism as orthodoxy. As for the Tang study, his guesswork concerning residential patterns correlating to socio-economic position is precisely that: guesswork. By his own admission, representatives from all walks of life generally occupied both urban and rural areas in pre-modern China. Most importantly, though, is the fact that the Vermillion Essays are so named because they are not a typical collection. They were, indeed, legitimate answers from exams complete with accurate dossiers, but they only come from a group of candidates who generally convened in the capital and circulated their answers, printed in red, among social networks for the purposes of

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<sup>171</sup> P'An Kuang Tan, Fei Hsiao-Tung, "City and Village: The Inequality of Opportunity" in *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* Johanna Menzel (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 15

maximizing group success.<sup>172</sup> These collections do not represent a year-by-year tally, like the Song records, of successful examination candidates.

Ping-ti Ho clarifies much with his famous study, though, covering a colossal time period from 1371, when the exams became truly routine in the Ming, to the end of the examinations in 1905. Ho analyzes over 34,000 successful candidates, over 11,000 of which held the highest Jin-Shi degrees, and cross examines their family civil service Employment histories. The results surprisingly corroborate the extremes of the two previously studies. The Ming Dynasty was characterized by a high degree of success among candidates, roughly an average of 50%, whose families had no previous members hold office. As the Qing Dynasty progressed, however, that number fell, but never below 16%.<sup>173</sup>

Scholars should obviously consider the importance of other occupations than simply the civil service in determining the economic power of families in pre-modern China. Successful merchants and landowners could obviously amass their own substantial wealth. However, for some time the extant evidence from Late Imperial China overwhelmingly suggests that material success within families and civil service appointment were intimately connected. It was, by a gargantuan margin, the absolute most prestigious and sought-after avenue to marshalling economic success.

It should also be noted that despite the fact that far more degrees in any period in Late Imperial China existed than jobs, receiving a Jin-shi degree was certainly a

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<sup>172</sup> P'An Kuang Tan, Fei Hsiao-Tung, "City and Village: The Inequality of Opportunity" in *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* Johanna Menzel (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 10

<sup>173</sup> Ping Ti-Ho, "Family vs. Merit in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties" in *Family vs. Merit The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* (Johanna Menzel. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 28-33

guarantee of at least eventual employment almost always involving great economic benefit. Even a chu-jen degree would very often garner one a local position guaranteeing one financial security far in excess of almost any other class of person. However, to acquire a degree in Late Imperial China was always, without exception, a marker of great social prestige regardless of one's employment status. It exempted one from corporal punishment and greatly widened the social, political, and economic options of any family in China with a son possessing one. Of all the candidates boasting an ancestor in possession of a degree, absolutely 100% of them could certainly count on an easier path in life than their counterparts.

When faced with all of these issues, however, few definite conclusions can be established. The records do, however, suggest very real trends. Never in the entire historical record of Late Imperial China is there any evidence that the examination systems favored only the privileged and wealthy. In fact, even in its most stratified times, the examinations still proved to be remarkably effective at advancing the under-privileged and dispossessed in society when laid in comparison with China's contemporaries. Indeed, even if the Ming Dynasty records over-exaggerate, that period of China's history still marks it, as Ping-ti Ho suggests, as one of the most upwardly mobile societies in human history.<sup>174</sup>

Based on this information, China's civil service examination system was remarkably meritocratic. The entire principle behind the system was to extend the reach of the state to the lowest and most unknown levels of society and bring their talents to the

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<sup>174</sup> Ping Ti-Ho, "Family vs. Merit in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties" in *Family vs. Merit The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* (Johanna Menzel. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 31

forefront of decision-making. Every year for which records exist, very large contingents of people from areas of society uninvested with the most reliable guarantors of material opulence and highest markers of social prestige lined the ranks of the licentiates. To clarify, though, Chinese society was not structured so as to allow men and women of many various persuasions and talents to easily elevate to the highest levels of society based on their talents and wherewithal. Chinese upward mobility applied only to a culture of literati. Short of achieving a certain unprecedented ideal, though, the examination system proved remarkably effective at guaranteeing the Chinese people in the late Imperial era a narrow but very real road to advancement, as long as they understood their advancement necessarily resulted in their ultimate subservience. In this way Quesnay's 1767 statement that "there is no hereditary nobility in China; a man's merit and capacity alone mark the rank he is to take" certainly is hyperbole to an extreme degree.<sup>175</sup> However, the myth is ultimately based in instances of occurrence.

### *Legacy of the Institution*

To answer the question concerning the examination's role in China's development into an industrialized society, we must look to the Qing Dynasty. The Manchus built arguably the greatest and most successful of all classic Chinese bureaucratic states, but by the time they came to the forefront of history the seeds of China's divergence from the West may already have been sown. As John Fairbank recounts, by the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Farmer's almanacs progressively became more and more static in the

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<sup>175</sup> E. A. Kracke, "Family vs. Merit in the Examination System," *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent* Johanna Menzel, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), 1

agricultural innovations they listed. China had simply ceased in producing many of the world's inventions, a lofty position it had held for some time.<sup>176</sup>

One must also recognize the rapid increase in population China underwent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which ultimately topped over 400 million people by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the key factors leading to this explosion certainly was the Qing Dynasty's particularly impressive record at stifling instability and warfare at this time, more so than usual. The overwhelming abundance of cheap labor may have stifled the incentive to innovate.<sup>177</sup> If this thesis is true, then the examinations, the key institution most responsible for Chinese elites producing unmatched social and political stability for over a thousand years, was also China's chief ossifying agent.

