



Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China

Benjamin A. Elman



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During China's late imperial period (roughly 1400-1900 CE), men gathered by the millions every two or three years outside official examination compounds sprinkled across China. Only one percent of candidates would complete the academic regimen that would earn them a post in the administrative bureaucracy. *Civil Examinations* assesses the role of education, examination, and China's civil service in fostering the world's first professional class based on demonstrated knowledge and skill.

Civil examinations were instituted in China in the seventh century CE, but in the Ming and Qing eras they were at the center of a complex social web that held together the intellectual, political, and economic life of imperial China. Local elites and the court sought to influence how the government regulated the classical curriculum and selected civil officials. As a guarantor of educational merit, examinations tied the dynasty to the privileged gentry and literati classes--both ideologically and institutionally.

China eliminated its classical examination system in 1905. But this carefully balanced, constantly contested piece of social engineering, worked out over centuries, was an early harbinger of the meritocratic regime of college boards and other entrance exams that undergirds higher education in much of the world today.



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