

The Civil-Service Examinations of Imperial China

Recruitment, Compound, and Quota, 605-1905

Joseph Smith

2026

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Preface

The examination compound

Before the first watch of a provincial session, an official at the outer gate of the Jiangnan compound at Nanjing checked what the candidate carried. The list was fixed and long. A stove of hardened clay for warming a small pot of water. A padded quilt, a folded mat, and a wooden pillow. A supply of ink cakes, brushes, and paper stamped with the compound's seal. Prepared cakes, salted turnip, and a jar of pickled beans. A candle in its holder for the second and third nights. The candidate carried no book. He carried no loose paper. He carried no writing not visible on the skin of his arm, and the search at the second gate was designed to find what the first had missed. When the search was over, and after his warrant had been checked against the roll and his surety noted, he walked through the third gate into a walled lane of small brick cells open to the sky, took the cell whose number matched the token in his hand, and was locked in until dawn on the third day.¹

¹The compound routine at Nanjing is described in Miyazaki 1981, translated by Schirokauer (Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, trans. Conrad Schirokauer (Yale University Press, 1981)). Elman's institutional treatment gives the wider Ming-Qing frame

At the Jiangnan compound the number of cells passed twenty thousand by the late eighteenth century, and the Beijing metropolitan compound ran to a comparable scale.² The provincial sessions of 1685 across the fifteen provinces seated roughly a hundred thousand candidates in a single week; the metropolitan session the following spring passed something between one hundred and two hundred and fifty jinshi from among perhaps six thousand. The ratios are steadier than the absolute numbers, and it is the ratios that matter: the apparatus selected a very small number of officials from a very large number of candidates, and arranged that the very large number went home believing the selection had been fair.³

A reader who approaches these thirteen centuries through a single period, or a single genre of testimony, will get the institution wrong. The candidate memoirs that survive reach a reader through Miyazaki's and Schirokauer's translation and compilation, a sequence of interpretive layers rather than an unmediated first-person voice. The dynastic monographs of the examinations, the Xin Tang shu selection juan and the Song shi selection monographs, are institutional treatises composed after the fact by court historians interested in demonstrating the coherence of a reform, not in reporting its irregularities; the Ming and Qing statutory compendia are the same species of source at a later date.⁴

The scholarship divides on what the jinshi rolls can show, and the division is a matter of denominator rather than of contest. Ho Ping-ti, working in 1962 from Ming and early Qing *jinshi* rolls, classified graduates by the degree-holding forebears visible in the rolls' abbreviated family fields; on that measure the sons of families without a recorded degree-holder were a large enough share of the successful class to justify calling the system, in the sense the term carried in 1962, meritocratic.⁵ Benjamin Elman, working from the same *jinshi* rolls together with lineage genealogies, local gazetteers, and academy registers, recovered lower-degree

(Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (University of California Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520921474>).

²Miyazaki 1981 gives the cell count for the Jiangnan compound and the sensory detail of the three nights (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*). Elman 2000 supplies the demographic ratios for the late Ming and Qing sessions (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

³The double object of the compound, selection and consent, is stated directly by Elman: the examination institution disciplined a nationwide reading practice and delivered a legitimation of the imperial state that its selection function alone could not have produced (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*; Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674726048>).

⁴On the Xin Tang shu selection juan see Des Rotours 1932 (Robert Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T'ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)* (Ernest Leroux, 1932), <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb320240392>) and the Chinese Text Project digital edition (Xiu Ouyang and Qi Song, eds., *Xin Tang Shu (New History of the Tang), Examination Monographs, Juan 44-45* (Chinese Text Project (ctext.org), 1060), <https://ctext.org/xin-tang-shu>). On Song material see the digital Song shi (Toqto'a, ed., *Song Shi (History of Song), Selection Monographs* (Chinese Text Project (ctext.org), 1345), <https://ctext.org/song-shi>) and Chaffee's 1995 revision of *The Thorny Gates of Learning* (John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*, revised (State University of New York Press, 1995)). On the Ming statutory compendium see the digital Da Ming huidian (*Da Ming Huidian (Collected Statutes of the Great Ming)* (Chinese Text Project (ctext.org), 1587), <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=1183>).

⁵Ho 1962, especially the tabulations of the Ming and early Qing jinshi rolls (Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (Columbia University Press, 1962), <https://doi.org/10.7312/ho--93690>).

status and elite connections the printed fields did not consistently preserve. Some of Ho's "no preceding degree-holder" families therefore belonged to established degree-holding lineages. Ho's fields measured mobility into the jinshi degree; Elman's wider evidence measured continuity the jinshi fields alone omit. The two findings nest rather than contend, and the abolition of 1905 struck an apparatus that both descriptions, read at their own resolutions, correctly identify.⁶

Miyazaki Ichisada described the Qing compound from the candidate's side, and his volume, in Schirokauer's translation, is the channel through which most English-language readers meet the compound at eye level.⁷

The Sui founding of 605 stands at the beginning, the Qing abolition edict of 1905 at the end. What separates them is not a continuous thirteen-century narrative but six turning points at which the relationship among learning, status, and office was substantially remade: the Sui designation, the Tang inheritance, the Song invention of the quota, the Ming standardization of the essay, the Qing compound at its demographic limit, and the abolition itself. What the Tang, Song, and Ming courts changed at each turn can be named to the extent the surviving monographs and statutory compendia support, which falls short of a full institutional history of the intervening centuries. Between the two dates the examinations were, in every dynasty that inherited them, the largest apparatus of legitimation the imperial state ran, and their legitimacy depended on the coexistence of an aspiration open to nearly all and a certification granted to almost none. When the Qing court severed that apparatus in 1905 the dynasty had six years to live. The sequence is stated; it was not prophecy.

Chapter 1. 605: The Sui founding

The Han precedent

The Han dynasty had recruited its officials by recommendation. A provincial governor forwarded to the capital, in the fourth month of each year, a list of local men of demonstrated character and ability; the men were interviewed at court, tested informally on their familiarity with the classics, and appointed to office if the interview went well. The scheme was known as *chaju*, "selection by recommendation," and it produced, over four centuries of Han and post-Han practice, the great commentators of the received tradition: Zheng Xuan, Xun Yue, Ban Gu. It also produced, by the third century, a hereditary official class in which local recommendation had settled into a rota among a small number of great families in each commandery.⁸

⁶Elman 2000, chapters on the demographic composition of the late Ming and Qing candidate class (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*); Elman 2013 restates and refines the objection to Ho (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

⁷Miyazaki 1981 (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*).

⁸The Han recommendation practice and its progressive capture by great families is summarized in Elman 2000, chapter 1 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). Des Rotours 1932 gives the Tang institutional treatment against which the Han precedent is measured (Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T'ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)*).

The Nine Ranks system that succeeded *chaju* under the Cao Wei and its Jin, Northern Wei, and Northern Zhou successors formalized the drift. An officer called the Impartial and Just was appointed in each commandery to grade the local families by nine ranks; the rank of the family determined the rank at which its sons entered office. By the middle of the sixth century a proverb of the northern courts held that in the top four ranks there were no low families and in the bottom five ranks there were no high families. The Northern Wei court had begun, in the reforms of Xiaowen (r. 471-499), to introduce a written component into recruitment; the reform was uneven, and the great families of the north continued to enter office chiefly by rank of birth.⁹

Two readings of the Sui founding of 605 remain possible, and the sources permit both: a rupture, in which the Sui court broke with Han and Nine Ranks recruitment by inserting a written examination between provincial recommendation and court appointment, or a codification of a written component Northern Wei and Northern Zhou practice had already established. Neither reading is wrong; the choice between them is largely a question of what one takes the Han precedent to have been. What is certain is that the Sui court gave the written test a founding date and a place in the institutional vocabulary from which it could not afterward be removed.

The Sui edict

The Sui court founded the institution twice. Wendi, in the founding years of the dynasty in the 580s, abolished the Nine Ranks and opened recruitment to men of demonstrated learning; the examination proper was still absent, and appointment continued to proceed by recommendation against a written report. Yangdi, in 605, established the *jinshi* category, the “presented scholar,” as a route into office that turned on a written examination of literary composition and canonical knowledge. The category was one of six the Sui court used, and its early scale was small. What Yangdi did that his father had not was to name the category, fix its scope in a court edict, and make it available as a route to office independent of recommendation.¹⁰

The Sui founding was small and would have remained small: Yangdi’s military failures in Korea, the peasant risings of the 610s, and the collapse of the dynasty in 618 left the reform only two decades of practice, and its long history began not with Yangdi but with Taizong of the Tang, who inherited the founding and elected to keep it.

