

Chapter 2

Origins of Meritocracy in China

The last century has been marked by a division between the West and East. In particular, since the Second World War, the capitalist and socialist camps have divided the world in terms of culture, economy, politics and ideology. In the West, the ideology of meritocracy has been celebrated for its profound significance. Michael Young first coined the term ‘meritocracy’ in his landmark book, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958), in which he defined merit as ‘IQ plus effort’, and imagined a growing tendency towards meritocracy in educational and occupational selection in modern Britain. During the 1940s and 1950s, American functionalists and post-War liberals and theorists on social mobility argued that meritocracy is a functionally necessary mechanism to select and reward individuals so as to meet the demands of the technical and economic rationality of an industrial society during its transition from traditionalism to post-industrialism (Davis 1942; Davis and Moore 1945). Education and its attached value, such as different levels of educational qualifications and the time spent in acquiring an education, were regarded as measures of different levels of merit.

Whereas meritocracy was regarded as the driving force towards post-industrial professionalism in the West, the Chinese civil service examination system (the Keju), arguably the pioneer of meritocracy among all civilisations, faced major setbacks in its political and historical significance in the early twentieth century. The Keju system crumbled in 1904 along with the Manchu empire, partly because of its association with the declining scholar-official class,¹ and partly because of its resistance to modernisation and its existence as a barrier to the emergence of a modern commercial and industrial class. The modern political forces in China—namely the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party—distanced themselves from the Keju system and downplayed the role of social selection through

¹The term scholar-official class has different variations. Historical research on Chinese history uses literati-official or scholar-official (Elman 2013; Ho 1962; Moore 1966). Another commonly used term is the Mandarin by Ringer (1990). This book uses the term scholar-official to avoid the confusion between Mandarin as a social class and Mandarin as the official Chinese language.

examinations in the Republican Regime between 1920 and 1940 and the later Communist Regime since 1949. Why did the social selection system which was arguably based on meritocracy have such a setback in China, when Western societies embraced such a system? This raises a further question regarding the ‘origins’ of meritocracy: what were the origins of the Chinese meritocracy in the imperial era? How much did they differ from the Western origins of meritocracy? Could we make sense of meritocracy as a barrier to Chinese modernisation while it acts as a drive towards Western post-industrialism?

Philosophical Origins of Chinese Meritocracy

The ideology of meritocracy originated in the ancient philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism during the fifth and sixth centuries BC and developed with the Legalists in the subsequent centuries (Yao 2000). Its leading social manifestation was to become the competitive civil service examination system (the Keju) which was the main vehicle of meritocratic social selection. The Keju was initially established in 608 during the Sui Dynasty, fully developed in the Tang-dynasty and later institutionalised in the Ming Dynasty in 1368, surviving thereafter until 1905 (Elman and Woodside 1994; Elman 2013). Why did this ideology emerge and survive in a hereditary society like imperial China but not in China’s counterparts? How did this ideology connect the minority upper classes with the overwhelming majority of peasants in society? How do we explain China, one of the most underdeveloped peasant societies by the late 1800s, exhibiting the most consistent systematic social selection through merit in the empire’s bureaucracy for more than one thousand years?

Different explanations have been offered for this unique form of Chinese meritocracy. The first account concerns Confucianism and its implications on the Chinese feudal political order. The importance of education and the ideology of meritocracy were integral to Confucianism, the dominant political philosophy throughout imperial China (Dardess 1983). Social selection based on examinations of classical studies, particularly the Confucian texts, was instrumental to the imperial political order, which ensured the selection of the Confucian scholars in the feudal bureaucracy that in turn consolidated the imperial rule. Therefore, this social institution survived volatile shifts of dynasties and remained intact even after the invasion of minorities and foreign forces (Ho 1962).

Elman put forth another explanation in his argument on the ‘interdependence’ of the feudal bureaucracy, gentry-literati elites and the examination selection (Elman 2000). Contrary to Ho’s argument, Elman further examined the relationships between the feudal ruling class and the scholar-literati class. He argued that the Keju system was constructed as part of the compromise between the two classes, and that the abolishment of the civil examinations as a social selection of scholar-officials came naturally in 1911 as a result of the demise of the Qing Dynasty. These two accounts touch upon the philosophical, social and political origins of meritocracy in imperial China. They provide some explanations of the

uniqueness of the Chinese meritocracy and the consistency of the social institution throughout the imperial era. However, they fail to explain how the two seemingly contradictory factors of social selection by merit and a hereditary feudal social order could coexist for hundreds of years, or how the social selection was deeply associated with economic, political and cultural functions of the feudal bureaucracy. This section explores the myths concerning the merit-based social selection in imperial China and how the selection process was so powerful that its existence prevented the emergence of driving forces of modernisation in China.