Contemporary theories accounting for the rise of industrialization are many and varied. They need no recounting here.<sup>178</sup> If the issue of this causality dilemma is so unresolved in places where this phenomenon actually happened, then a debate over a place where it did not is even more folly. One thing is quite certain, though. As Fairbank notes in nations where industrialization lingered, such as Russia and Japan, the lost ground could be reclaimed through sheer force of governance, regardless of the human or cultural cost.<sup>179</sup> In this aspect there can be no debate. The sheer hyperconservative disposition of the throne in the last century of the Qing Dynasty stifled not only the very

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<sup>176</sup> John King Fairbank, Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*, 172

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*, 172

<sup>178</sup> The debate surrounding the divergence of East and West is characterized usually by the arguments presented in Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* and selected works by Andre Gunder Frank such as *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*, 218



real attempts at reform, but also whatever further potential attempts that may have lingered in the minds of cautious advisors.

These advisors included Kang Youwei, the *jin shi* licentiate remembered most fondly for his promotion of the “Hundred Days Reform” campaign. After China’s utterly humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1895, reformers like Kang were presented with the open ears of the emperor Guangxu, who up to then was merely a puppet of the empress Dowager Cixi. Kang and his colleagues in the Summer of 1898 all under the sanction of the emperor successfully sponsored reforms edicts abolishing the eight legged essay and ended the literary and calligraphy composition requirements of the examinations and replaced them with questions more relevant to the Western tradition of the sciences and humanities. Local education was to be transformed and Westernized, mines and railways sponsored, and a national budget created for the advancement of social progress.<sup>180</sup>

Up to this point, reform movements had been ignored in the court. This one would die literally in a flurry of executions as the Empress Dowager Cixi instituted a direct coup and marginalized the seemingly independent emperor Guanxu. It actually would not take long for Cixi and her establishment to see their own rapidly advancing destruction. Starting in 1905 the Qing throne had legitimately committed itself to constitutional and economic reform. It abandoned the examinations and even tried to send emissaries to foreign countries to study government models. These, of course, were only attempts to save their own skin, but they were, admittedly, full-hearted attempts. The examinations were truly gone after 1905, and they represented the most powerful and enduring

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<sup>180</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search For Modern China*, 229

mechanism sustaining the throne's dominance over the multi-layered economy of dominance that was Chinese society.<sup>181</sup>

These developments only reinforce Fairbank's point, though. Imperial China could only have been saved by reform had it been instituted closer to 1850, not in 1905 when all popular legitimacy had slipped away. The culture shock of seeing their little Japanese brothers totally outclass them on the battlefield would only have been potentially useful to the Chinese immediately after the Taiping Rebellion or the Second Opium Wars. By the end of the century, Chinese society broadly defined and the provincial authorities were literally one or two minor rebellions away from dropping all allegiance and consent to the central government.

The throne's perceived security in the traditional hierarchical structure was the principal cause of their myopia. The examinations reinforced this structure and sense of security with its profound capacity to continually produce colossal demonstrations of absolute deference. To change the system, to replace the systematic social and ideological programming of ancient classics and philosophy with anything else was to threaten the rigid superstructure that guaranteed the both the gentry elite and the Imperial family their positions. Examinations, indeed any institution, can be said to be nothing but an extension of human endeavor. If this is true then it is the Imperial elite who deserve the sum total of the blame for China's divergence, along with whatever subtle economic and material factors beyond the sight of mortal humans.

This is false, though. Institutions may ultimately be themselves only machinations of people. However, those machinations shaped those people from birth to death and

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<sup>181</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Search For Modern China*, 246

conditioned their decisions even in times when they seemed to be fully aware of their actions. The lesson is that no one is coldly rational enough to see the full ramifications and context of their decisions. As much as people fashion institutions, they are also products of them, driven even to belief in the supernatural by them. Scholars should see the legacy of institutionalized social conditioning as that of a historical actor in and of itself. This actor at times supported the near incomparable stability, economic power, and cultural sophistication of a colossal and well-organized mass of humanity. But the legacy of the examinations must also reflect their inevitable effect in stymieing the very real potential technological and institutional development of Chinese civilization and all of the very real benefits to humanity such a revolution entails.

### *Conclusion*

The examinations were dynamic in form yet surprisingly static in function even as far back as the Han Dynasty. The only aspects of that function that changed from their inception was scale by which they were expected to operate. Always Imperial, aristocratic, or gentry elites intended them to fit and play a role within an economy of social domination. By the Song Dynasty, that role had become principal, indeed essential. The place of the examinations in Chinese history as well as the philosophies with which they coupled should be as mechanism serving the historical needs of historical people.

Looking into China's past, one is struck at the overwhelming and dominant presence of hierarchy and social inequality that favored state-entrenched elites. This is especially so after the Song Dynasty. After then the very structure of the state assumed the presence of an autocrat who could single-handedly manipulate his country's elite in

both behavior and composition to a shocking degree. This simple observation illustrates that the purpose and historical place of the examinations was ultimately to either solely or at least assist, along with myth-creation, in creating this condition.

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