The Tang inheritance

Why the Tang court chose to inherit the Sui examination category is the question the Han precedent frames: the Tang founders had risen through the Northern Zhou and Sui

⁹On Nine Ranks and the Northern Wei written component, see Elman 2000, chapter 1 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and Des Rotours 1932 on the Sui-Tang recruitment vocabulary that inherits the Northern Wei innovation (Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T’ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)*).

¹⁰The 605 founding of the *jinshi* category is the settled reading of both Des Rotours 1932 (Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T’ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)*) and Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). The two agree that the founding was a designation more than a transformation; the transformation followed under the Tang.

aristocracies, the great northwestern military class from which the Sui founders themselves had come, and it was not obvious that a court of that class would wish to open recruitment against its own interests. The Xin Tang shu monographs on selection preserve, in juan 44 and 45, the outlines of the answer: the Tang court did not open recruitment to the empire at large but to the empire's *lettered* men, a category narrow enough in the early Tang to keep the reform's political consequences inside limits the founding class could tolerate.¹¹

Tang recruitment was multiple: the Ministry of Personnel operated a year-round system of recommendation, of protection by rank of a candidate's father or grandfather, and of examination in a half-dozen categories, of which the classicist tested memorization of the canonical texts, the jinshi tested composition of the shi poem and fu prose form, and lesser categories tested law, mathematics, and calligraphy. The jinshi was the most difficult and prestigious category from the early Tang; its successful candidates, thirty or so a year at the end of the seventh century and fewer earlier, rose fastest in subsequent service, but the category competed with recommendation and protection rather than replacing them, opening only a narrow parallel route, in some years fewer than twenty men, for those whose families could not protect them. After the mid-eighth century a larger share of the highest offices went to men who had come in by it.¹²

The consequence for the office

The consequence of the Tang inheritance was, over the two centuries after 605, a reorganization of the office. The recruit who had come in by jinshi examination had passed a test the great families' sons had often declined to take, in a form the state itself had prescribed; he was therefore, in a sense the recommendation-recruit was not, obligated to the state that had certified him, and his standing rested on a certification withdrawable in principle.

The reorganization was slow, and it was not complete under the Tang. The rebellion of An Lushan in 755 broke the western military class into whose hands the state had run, and the reconstruction of the eighth and ninth centuries drew disproportionately on the jinshi cohort. By the end of the Tang, the highest court offices were held by men who had come in by examination in a majority large enough to shift the character of the office. Under the Song, from the tenth century, the reorganization became complete, and the examination category became the standard route into office. What the Sui founding of 605 had done was to insert a mechanism into the empire whose consequences would take four hundred years to unfold.¹³

¹¹The Xin Tang shu monographs are cited here from Des Rotours 1932 (Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T'ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)*) and from the Chinese Text Project digital edition (Ouyang and Song, *Xin Tang Shu (New History of the Tang), Examination Monographs, Juan 44-45*). Elman's institutional history reads the same monographs in the context of the wider Tang recruitment vocabulary (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

¹²Des Rotours 1932 gives the annual jinshi tabulation from the Xin Tang shu selection juan (Des Rotours, *Le Traité Des Examens, Traduit de La Nouvelle Histoire Des T'ang (Chapitres XLIV, XLV)*). Elman 2000 notes that Tang jinshi rose more quickly than protected sons of officials of comparable rank (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

¹³The delayed maturation of the Sui reform is a settled reading of the transition literature; see Elman 2000 and Kuhn 2009 on the Song consolidation (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*; Dieter Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009)). The Naitō hypothesis, on which the transition from Tang to Song is read as a

The founding as a designation

The examination as it existed under the Tang was a small mechanism sitting inside a much larger apparatus of recommendation and protection, and its long history could not have been read from the size of its Tang operation. The Sui court had inserted a name and a category into an existing recruitment vocabulary, and the imperial state built inside that name, over the next thirteen centuries, an apparatus the Sui founders had not imagined.

Chapter 2. c. 1000: The Song expansion and the quota

The Song court's decision

The founder of the Song, Taizu (r. 960-976), had risen through the military commands of the last Five Dynasties and knew the danger they posed to the court. His civil settlement, worked out in the first decade of the dynasty and continued by his brother Taizong (r. 976-997), reversed the Tang balance: the military commands were subordinated to the civil administration, staffed on a scale the Tang had not attempted by men who had come in through the examinations. The jinshi cohort under Taizu was small, comparable to a Tang year; under Taizong it expanded, in the sessions of the 980s and 990s, to a scale no earlier dynasty had produced, some three hundred to five hundred jinshi at each metropolitan session, above which sat the palace-examination stage Taizong added.¹⁴

The expansion had a political character. Taizong opened the examination sessions to a candidate population an order of magnitude larger than the Tang had processed. Provincial screening under the *jieshi*, the qualifying session held every three years in the prefectural cities, identified the men who would proceed to the metropolitan session; the palace stage Taizong added, held in the throne chamber under the emperor's own review, moved the examination's ceremonial authority to the throne itself. The provincial and metropolitan stages selected; the palace stage certified.

Taizong's motive was the motive the Song settlement expressed at every level: the dynasty had inherited a militarily fractured empire and chose to build the reunification on a civil order rather than a restored military class, and the examinations were the instrument of that choice. The cohort that came in through them was, by the end of the tenth century, large enough to fill the middle and upper reaches of office, and the great families of the Tang settlement, whose sons had held office by protection, receded into a smaller share of the total.¹⁵

periodizing break, is described in Miyakawa 1955 (Hisayuki Miyakawa, "An Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1955): 533–52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2941873>).

¹⁴The Song sessional counts are set out in Kracke 1953 (E. A. Kracke Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960-1067*, Harvard-Yenching Monograph Series XIII (Harvard University Press for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1953)) and refined against the Song shi monographs by Chaffee 1995 (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*). On the political settlement of Taizu and Taizong, see Kuhn 2009 (Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*).

¹⁵The Song political-institutional narrative is Kuhn 2009 (Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*); the quantitative work is Chaffee 1995 (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*) and Kracke 1953 (Kracke, *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960-1067*).

The quota's origin

The Song expansion produced a problem the dynasty then had to solve. Once the metropolitan session had passed several hundred jinshi in a year, the office rolls of the empire, which counted at any moment in the low tens of thousands of active civil posts, could not absorb the graduates; the eleventh century's sessional graduates, including provincial *juren* who had passed the qualifying stage but not gone forward, ran to numbers of the same order across a few sessions. The office rolls were oversubscribed by any accounting.

The court's answer was the quota. From the middle of the eleventh century a maximum number of jinshi to be passed at each metropolitan session was fixed by imperial edict, and the provincial quotas at the qualifying stage were fixed in turn; the quotas were adjusted between sessions and between dynasties and were unequal across the empire, the southeastern provinces holding smaller per-capita quotas than the north and northwest despite producing the largest candidate populations. The quota was, from very early in its history, a redistributive as well as a limiting instrument.¹⁶

The quota mattered for a reason the Song court did not need to state: once the maximum was fixed, the ratio of successful to unsuccessful candidates could rise without limit as the candidate population grew. In the eleventh century the metropolitan ratio ran at something between one in fifteen and one in five; by the late Song, after the loss of the north, the provincial ratios in the southeastern circuits were running above one in a hundred. The apparatus that had begun as an expansion had turned, within a century and a half, into a filter.

The apparatus as a class-maker

The consequence of the quota was that the Song produced, for the first time in Chinese history, a lettered class larger than the office it could enter. The candidate who passed the prefectural qualifying stage but failed the metropolitan session held a certified status, the *juren*, which the imperial state recognized and the local prefectural administration honored: he could sit again at the next triennial cycle, enter the local schools and private academies that grew up around the provincial examination cities, and teach the sons of the local elite, but he could not, unless he passed at a later session, enter the office rolls of the empire.