There are several myths regarding Confucianism and its ideology of meritocracy that transcended the feudal boundary. Despite having different political views on feudal order, ancient Chinese philosophers such as Confucius (孔子), Mencius (孟子) and the Legalists (法家) shared a similar understanding of the functional necessity of social stratification as the key element for social cohesion in imperial China. Education was believed to bring an equilibrium, which both justified social stratification and enhanced social cohesion (Ho 1962). According to Mencius: “in education, there should be no class distinction... it is the duty of the state to set up schools at various levels for the education of people” (Ge 1994). To ensure a sustainable hierarchical society, Confucius and his followers criticised the inherently corrupt nature of the feudal ruling class and proposed to bringing social equity mainly through education. Ho therefore argued that Confucian scholars proposed a social order not based on ‘hereditary status’ but on ‘individual merit’, an ideology that transcended the feudal boundary (Ho 1962: 8–9).

Whether Confucian ideology on education and merit-based selection transcended feudalism warrants further scrutiny. First, the Confucian ideology of merit-based social selection did not aim to achieve social justice or equity in feudal society; instead, it was class-biased with a focus on the moral and intellectual superiority of the literati-scholar class. Confucius and his followers, such as Xunzi (荀子) criticised the inherently corrupt nature of the feudal rulers and argued that there was no divine right for any particular ruler (Ho 1962).

Unlike feudal royalties’ divine rights from God in its European counterparts, Chinese aristocracy was characterised as lacking a mandate or legitimacy (Jiang 2015). The line of legitimate titles was interrupted continuously throughout hundreds of years, and the shifting dynasties and changing names of royalty illustrated this lack of consistent legitimacy for each dynasty. The first emperor of each new dynasty commenced his ruling with a ritual in which the previous dynasty was acknowledged and criticised for its failures in both conduct and morality (McDermott 1999). With this ritual, the legitimacy of the new dynasty was justified as a replacement for the immoral rule of the previous dynasty.

Furthermore, Confucius and his followers demonstrated the inferiority in minds and virtues of those who performed ‘manual labour’, and, who were, therefore, unsuitable to rule (Huang and Gove 2012: 10). As Confucius put it: “some labour with their minds and some labour with their physical strength. Those who labour with their minds rule others, and these who labour with physical strength are ruled by others. These who are ruled sustain others and those who rule are sustained by others. This is a principle universally recognised” (Tu 1998: 17). This Confucian elaboration

on the division of labour and responsibilities highlighted the distinction between the scholar-official class and the peasants, with the latter being the ruled class.

By eliminating the suitability of the labouring class as the ruling class, Confucius and his followers argued that the government should be ruled by the wise and virtuous selected by individual merit, and a hierarchal status should be determined by achievement and virtue (Mei 1973). The social group in imperial China that was considered the most wise and virtuous was the literati-scholar class, who were selected through an examination-based system, the Keju (Elman 2009). This Confucian perspective shared some similarities with the functional theory on social stratification, which was widely regarded as an early philosophical approach towards meritocracy (Elman 2013) and was used to argue that the belief in education was deeply rooted in Chinese culture. However, I would argue that the Confucian approach to meritocracy was no more than a philosophical justification of the privilege and status by the scholar-official class, which was strengthened by an institutionalised civil examination system.

Second, how to measure individual merit has been central to the debates on meritocracy. The proposition from Confucius and his followers offered a cultural and literary measurement that has important implications on education and cultural capital. For Confucius, merit was primarily defined by cultural and moral values such as “learning, administrative skills, moral quality, righteousness, uprightness and conscientiousness” (Chu 1957: 237). The Legalists took a more practical approach to make sense of merit by promoting agricultural and military skills. Between 657 and 828 in the Tang Dynasty, the Keju identified approximately sixty itemised criteria, which were narrowed down to a strong focus on the knowledge of classics, stereotyped theories and literacy attainment during the Ming and Qing Dynasty (Ho 1962: 11). The Keju selection system became institutionalised during this period, establishing examination pathways with two degrees and two curricula (Franke 1960; Elman 2014).

These Confucian and neo-Confucian definitions of merit have obvious limitations. The all-embracing ideology of merit excluded some social groups such as merchants, artisans and peasants from social selection because the skills or knowledge they represented were regarded as labour skills that were inferior to the work of mind. The literati-scholar class was the only group qualified to demonstrate the official measures of merit. Hence, the Confucian ideology of meritocracy exclusively served the scholar-official class through an institutionalised system. Contrary to the concept of equality and social justice, the Confucian meritocracy served its own social class and discriminated against other social groups through the feudal institution of social selection. Hence, the Confucian ideology failed to go beyond feudal boundaries, as many scholars might suggest.