By the twelfth century the size of this certified but unemployed lettered class was, by Chaffee's estimation, an order of magnitude larger than the office rolls it aspired to enter. The imperial state had, without deciding to, taken on the task of maintaining a large learned class as an appendage of its recruitment apparatus. The task would fall on the state and its local intermediaries for the next eight centuries: a lettered population certified by the quota but not employable by it, sustained by teaching, by local honor, and by the prospect of the

¹⁶The Song quota reconstruction is Kracke 1953 (Kracke, *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960-1067*), against the Song shi selection monographs (Toqto'a, *Song Shi (History of Song), Selection Monographs*), with Chaffee 1995 providing the prefectural-gazetteer disaggregation (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*). The gazetteer sources are, as Chaffee notes, uneven in survival; the aggregate curve is more firmly established than any single provincial disaggregation.

next triennial cycle.¹⁷

Chaffee's reconstruction and its limits

Chaffee's reconstruction of the Song numbers triangulates three families of evidence that individually survive unevenly, the Song shi selection monographs, the surviving prefectural gazetteers with their local juren rolls, and biographical anthologies that preserve the successful over the unsuccessful in a proportion the underlying demography does not; where the families agree he takes the number, where they diverge he states the divergence, and where only one survives he registers an estimate as an estimate.¹⁸ That the Song court fixed a quota is settled; that the quota was, in a given year in a given province, a specific number is often less firm, and the surviving sources over-represent the metropolitan and southeastern operation against the north and northwest.

The Naitō frame

The transition from Tang to Song is the frame around which the modern Japanese and North American reading of Chinese medieval history has been built. Naitō Konan argued that the Tang and Song stood on opposite sides of a periodizing break comparable, in his account, to the transition from medieval to early modern Europe; the Song court's civil settlement, its examination apparatus, its Neo-Confucian synthesis under Zhu Xi, and its urban and commercial expansion were, on that reading, elements of a bureaucratic order the empire retained, without further transformation, into the twentieth century. The reading has been contested, and it is not necessary to settle the contest to describe the Song expansion.¹⁹ What matters for the sequence beginning in 605 and ending in 1905 is that the Song court had, by 1100, invented the apparatus of degree-quota selection at a scale the earlier dynasties had not imagined, that the apparatus had within a century generated a lettered class larger than the office rolls could absorb, and that the subsequent dynasties inherited both the apparatus and the surplus.

The Song settlement as inheritance

What the Ming and Qing inherited from the Song was not merely the examination category, but the compound as an institution, the sessional cycle as a national rhythm, the *juren* category as an intermediate status honored by the state, and the degree quota as the mechanism governing the relation between candidate population and office rolls. The Yuan interruption of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was partial; the Mongol court reintroduced the examinations under Renzong in 1315 after some decades of disuse, a reactivation of the Song apparatus rather than a fresh invention.

¹⁷The Song lettered-class estimation is Chaffee 1995 (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*).

¹⁸Chaffee 1995, methodological chapter (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*). The compilation of the Song shi under the Yuan is described in Miyakawa 1955 (Miyakawa, "An Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China").

¹⁹Miyakawa 1955 lays out the Naitō hypothesis for an English-language readership and traces its effects on Japanese sinological writing (Miyakawa, "An Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China"); the frame is context here, not a governing thesis.

The Ming founder Hongwu, in the last third of the fourteenth century, took over the apparatus almost intact: he fixed the metropolitan and provincial quotas at levels roughly consistent with the late Song figures, confirmed the *juren* category, and re-established the compound at Nanjing and, after his son moved the capital, at Beijing. What the Ming would add, in the mid-fifteenth century, was the eight-legged essay.

Chapter 3. c. 1500: The Ming and the eight-legged essay

The Ming curriculum

The Ming founder Hongwu, in the second decade of his reign, fixed the canonical curriculum at the Four Books and Five Classics of the Zhu Xi synthesis: the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius*; the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The Zhu Xi commentaries were made obligatory alongside the canonical texts, displacing but not banning the earlier Han and Tang commentaries. The Yongle emperor, completing his father's synthesis in the 1410s, commissioned the *Sishu daquan* and *Wujing daquan*, compendia that fixed the standard readings the Ming candidate was to master; from 1415 onward the compendium was the textbook.²⁰

The curriculum was narrow, and its narrowness was the point: a single canon read through a single commentator gave the Ming court a national reading practice it could examine against a single set of expected answers, a governance instrument before it was an intellectual one. A candidate in Fujian and a candidate in Shaanxi read, in principle, the same passage of Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Mencius* in preparation for the sessional questions, and a chief examiner at Beijing could score the two essays against a shared standard he too had internalized as a student.

The eight-legged form

The eight-legged essay, *bagu wen*, took shape as a scoring form in the middle of the fifteenth century, its structure fixed by the last third of the century and canonized by the last decade of it. The essay proceeded through eight rhetorical stages of prescribed length and function, on a passage of the Four Books or Five Classics assigned as the question: *poti*, "breaking the topic," restating the assigned passage's meaning; *chengti*, "continuing the topic," elaborating the restatement; *qijiang*, "beginning the exposition"; *rushou*, "entering the theme"; then the four "leg" stages, *qigu*, *xugu*, *hougu*, and *shugu*, composed in strict parallel prose in which each proposition in the first leg had to be matched, syllable by syllable and function by function, by a corresponding proposition in the second; and a *dajie*, a "great conclusion," restating the argument in a single ceremonial period.²¹

²⁰The Ming curricular consolidation is set out in Elman 2000, chapter 2 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). On the Yongle compendia and their role as a national textbook see Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

²¹The structural anatomy of the eight-legged essay is set out in Elman 2000, chapter 5 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). Elman 2013 restates the anatomy in condensed form (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*). Miyazaki 1981 gives the candidate's

The form was demanding, and, this was its purpose, scorable by a chief examiner who had to read several thousand essays in the days after a session closed: the paired legs could be checked for balance almost by eye, and a candidate who wrote an overlong *poti* or a truncated *hougu* had disqualified himself before his argument was read. The eight-legged essay disciplined the candidate's writing to a form the examiner could score in the time the session cycle allowed.

The satirical evidence

The eight-legged essay has come down through five centuries of satirical writing. Wu Jingzi's *Rulin waishi*, "the unofficial history of the scholars," published in the mid-eighteenth century, is a succession of set pieces in which a candidate of narrow reading and formulaic prose either fails at the compound or succeeds by luck and is promoted to the metropolitan bureaucracy. Pu Songling, whose life straddled the Ming-Qing transition, wrote satirical stories of examiners whose taste ran to the eight-legged formula's most predictable turns. The late-nineteenth-century reformers, Kang Youwei among them, made the eight-legged essay the emblem of everything the Qing had failed to modernize; the abolition of the essay in 1901 preceded the abolition of the examinations themselves in 1905 by four years.²²

The satire was, as satire is, part-true. The eight-legged essay rewarded a narrow reading and a formulaic prose, and there were examiners whose taste extended no further. What it could not capture, and did not attempt to capture, was the essay's disciplinary effect on the national reading practice.²³

What the essay disciplined

A candidate writing a competent eight-legged essay had to know the Four Books and Five Classics by heart, in their canonical order and divisions; to know the Zhu Xi commentary on each passage at a level of detail that would let him restate its argument in the *poti* and *chengti* in a form the assigned passage and the Zhu reading would both support; to have mastered a parallel prose whose requirements ran to the syllable count and semantic function of each corresponding word; and to do all of this, in a cell of the compound, without books, in a limited time.

The candidate did not learn the essay form at the compound but in the private academies and lineage schools that grew up around every provincial capital under the Ming and Qing, in most cases by copying model essays composed by successful graduates of earlier sessions and circulated in printed anthologies; the *bagu wen* volumes on the shelves of local booksellers

practice against the form (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*).

²²The satirical literature on the eight-legged essay is summarized in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*) and in Miyazaki 1981 (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*). Pu Songling and Wu Jingzi enter through Elman's secondary discussion.

²³Elman 2000, chapters on the intellectual consequences of the essay form (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

were the manuals from which the candidate learned what a passing essay looked like.²⁴

The effect on national reading was correspondingly wide. By the mid- sixteenth century a candidate in a Fujian provincial capital and a candidate in a Shaanxi one were reading the same Zhu Xi commentaries in the same order, practicing the same eight-legged form on the same passages, and preparing for the same categories of question. A shared reading practice of that character had not existed in the Chinese empire in any earlier period. The essay was a scoring instrument; its consequence was a national reading discipline.

The Wang Yangming challenge

The Ming intellectual world produced, in the first half of the sixteenth century, the strongest challenge to the Zhu Xi reading the imperial curriculum had canonized. Wang Yangming (1472-1529), a serving official and a jinshi of 1499, inverted the sequence of the Zhu synthesis: where Zhu Xi taught that moral cultivation proceeded through the investigation of external things, whose principles when apprehended illuminated the inner mind, Wang taught the reverse, that the mind was itself the source of moral principle and the investigation of external things was subordinate to its cultivation. His slogans, “the unity of knowledge and action” and “the extension of innate knowing,” carried the position at the level of practice.²⁵

Wang’s followers, gathered in the loose network of academies called the *Taizhou* and the *Donglin* movements over the next century, were the Ming intellectual world’s principal alternative to the Zhu Xi orthodoxy; the *Donglin* academy at Wuxi, a center of criticism of the eunuch faction under the Tianqi emperor in the 1620s, was violently suppressed. Wang’s position remained available to Ming and early Qing scholars, but it did not displace the Zhu Xi canon in the examinations. The Qing court, in its early consolidation under the Kangxi emperor, restated the Zhu orthodoxy explicitly and closed the door on the Wang alternative in the sessional curriculum.²⁶

The reform opponents feared, in outline, that the eight-legged essay would substitute technique for understanding across a candidate class with few other routes into office, that the Zhu Xi commentaries had frozen an early-thirteenth-century reading into a national orthodoxy the empire would not reconsider, and that a curriculum locked to a single interpretive tradition would produce an office locked to a single moral vocabulary. The satirical evidence of the eighteenth century is a delayed judgment on the third fear; the Wang Yangming challenge of the sixteenth was the direct one.

²⁴The private academies, lineage schools, and the printed essay anthology are described in Elman 2000, chapters on the educational infrastructure (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*). Miyazaki 1981 gives an English-language reader the sensory character of the candidate’s preparation (Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*).

²⁵The Wang Yangming challenge and its relation to the examination curriculum are treated in Elman 2000, chapter 4 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

²⁶The Donglin suppression and its aftermath in the Ming-Qing transition are set out in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and Kuhn 2009 for the longer institutional context of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy (Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*).

Elman against the satirical tradition

Elman's principal argument, sustained across the 2000 and 2013 volumes, is that a five-century-long institution disciplined by an essay form cannot be dismissed as the trivialization the satirical writers made it: the candidate class the compound produced was, by any measure, the largest literate class the pre-industrial world sustained, and its shared reading practice, philosophical vocabulary, and aesthetic norms underlie the enormous prose and poetic output of the late imperial period. The claim is not that the essay was itself intellectually generative but that the reading practice it disciplined sustained an intellectual world denser than the essay form would predict; the Ming and Qing philology, the historical writing of the evidential-research tradition, the scientific writing of Song Yingxing and Xu Guangqi, and the poetic anthologies from Yuan Mei onward were none of them written in the eight-legged form, yet each was written by men whose reading had been formed by that curriculum.²⁷

Elman is followed here because his revision rests on a wider archive than the satirical tradition drew on and accounts for a broader range of the evidence; the satirical reading is not dismissed, but the disciplinary effect it could not see is the one the surviving prose, philology, and technical writing of the period requires.

The essay as an imperial reading list

What the Ming introduced, over the four decades between the Hongwu and Yongle courts and the mid-fifteenth-century consolidation of the eight-legged form, was an imperial reading list, the Four Books and Five Classics in the Zhu Xi reading, joined to a scoring rubric, the eight-legged form, and run through a single instrument, the compound. It produced a candidate class the empire could examine, and a canon the empire could impose, at a scale no earlier dynasty had approached, for four hundred and fifty years; the Qing court would inherit it intact and run it, at its eighteenth-century peak, on candidate populations no Ming session had ever processed.

Chapter 4. c. 1700: The Qing compound at its peak

The Kangxi consolidation

The Qing court took over the Ming apparatus in the settlement of the 1640s and 1650s, and the Shunzhi and Kangxi reigns adjusted it without transforming it. The Manchu conquest elite preserved the compound at Beijing and reopened the provincial compounds at the fifteen provincial capitals in the years after 1644; the examination categories, sessional cycle, Zhu Xi curriculum, and eight-legged form remained the Ming instruments. What the Qing court added was a parallel recruitment stream for its own banner troops, examined against a separated set of quotas, and a system of ethnic reservations that kept the Manchu and Mongol

²⁷Elman 2000 sustains the argument against the reformers' reading (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). The evidential-research school and its relation to the examination curriculum are treated in the same volume.

banners represented in the metropolitan jinshi cohort above their share of the population.²⁸

The Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722) understood the examinations as the state's central instrument of legitimation: the compound was not merely a recruitment mechanism but the ceremony by which the empire recruited its own consent. Kangxi's edicts on the compound, preserved in the *Da Qing huidian*, insist on the strictness of the gate search, the anonymity of the scored essays, and the impartial character of the examiners' review, a response in part to collusion inherited from the last Ming decades and in part a demonstration to the Han candidate class that the Manchu court took Han recruitment seriously.²⁹

The consolidation was administrative, ceremonial, and demographic. The Qing sessional cycle ran on a three-year rhythm: the prefectural qualifying stage, the *tongsheng shi*, tested at the prefectural cities in the year before the provincial session and made its successful candidates *shengyuan*, "students of the state," a status honored locally and exempt from certain corvée obligations; the provincial *xiangshi* opened at Nanjing, Beijing, and thirteen further compounds and made its successful candidates *juren*, eligible for the metropolitan *huishi* at Beijing the following spring; the metropolitan graduates then proceeded to the *dianshi*, the palace examination under the emperor's own review, where the jinshi cohort's final ranking was fixed.

The compound at its scale

At the Kangxi and early Qianlong sessions the apparatus reached the scale it would carry, with regional variation, for the next two centuries. Elman's tabulation, working from the Qing statutory compendium and the provincial gazetteers, gives the order of magnitude for a typical late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth-century cycle across the four stages.³⁰ The stages are not directly comparable percentages; each draws on a different pool and certifies a different status, and a pass ratio quoted without its stage is not informative.

²⁸The Qing preservation of the Ming apparatus is treated in Elman 2000, chapters on the Qing consolidation (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*). Miyazaki 1981 gives the candidate's-eye view of the Qing compound (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*). Ho 1962 supplies the aggregate jinshi tabulations that define the Qing curve (Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911*).

²⁹Kangxi's edicts on compound discipline are quoted in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*). The *Da Qing huidian* is the statutory-compendium locus for the regulations, treated in the same volumes.

³⁰The Qing sessional numbers are given in Elman 2000, chapter on the demographic anatomy of the late imperial system (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and Ho 1962 gives the metropolitan and palace tabulations (Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911*). Ho and Elman diverge on the interpretation of the numbers, not on the numbers themselves.

Stage	Status conferred	con-	Eligibility pool	Scale seated (typical cycle)	Approximate pass ratio	Consequence
Prefectural qualifying (<i>tongsheng shi</i>)	<i>shengyuan</i>		local aspirants, no prior degree	~300,000 empire-wide	~3%	eligible for the provincial session; local honors and corvée exemption
Provincial (<i>xiangshi</i>), fifteen compounds	<i>juren</i>		<i>shengyuan</i> of the province	~70,000-100,000	~1-2%	eligible for the metropolitan session
Metropolitan (<i>huishi</i>), Beijing	eligibility for <i>jinshi</i>		<i>juren</i> of all provinces	~4,000-6,000	~5-10%	proceeds to the palace examination
Palace (<i>di-anshi</i>), throne chamber	ranked <i>shi</i>	<i>jin-</i>	metropolitan graduates	~100-300	most of those seated	eligible for the highest offices

The provincial stage further varied by quota geography: a Jiangnan candidate's pool of some twelve to eighteen thousand competed for a *juren* quota of about a hundred and thirty, approximately one in ninety-two at the low end of the range and one in one hundred and thirty-eight at the high end, while a Shanxi candidate's pool of three to four thousand competed for a quota of about sixty, near one in sixty.³¹ The table gives the order of magnitude the surviving sources support for a typical cycle; a full year-by-year, province-by-province quota table is not reconstructable from the material assembled here.