Yet, contrary to the myth, the notion of Confucian education for all exists only in theory rather than in reality. Educational opportunity for all was no more than a symbolic justification for social stratification, since education was an exclusive privilege for some social groups in imperial China. If educational opportunities were not available to all, how could a social selection based on examinations qualify as meritocracy? Was the Confucian meritocracy no more than a feudal

political tool of social selection? As Confucius and his followers did not tackle the fundamental issue of the provision and availability of educational opportunities in the feudal society, the next section will examine the development of a dynastic school system and the implications on civil service selection by the Keju.

Meritocracy, Education and the Keju in Imperial China

The myth of the Confucian meritocracy that transcends feudalism lies in its confusion between social selection and social opportunity in imperial China. Confucius argued that no class boundary existed in education and proposed equal opportunity in education for both the high and the low (Tu 1998). Education for all was a fundamental principle of Confucian ideology; however, it remains unclear whether the provision of education was a private matter or was the responsibility of the imperial government. Unlike the role the churches played in the provision of educational opportunities laying the foundation of national education systems in Western countries (Green 1990), there was an absence of the engagement of religious organisations in the educational development in imperial China. Instead, Confucian ideology promoted universal rights in education in imperial China. Moreover, by claiming that educational opportunities should be provided to all, examination-based civil service selection could therefore be justified as a vehicle of social equality. Hence, the Confucian meritocracy was arguably a premodern version of social mobility through education. However, was this Confucian ideology powerful enough to drive the formation of a national education system? How could educational opportunities be provided to all social groups in such a hereditary and hierarchal society? Hence, it is necessary to review the historical development of the education system over different dynasties with regard to the development of the Keju (Fig. 2.1).

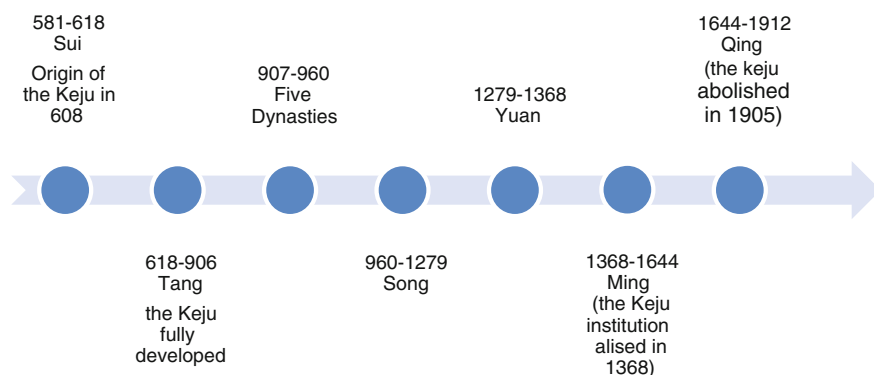


Fig. 2.1 Chronological timeline of the Chinese dynasties in relation to the Keju. *Source* Elman (2000, 2009, 2013)

Prior to the early eleventh century in the Song Dynasty, little evidence suggested that the feudal governments invested in dynastic schools, although the civil service examination (the Keju) had long been established as the official competitive examination channel of selecting those with merit and talents among all social groups since 608 (Elman 2014; Franke 1960). Instead, a few state schools were established as charities funded by some scholar-officials who obtained their social status through examination selection (Bol 1990). The formal state-funded schools can be traced from the Song Dynasty, when a primitive provision of teachers, school facilities and regulations were introduced gradually across the country (Ho 1962: 169). The earliest record of the state's provision of educational opportunities did not occur until 1022 in the Song Dynasty, with the first state-funded school in the prefecture of Yenchou in Shandong province (Liu 1957). A movement for the establishment of state schools was a result of the work of reformist statesman Fan Chung-yun (范仲淹), who administered an imperial-court-supported decree that aimed to provide educational facilities across all provinces and prefectures (Liu 1957).

However, the dynastic provision of education during this period was still primitive in many ways. There was a lack of a central budget reserved exclusively for building schools and hiring teachers across the country (Ho 1962). The provision of schools was decentralised in the sense that it was entirely dependent on the initiatives of local officials and local funding. School establishments were obtained from endowed properties that lacked proper maintenance, government regulations for access, and qualified teachers (Ho 1962). As a result, dynastic schools only hired 53 teachers in an empire of 1000 counties in 1078 (Ho 1962: 170). By the end of the Northern Song in 1126 the total recruitment of state schools was 1700, with the peak number at 3800 (Ho 1962: 171).