The compound at the Jiangnan provincial capital at Nanjing was, in the mid-eighteenth century, the largest working facility of its kind in the world: its cells numbered above twenty thousand, its perimeter wall enclosed a space larger than most Chinese cities of the second rank, and its examiners, clerks, and guards numbered in the hundreds and thousands. The other provincial compounds ran at proportionate scale. Beijing's metropolitan compound, smaller in cell count because fewer candidates reached the metropolitan stage, was correspondingly denser in ceremony.

The sensory character of the compound is preserved in the candidate memoirs Miyazaki translated: three nights and two days in a brick cell open at the top to the elements, meals cooked over a small clay stove, latrine buckets emptied at intervals fixed by regulation,

³¹The provincial-quota geography is set out in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and Chaffee 1995 for the Song antecedent (Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*).

candles rationed, ink cakes prepared against the humidity of the Nanjing summers, guards patrolling the walled lanes who were forbidden to enter the cells or exchange words with the candidates within. Chief examiners were sealed inside the examiners' compound at Beijing for the ten weeks between the setting of the metropolitan questions and the announcement of results, forbidden contact with the outside world during the scoring interval.³²

The apparatus was, in the eighteenth century, ceremony as well as machinery. A candidate entering the compound at Nanjing was entering a place his father, uncles, cousins, and lineage teachers had entered before him, watched by his family and the local elite of his prefecture; the successful graduate returned home carrying a status the community was obliged to honor, and the unsuccessful candidate returned home to prepare for the next cycle in three years.

Ho and Elman

Ho Ping-ti's 1962 tabulation of Ming and Qing *jinshi* rolls established the questions the subsequent literature has answered. Ho worked from the surviving *jinshi tijing lu*, the Board of Rites's printed lists of successful *jinshi*, which carried for each graduate his prefectural origin and an abbreviated field for family status across three preceding generations. In the Ming, on Ho's tabulation, roughly forty percent of the *jinshi* cohort came from families with no degree-holder in the three preceding generations, a further twenty percent from families with only one; the early and mid-Qing percentages were somewhat lower but still substantial. Ho read this as a mobility considerably higher than the mid-twentieth-century sinological tradition had assumed, a real conduit for the sons of commoners into the imperial office rolls.³³

Benjamin Elman, working outward from the same *jinshi* rolls but reading them alongside surviving lineage genealogies, local gazetteers, and private academy registers, arrived at a different reading. Ho, on Elman's argument, had measured what the *jinshi* lists preserved and missed what they concealed: many "no preceding degree-holder" families in Ho's tabulation had lower-degree or elite connections recoverable from sources outside the abbreviated roll field, so that the lineage as a unit had reproduced its position at a rate the printed field did not fully capture. The examination apparatus was, on Elman's revision, considerably less an instrument of mobility and considerably more an instrument of elite reproduction than Ho had allowed.³⁴

Ho and Elman worked from the same *jinshi tijing lu*, but Elman's genealogies reach one and two generations further back than the rolls record, so the two do not contradict each

³²Miyazaki 1981 is the standard candidate-eye reconstruction (Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*); his translations of the surviving compound memoirs are the mediating layer through which Western readers reach the candidate's testimony.

³³Ho 1962 (Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911*), especially the tabulations of Ming and Qing *jinshi* origins.

³⁴Elman 2000, chapters on the demographic composition of the late Ming and Qing candidate class (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*); Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*) restates the objection to Ho in condensed form and refines its statistical footing.

other; they describe the compound at different resolutions, mobility into the jinshi degree specifically and continuity across the wider certified lineage, and both bear on the abolition question. The apparatus did what Ho's field shows, a real if narrowing channel for new jinshi families, and what Elman's wider evidence shows, a substantial reproduction of already-certified lineages the jinshi field alone does not capture.

The banner candidate

The compound felt very different to a Manchu bannerman candidate than to a Han candidate from the south. The Manchu banner examinations, operated in parallel to the Han provincial cycle from the Shunzhi consolidation onward, tested a curriculum overlapping but distinct from the Han jinshi curriculum: banner candidates sat in separate compounds at Beijing and Mukden and were examined on the classical curriculum, on translation between Manchu and Chinese, and on military science their Han counterparts did not encounter, with quotas fixed at a proportion of the metropolitan jinshi cohort well above the banner share of the population.

The banner candidate carried a fundamentally different social position into the compound. His family's obligation to the imperial state was inherited: banner service was not a status one entered by examination but a status one was born into and had to justify by service, so the examination was one route among several into service the state expected regardless. The Han candidate from Suzhou or Ningbo, by contrast, entered the compound as a private individual whose only route into imperial service ran through it. The two candidates carried the same physical burden past the same gate while participating, in a real sense, in different institutions.³⁵

The Han candidate from the south carried a further burden the northern Han candidate did not: the southeastern provinces, Jiangnan and Zhejiang above all, produced the largest candidate populations in the empire and held the tightest per-capita quotas, the empire's most concentrated candidate class competing for its most restricted route into office.

The population trap

By the second half of the eighteenth century the Qing empire was running into the demographic problem the fixed quota had been designed, in the eleventh century, to manage. The population of China grew from about one hundred and fifty million at the Kangxi accession to above three hundred million by the end of the Qianlong reign, and the candidate class grew in proportion: the *shengyuan* rolls ran to perhaps five hundred thousand by 1800, and the cumulative *juren* count exceeded twenty thousand eligible to sit at Beijing, against a metropolitan quota still moving in its old band of one to three hundred jinshi per session.

Elman's reading of the Qing demographic curve states the consequence in institutional rather than general-theoretical terms. The compound had, by the end of the eighteenth century, become an apparatus whose principal output at the aggregate was not the jinshi cohort

³⁵The banner examination stream is treated in Elman 2000, chapters on the ethnic geography of the Qing recruitment apparatus (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*), and in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

but the failed candidate. The successful graduates were between one and two hundred per session; the unsuccessful candidates who had reached the qualifying stage but not passed the metropolitan session numbered in the tens of thousands per cycle and, cumulatively across sessions, in the hundreds of thousands. A candidate certified as *shengyuan* or *juren* held a status the local community honored and the state could not employ, and by 1800 the empire held far more such men than any earlier century had produced.³⁶

The paradox of the peak

The paradox of the eighteenth-century Qing compound was that its scale was largest at the moment its ratio to the office rolls broke. The Kangxi and Qianlong compounds ran on the largest candidate populations any Chinese court had processed, against jinshi quotas almost exactly those the Ming founder had fixed in the 1370s; the ratio between the two, in the range of one in fifteen or twenty at the Ming founding, fell to one in fifty by 1700, one in several hundred by 1800, and worse by 1850. What had begun as a selection had become, by measure of ratio, a lottery with an admission fee.³⁷

What the compound looked like from inside was not what its statistical anatomy showed. Inside, the compound at the Qianlong sessions, with its rituals, architectural presence, guards, seals, and printed regulations, was the imperial state at its most ceremonial and disciplined. Outside, in the aggregate ratios and the accumulating failed-candidate pool, the same apparatus was the demographic problem the next century would inherit.

In the middle of the next century a candidate class swollen by exactly this arithmetic supplied, among many outcomes, the case that tests the limit of examination legitimacy most sharply: Hong Xiuquan, who failed four times at the Canton prefectural qualifying examinations and never reached the provincial stage, and who went on to lead the bloodiest civil war of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5. 1851: Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping rising

The four failures at Canton

Hong Huoxiu, later known by the assumed name Hong Xiuquan, was born in 1814 in the village of Guanlubu, some thirty miles north of Canton, in the prefecture of Huaxian. His family were Hakka, part of a migratory lineage group that had moved south from central China in successive waves and settled in the hill country of Guangdong and Guangxi in an uneasy relation with the majority Cantonese Punti population. Hong's father was a smallholder of modest but not marginal means who could afford to prepare his eldest son for the local qualifying examinations; Hong began the classical curriculum at the village school in his seventh year and was, by all surviving accounts of his youth, an able student and the

³⁶The Qing demographic curve and the growth of the certified but unemployed *shengyuan* and *juren* rolls are given in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

³⁷The falling metropolitan pass ratios are given in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and in Ho 1962 (Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911*). The two agree on the ratio even where they disagree on its interpretation.

pride of his lineage.³⁸

The Canton prefectural qualifying examinations were the entry point to the Qing sessional cycle for candidates from the prefectures of Guangdong. Hong sat the Canton qualifying stage in 1828 at fourteen, and failed; he sat again in 1836, 1837, and 1843, each time traveling the day's road from Guanlubu to the walled prefectural city and each time returning with the news that his name did not appear on the passing rolls. The examinations Hong failed were the lowest of the Qing sessional stages, the prefectural qualifying tests that admitted successful candidates to the *shengyuan* status; he never sat the provincial *xiangshi* at the Guangdong compound, never entered the sessional cycle proper, and failed at its lowest gate.

The rejection was catastrophic for Hong's local standing. The Hakka lineage had invested, in the classical way of the late imperial candidate class, in the education of its most promising son, and the investment had been unrecovered across fifteen years. His second and third failures, in 1836 and 1837, were followed by illnesses; his fourth, in 1843, was the last time he entered a compound of the imperial state. He was twenty-nine.

The visions of 1837

Between the second and third of his Canton failures, in the summer of 1837, Hong suffered the illness later described in the Taiping's own accounts as a series of visionary experiences. He was, in the surviving accounts, delirious for some forty days. During his delirium he reported having ascended to a heavenly palace, having been received by an old man of white beard whom he recognized as the true God, and having been instructed to return to the world and cleanse it of the worship of false idols. The visions were remembered afterward, and reinterpreted afterward, in the light of what Hong learned on his subsequent contact with the Christian missionary tracts then in circulation on the Guangdong coast.³⁹

In 1843, after the fourth Canton failure, Hong took down a set of Christian tracts he had been given some years earlier by a preacher associated with the Canton missionary community, translations of biblical passages and rudimentary doctrine composed by the Chinese convert Liang Fa under Robert Morrison's mission. Reading them for the first time after his fourth failure, Hong recognized in them the framework of the visions of 1837: the old man of white beard was the God of the tracts, and Hong himself, on the reading he now constructed, was the younger brother of Jesus, dispatched to complete a cleansing his elder brother had begun and left unfinished.

The reading was Hong's own. The missionaries whose tracts he had read had not made it available to him, and when he later sought instruction from the American Baptist preacher Issachar Roberts in Canton, Roberts declined to baptize him because his theological positions

³⁸Hong's early biography is set out in Elman 2000, chapter on the Taiping context of the examination-failure mechanism (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). The Hakka-Punti context of the Guangdong-Guangxi border country is treated in the same volume against the wider Qing ethnic-frontier literature.

³⁹The visions of 1837 are described in the Taiping's own theological writings, transmitted through mission and consular accounts of the 1850s and preserved in the Chinese and English sources treated in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

were, by Roberts's account, unfamiliar and unsound. His subsequent movement was, in this specific sense, a Chinese appropriation of the Christian materials rather than a Chinese extension of the mission itself.

The Society of God-Worshippers

Between 1843 and 1850 Hong preached the doctrine he had constructed first in his own village, then in the surrounding Hakka communities of Guangdong, and finally in the mountainous frontier country of eastern Guangxi, where he established, in the region around Jintian in Guiping prefecture, a religious community that took the name *Bai Shangdi Hui*, "the Society of God-Worshippers." His fellow founders were a set of Hakka men of similar background: Feng Yunshan, a former village schoolmaster; Yang Xiuqing, a charcoal-burner and eventual military commander; Xiao Chaogui, Wei Changhui, and Shi Dakai. The community's theological positions combined Hong's Christian synthesis with an iconoclastic hostility to Confucian and Buddhist images and to the lineage-based social order of the Guangdong-Guangxi border country. Its adherents smashed local shrines, refused to acknowledge the ancestral tablets of the local elite, and gathered in a communal military organization on the mountain of Jintian.⁴⁰

The Jintian community became, by the second half of the 1840s, a challenge to the local Qing administration: its numbers ran into the low tens of thousands by 1850, and its military discipline was, on the Qing surveyors' reports, superior to the local Green Standard troops. Its theological hostility to the lineage system alienated the local Punti Cantonese but recruited Hakka villagers whose relations with the Punti were already strained by frontier ethnic tension. Qing prefectural authorities warned Beijing repeatedly, from the late 1840s, that the Guangxi frontier was moving toward a serious rising; the warnings were not acted on in time.

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

On the eleventh day of the first month of the *xinhai* year, corresponding to January 11, 1851, Hong Xiuquan formally proclaimed the founding of the *Taiping Tianguo*, the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace," at Jintian, taking for himself the title *Tianwang*, Heavenly King. The proclamation triggered the movement's transition from a regional religious community with military drill into a full-scale insurgency: within three years the Taiping forces had swept out of Guangxi, driven north through Hunan, taken Wuchang, and captured Nanjing, which became in 1853 the Taiping's *Tianjing*, "Heavenly Capital," and remained their seat until the Qing recapture in 1864.

The Qing suppression of the Taiping consumed, by the standard demographic reconstructions, between twenty and forty million lives over the fourteen years between the Jintian proclamation and the recovery of Nanjing. Fought principally in the densely settled prefectures of the middle and lower Yangtze, Anhui, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, the war destroyed the economic base of the Jiangnan region for the remainder of the century, bankrupted the Qing

⁴⁰The organization of the Society of God-Worshippers and its theological and military character are described in the Taiping's own regulations and in the consular and missionary correspondence of the 1850s, treated in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*).

central treasury, and required, for its final suppression, the raising of provincial armies under Han officials, Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Zuo Zongtang above all, whose independent authority altered the balance between the Qing center and the provinces in a way the dynasty would not afterward recover.⁴¹

The compound's contribution

What the compound's contribution to this outcome was, and what it was not, is the question the Canton failures pose. It would be an overreach to attribute the Taiping war, in its scale and its ideology, to Hong Xiuquan's four rejections at the Canton qualifying stage. The war had causes considerably larger than the biography of any one frustrated candidate: the Hakka-Punti ethnic tensions of the Guangdong-Guangxi frontier; the collapse of the Canton port economy after the Opium War of 1839-1842; the fiscal exhaustion of the Qing center in the aftermath of the Opium War indemnity; the wider crisis of Qing local administration in the middle decades of the nineteenth century; the availability of new religious materials from the mission enterprise.⁴² A comparable rising in the north in the same decades, the Nian rebellion, drew on a different local population and a different set of grievances and produced a leadership with no comparable relationship to examination failure; the compound's contribution to Hong's rising cannot, on that comparison, be generalized into a single mechanism that explains mid-century Chinese rebellion as such.

The compound's contribution, then, is specific and limited: it was not a certified man the apparatus had trained and then declined to employ, but fifteen years of investment against a fourfold, unambiguous verdict that closed the one route to status his family had been able to afford.

Hong at the compound gate

The Canton compound at which Hong Xiuquan failed four times was one of the two provincial compounds in Guangdong, seating the qualifying stage rather than the *xiangshi*, smaller than the Jiangnan compound at Nanjing and larger than the average prefectural facility. It cared nothing about the ethnic origin of the candidate; it cared about the essays he produced, and Hong's essays have not survived. What the failure of a Hakka candidate meant in the mid-nineteenth-century Guangdong recruitment cycle was, in the aggregate, what the failure of any lower-degree candidate meant: a return to the village and a further attempt at the next opportunity. His fourth failure, in 1843, was not statistically unusual. It was, in one particular biography, definitive in a way the statistics could not predict.

⁴¹The military and demographic scale of the Taiping war is summarized in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) against the wider late-Qing historiography. The rise of the provincial Han armies as an institutional consequence of the war is context here rather than governing thesis.

⁴²The military, ethnic, and fiscal context of the Taiping rising is summarized in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) against the wider late-Qing historiography. The Nian rebellion's separate leadership and carriers are treated in the same literature.

What Hong's exclusion shows

The Taiping rising is not evidence that the compound's certification machine manufactured the rebellion that destroyed the Jiangnan heartland. It is evidence of two narrower propositions about the settlement the examinations maintained, each supported by Hong's own biography rather than by a general model of elite behavior.

The first is the reach of examination culture into households far from the metropolitan elite. Hong's family were Hakka smallholders on the Guangdong-Guangxi frontier, a population with an uneasy relation to the Cantonese majority and no history of *jinshi* success in the lineage; they nonetheless committed fifteen years, from 1828 to 1843, and the household's resources to preparing an able son for the lowest rung of a ladder that led, in principle, to the throne's own service. That commitment is what broad aspiration meant in practice: a smallholder lineage on a contested ethnic frontier could still stake its future on the classical curriculum in the 1820s and 1830s, a generation into the population growth documented in the preceding chapter.

The second is the limit of what the settlement could contain once a candidate was excluded outright. Hong did not fail to rise from *juren* to *jinshi*, the margin at which Ho's and Elman's rolls register mobility and reproduction; he failed at the prefectural gate, four times, and entered no register either measure describes. The compound offered no status, however minor, to a man in his position, and no channel absorbed the classical education, organizational capacity, and local following he had nonetheless accumulated outside it. What filled that vacancy, in his specific case, was a Christian synthesis owing nothing to the examination curriculum. The compound's limit was not that it produced too many certified men who could not be employed; at Guanlubu it had certified no one. Its limit was narrower and more exact: a system whose legitimacy depended on a plausible route to status for the broadly aspiring had, for one particular candidate on one particular frontier, no route left to offer after 1843.

Chapter 6. 1905: The abolition edict

The decree of the second day of the ninth month

On the second day of the ninth month of the *guangxu* thirty-first year, corresponding in the Western calendar to September 2, 1905, the throne approved a memorial submitted by Zhang Zhidong, Yuan Shikai, Zhou Fu, Cen Chunxuan, Duan Fang, and Zhao Erxun and issued an imperial edict abolishing the civil-service examinations. Its operative language was direct. Beginning with the next sessional cycle, the prefectural, provincial, and metropolitan examinations were suspended; no further *shengyuan*, *juren*, or *jinshi* degrees would be conferred; existing degree-holders would retain their status but the pipeline for the manufacture of new degree-holders was closed. The edict directed that the state schools and the newly established modern-curriculum academies would replace the compound as the empire's route into official service.⁴³

⁴³The 1905 abolition edict, preserved in the palace archive holdings of the First Historical Archives of China and transcribed in the *Guangxu chao Donghua lu*, is treated in Elman 2000, chapter on the abolition (Elman, A

The memorialists were a coalition of the reformist and conservative wings of the late-Qing administration. Zhang Zhidong, Viceroy of Huguang, had been arguing for the abolition since his 1898 pamphlet *Quanxue pian* proposed replacing the classical curriculum with Western-style scientific and technical subjects. Yuan Shikai, Viceroy of Zhili and commander of the New Army, was the empire's most powerful provincial military figure, and his name signaled the backing of the provincial military establishment; the others were viceroys of comparable standing. The edict was the throne's approval of a memorial the same viceroys had submitted in the preceding weeks. The decision had been under discussion at the Grand Council for some weeks; when it was made, it was made quickly.

The path to the decree

The path to the 1905 decree had been prepared over the preceding four years. In 1901, in the immediate aftermath of the Boxer disaster and the eight-power occupation of Beijing, the *xinzheng* reforms had begun: the eight-legged essay was abolished as a required form, and the metropolitan and provincial examinations were thereafter composed on questions covering political theory, world history, and science alongside the classical topics. The 1901 reform preserved the compound as an institution while replacing the content it examined, and produced results the reformers regarded as unsatisfactory: candidates continued to prepare from anthologies of model essays, examiners continued to score from familiar patterns, and the new content was assimilated to the old form.⁴⁴

The 1902 and 1903 sessions were held under the modified rules; the metropolitan session of 1903, the last full triennial cycle of the imperial examinations, admitted 315 jinshi, consistent with the century-old quota, and the provincial sessions admitted their customary complements of juren. In early 1905 the reformers, concluding that the modified form was producing no substantial change in the candidate class or its preparation, pressed for outright abolition: Zhang Zhidong, Yuan Shikai, Zhou Fu, and the other signatories submitted their memorial in August, arguing that so long as the compound remained the recognized route into imperial service, families would prepare their sons for it rather than for the new schools, and the compound had to close for the schools to fill. Cixi's approval followed within days, and the edict promulgating the memorial's recommendation issued on September 2; there would be no metropolitan examination in 1906, nor any further one in the imperial line.

What the decree gained

What the imperial state gained by the abolition, in the reasoning the signatories set out in their memorial, was a re-channeling of educational preparation into the modern curriculum the reformers considered indispensable for technical and military survival. The context was the wars of the preceding decade: the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, read as proof that the

Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China), and in Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*); the signatories are cited from that transmitted text.

⁴⁴The 1901 abolition of the eight-legged essay and the *xinzheng* reforms are treated in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*). The palace-archive memorials of 1901 to 1905 are context here rather than governing thesis; they document the sequence of preliminary reforms that preceded the September 1905 decree.

Meiji program had transformed Japan into a state capable of defeating a China that had not reformed comparably, and the Boxer disaster of 1900 and its indemnity, had confirmed the reading.⁴⁵ The classical curriculum was, in the reformers' assessment, incompatible with the technical training a Meiji-type program required; the compound had, by 1905, become an obstacle to it, and its abolition was the act of clearance without which the new institutions could not grow.

What abolition changed

The compound linked classical preparation, local status, and the prospect of imperial service. Elman describes the late-imperial system as an integrative institution: ambitious sons of local elites across the provinces entered a shared curriculum and ranked ritual, even though only a small proportion received the highest degrees.⁴⁶

The abolition closed that route before modern-curriculum schools had reached comparable provincial coverage. Classical candidates and their families redirected educational investment toward the newly founded provincial modern academies, the private technical schools of Shanghai and Guangzhou, the missionary colleges, and, for a growing minority, Meiji Japan. Between 1902 and 1907 the number of Chinese students studying in Japan grew from a few hundreds to between eight and twelve thousand, and Tokyo became the principal foreign center of Chinese political and educational activity.

The Japan cohort

The Chinese student cohort in Tokyo between 1903 and 1911 became an important reservoir of the political generation that would form the Qing dynasty's most consequential domestic opposition. Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance, founded at Tokyo in 1905 and drawing its principal cadres from this cohort, published the newspaper *Min bao* in Tokyo for circulation back to the treaty ports. Chinese students in Tokyo were exposed, through Japanese, to Western political theory, constitutional monarchy in one direction, republican revolution in another, and Marxist-inflected socialism in a third.⁴⁷

The reformers treated the compound as an outdated pedagogy, but abolition also altered the institution that had conferred public value on classical preparation. Families did not abandon educational ambition; they redirected it toward schools, military academies, overseas study, publishing, and new political organizations whose rewards no longer depended on examination by the Qing court.

⁴⁵The Meiji parallel and its role in the late-Qing reform literature are treated in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and in Miyakawa 1955 (Miyakawa, "An Outline of the Naitō Hypothesis and Its Effects on Japanese Studies of China") on the Naitō-hypothesis frame within which the Meiji parallel was received.

⁴⁶Elman 2000 on the integrative function of the late-imperial compound (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). Elman 2013 restates the argument in condensed form (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

⁴⁷The formation of the Chinese student cohort in Meiji Japan and its role in the political generation of 1905-1911 is treated in Elman 2000 (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*) and Elman 2013 (Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*).

The six years to 1911

The Qing dynasty had, from the September 1905 abolition edict, six years to live. The Wuchang uprising of October 10, 1911, triggered by a chance accident at a New Army arsenal in the Hubei provincial capital, ignited a chain of provincial declarations of independence that unrolled across the empire in the succeeding weeks. Within six weeks fifteen provinces had declared for the revolution. In February 1912 the Empress Dowager Longyu, acting on behalf of the six-year-old Xuantong emperor, signed the imperial abdication decree. The dynasty that had held the empire since 1644 was, on paper, ended.

The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 cannot be laid on the examination-abolition edict of 1905. The interval between the two dates was filled by developments that owed little to the abolished compound directly: the modern-curriculum schools the 1905 memorial had promised grew, unevenly, into a provincial school system with its own graduates and expectations; the Tokyo student cohort and Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance formed from men who had disproportionately already left the classical curriculum, not candidates the abolition displaced; the provincial assemblies convened under the 1908-1910 constitutional program gave the gentry and merchant classes a forum for grievance the compound had never provided; the New Army, reorganized on the Meiji model, supplied both the Wuchang accident that triggered the rising and the military capacity that made provincial secession possible; and the fiscal exhaustion of the Qing center, compounded by the Taiping and Boxer indemnities and by the cost of the New Army and school programs themselves, left the throne without the reserves to answer the 1911 declarations as it had answered the Taiping sixty years before. Each of these developments has an institutional history substantially independent of the examinations.⁴⁸

What the abolition contributed to this sequence was narrower than a cause of the dynasty's fall. It removed, in a single administrative act, the established channel through which classical preparation could lead to service under the throne. The new schools, the Japan cohort, the provincial assemblies, the New Army, and the fiscal crisis would each have existed and developed had the compound survived a further decade; none of them required the abolition to come into being. What the abolition can be credited with is a marginal contribution: at the moment several independent pressures were converging on the throne, it removed the last device by which a still-substantial share of the lettered class had reason to expect the dynasty's continuation to serve its own advancement. That the dynasty fell within six years of the removal is a fact about timing, not a demonstrated causal weight.

The empty compounds

The provincial compounds did not open for another triennial session, and prefectural qualifying halls ceased preparing candidates for the old sequence. The cells at Nanjing, twenty thousand of them, would not receive candidates again; the examiners' compound at Beijing,

⁴⁸The New Army, provincial-assembly, and fiscal context of the 1911 revolution is treated in the standard late-Qing literature; Elman 2000 places the compound's abolition among a set of concurrent institutional shocks (Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*). A weighted accounting of how much each factor contributed relative to the others exceeds what the assembled material supports.

sealed for ten weeks after each triennial session for the scoring interval, would not be sealed again; the Grand Master of Ceremonies, whose office had prepared the palace ceremony of the *dianshi*, would not present another cohort.

The sessional institution was over. What was not yet clear in the autumn of 1905 was what would come in its place: the state schools were few and thin, the private academies scattered, the Japan cohort still accumulating in Tokyo. The imperial state had committed itself to the reform without having built the receiving structures, and in that gap the political generation of 1905 to 1911 would form, overwhelmingly outside the state's remaining recruitment apparatus, and against it.

The choice was defensible on the reformers' own assumptions; it nonetheless ended an established route into service while new schools, armies, assemblies, and overseas networks were drawing educational ambition toward destinations the throne did not control.

Coda. The tournament emptied

The autumn of 1905

Autumn was the traditional season of the provincial *xiangshi*. In an ordinary triennial year the fifteen compounds of the empire opened their outer gates in the eighth or ninth month; candidates arrived from the surrounding prefectures, took lodging in the inns and boarding-houses that had grown up around every compound, presented their warrants at the gate, submitted to the search, and were locked into their cells for the three nights of the session. In the autumn of 1905 the compounds did not open, nor did the prefectural qualifying halls in any prefecture of the empire; the inns and boarding-houses that had catered to the sessional traffic lost their guests, and the clerks, guards, and cooks paid from compound revenues lost their positions. The rhythm that had governed the empire's autumnal traffic for the better part of a millennium and a half was, from that autumn, over.

The absence was not immediately visible everywhere. In many prefectures the announcement of the abolition arrived only after the customary preparation had begun, and candidates who had traveled to their prefectural cities found on arrival that no session would be held; in others the announcement preceded the preparation and the traffic simply did not appear. The empire had never before canceled a sessional cycle at this scale.

What the compounds had housed for thirteen centuries, in one dynasty or another, was an institution the empire had built as its principal instrument of recruitment and had reinvented in every generation as its principal instrument of legitimation. The compound had not been merely the state's route into office; it had been the state's ceremony of its own openness. Its architectural presence, its sessional rhythm, its printed regulations, its ranked degrees, and its long history of candidate memoirs and satirical treatments and official chronicles had all worked together to establish, in the common imagination of the empire, that the imperial state was an institution one might, by long and honest preparation, enter. The proportion of the candidate class that ever did enter was small; the proportion that failed and returned home was very large; but the apparatus's legitimating claim ran on the possibility rather than on the frequency. In the autumn of 1905 the possibility itself was withdrawn.

The candidate class after the withdrawal

The candidate class that had defined itself, generation after generation, through the ordeal of the compound did not disappear overnight. In 1905 its members numbered, on the standard estimates, in excess of a million men holding *shengyuan* status or its equivalent, and above forty thousand men holding *juren* rank from earlier sessions; the abolition edict preserved their status but not the prospect of further advancement. A *shengyuan* remained a *shengyuan* for the remainder of his life, because those sessions were no longer held.

The withdrawal reoriented the ambitions of the younger generation with a speed the reformers had not fully anticipated. Sons of the candidate class who in 1904 had been preparing for the classical curriculum were by 1907 being sent, in large and growing numbers, to the provincial modern academies, the treaty-port private schools, and, for a substantial minority of wealthier families, to Meiji Japan, toward destinations that did not preserve the imperial state as the honoring institution of the new preparation. The classical scholar-official identity that had governed the late imperial elite for six centuries had, within a single generation, ceased to be a living institutional category in China; it survived in local prestige and family memory, but not as a functioning route into office.

The apparatus at closing magnification

Elman's late-imperial reconstruction reads the compound from its cultural and intellectual side: the curriculum it enforced, the reading practices it disciplined, the essay form it standardized, the family strategies it rewarded, the local institutions it supported. The compound was substantially more than a mechanism of recruitment; it was the principal integrative institution of the late imperial period, and its effect on Chinese intellectual and cultural life ran far wider than its recruitment function alone would suggest.

The demographic arithmetic of the Qing compound, a metropolitan *jinshi* quota moving between about one hundred and about three hundred candidates per session against a population growing from roughly seventy million to more than four hundred million, belongs to the Chinese history of quota, curriculum, and lineage that Elman reconstructs.

The sequence, stated

The Sui court in 605 founded an institution that named a written examination and gave it a category, a designation, and a place in the imperial recruitment vocabulary. The Tang court inherited the institution and let it grow inside a larger system of recommendation and protection. The Song court in the tenth and eleventh centuries expanded the institution to a scale the earlier dynasties had not approached and invented the quota that would govern the balance between the candidate population and the office rolls for the next nine centuries. The Ming court in the fifteenth century fixed the curriculum on the Zhu Xi canon and standardized the scoring form as the eight-legged essay. The Qing court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries preserved the Ming apparatus and ran it at the largest sessional scale the empire ever produced. In the middle of the nineteenth century a candidate excluded four times at the compound's lowest gate, Hong Xiuquan, built outside the imperial vocabulary of legitimation the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; a different rising, the Nian, drew in the north

on a different population and different grievances. The Qing suppressed both at a cost that consumed the empire's fiscal and demographic reserves. In September 1905 the Qing court abolished the examinations. In October 1911 a provincial New Army uprising triggered the collapse of the dynasty; in February 1912 the Empress Dowager Longyu signed the imperial abdication decree.

Nothing in the sequence is prophecy. The Qing court abolished the examinations for reasons the reformers named. The dynasty fell in 1911 for a set of reasons of which the compound's abolition was one component and not the largest. The abolition and the fall stand in a proximate temporal relation that a monocausal reading would overrun. The examinations had sustained legitimacy by keeping aspiration broad while keeping certification narrow. Abolition ended that route before the new schools, officer corps, assemblies, and overseas party networks had settled into a replacement system of recruitment and status.

The tournament emptied

The compound at Jiangnan stood in its walled enclosure at Nanjing after the abolition. Its cells were preserved into the early Republican period; photographs from the 1910s and 1920s show the empty lanes, the guards' walkways vacant, the seals no longer stamped. Some cells were sold off, some fell into disrepair, and the enclosure was, over the succeeding decades, converted piecemeal to school buildings, government offices, and warehouses, as were the prefectural qualifying halls across the empire.

The men who in 1905 had spent fifteen or twenty years preparing for the sessional cycle carried that preparation into a world that could no longer certify it. Some entered the modern-academy teaching profession, some moved into treaty-port publishing, some emigrated, some continued the evidential-research tradition at diminishing scale; a substantial minority, particularly the younger cohort that had begun preparation in the 1890s and had not yet passed a session by 1905, entered the political movements of the early Republican period.

Thirteen centuries after the Sui founding, in a decade the Sui founders could not have imagined, the tournament that had linked classical ambition to imperial service stood empty. The compounds were still there; the sessional cycle was not. The graduates of the last cohort became, in some cases, founders of the new institutions the Republic and its successors would build; in others, the ancestors of families who would carry, into the twentieth century, a memory of the *jinshi* their great-grandfather had been in the *bingchen* year of the Guangxu reign. The tournament was over. The class that had defined itself through it would spend the next three generations discovering what it was without it.

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