The historical moment of the formation of the imperial education system did not occur until the Ming Dynasty. One question arises: why did the formation of imperial education lag so far behind the civil service examination system? The civil service examination system was established in 681 in the Sui Dynasty (Elman 2009), when it was seen as an important recruitment route to the feudal bureaucracy and a pathway to upward social mobility. Imperial China seems to be a peculiar case of meritocracy, a top-down model in which social selection comes prior to social opportunity. This section explores valid explanations for the conditions of the rise of the imperial education provision by drawing on modern sociological theories and historical accounts. As Green (1990, 2013) argues in his historical analysis of the rise of education systems in the US, Europe and Asia, there has been insufficient application of modern sociological theories to the historical questions. Historical research on education and civil service examinations in Imperial China has been restricted to the availability of archived materials (Elman 2013; De Weerd 2007). These studies provide fascinating reconstructions of historical evidence on social selection in imperial bureaucracy. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of theoretical elaborations on these historical accounts. This section is a modest attempt to extend modern sociological theories to understand the formation of imperial education provision in China.

Broadly speaking, there are three main theoretical perspectives on the formation of education systems which could be relevant to examine the formation of imperial education in China. The structural functionalist theory links education to the rise of industrial societies with the need for skilled labour and social cohesion. State formation theory, on the other hand, associates the rise of education systems to the intensiveness of state building and bureaucracy. The Weberian account offers an alternative explanation of the development of education as the product of the interaction of different social groups and internal characteristics of institutional development. The following section assesses the validity of three theoretical explanations by examining the historical accounts in Imperial China.

The origin of structural functionalism stems from Durkheim's work on the nature of civil society and the role of education in cementing new forms of social cohesion (Durkheim 1997). According to Durkheim, education has dual purposes: one for skills training as economies advanced and became more specialised; and the other for nurturing a homogeneity of collective culture (Durkheim 1956). Similarly, the modern American functionalist argument rests on the parallel development of the rise of education systems and the advancement and sophistication of new technology and science. In other words, educational development was inseparable from the economic growth which required skilled labour for an increasing sophistication of technical skills. The Imperial Chinese case is hardly qualified as an industrial society. Rather, the structural functionalist standpoints link the economic growth and the need for skilled labour to the pattern of educational development. The economy during the Tang and Song Dynasties experienced strong growth and prosperity with improved agricultural production of rice in the Yangzi Delta, advanced technology in printing and ship-building, and a booming foreign trade in silk, textiles and ceramics (Adshead 2004).

The developed economy during this period also produced a sophisticated division of labour into different production activities. A variety of kilns and workshops, which employed a large number of workers, were built in provinces such as Jiangxi and Henan to meet the growing demands for Chinese porcelain, silk and textiles (Elvin 1984). The workers in the porcelain and silk production were recruited and trained in the individual kilns or workshops where apprentices learned their skills and socialised (Elvin 1996; Shiba 1982). The training for specialised skills during this period illustrated a bottom-up model, which was characterised with individual contractual relations, localised private provision and self-regulations. Equally, there was little evidence of the provision of vocational training from the feudal bureaucracy.

This can be attributed to the strong distinction between classical and vocational training in value, prestige and rewards in Imperial China. Classical education had a long Confucian tradition of focusing on languages, culture, literature, and philosophy, which was detached from practical skills in each occupation. The Confucian belief lies in the nobleness of 'work with mind', which is superior to 'work with labour' (Kuhn 2009), which was a distinctive separation of classical education from vocational skills. This sophisticated division of labour and the existence of apprenticeship at kilns or family workshops did not lead to a systematic

development of vocational training across the same industry, let alone a national education system. Moreover, the Confucian value in classical education did not seem to support the provision of practical skills in the increasingly sophisticated industry; however, it further alienated the technical skills required by the booming industrial and commercial sector from the purpose and function of education in the society. Therefore, the structural functionalist account of the economic development on the education system is not sufficient to explain the Imperial Chinese case.

State formation theory focuses on the role of nation-building in producing the educational development for its unified bureaucracy and national identity. It has been argued that a national education system is a product of an accelerated and intensive process of state formation in new or reconstituted states as a result of nationalistic responses to external military threats or incursions, rebuilding states after revolutions and civil wars, or geopolitical competition against economically advanced neighbours (Green 2013). Imperial China offers several interesting attributes to examine the state formation argument. First, the geopolitical and historical evidence on the different dynasties replacing preceding ruling dynasties through military actions illustrates the extensiveness of nation-building throughout the dynastic history. Each of the three dynasties after the Sui—the Tang, Song and Jin-Yuan—fit into the category of a new dynasty which went through an extensive process of empire building, particularly in response to external military threats and internal divisive opposition powers (Barfield 1989; Franke and Twitchett 1994).

The Tang Empire united the Warring States from the previous Sui Dynasty and settled a peace treaty with minorities in the north before building a strong feudal bureaucracy with support primarily from southern clans (Lee 1988; Herbert 1986, 1988). The relatively secure political and military empire from external threats laid the foundation for the Tang's golden era, which was marked by strong and benevolent rule, successful diplomatic relationships, economic trade and a cultural efflorescence of a cosmopolitan style (McMullen 1988). The succeeding Song Empire also continued this empire building with strong military bases along the northwestern borders and renewed Neo-Confucian ideology to establish a strong feudal bureaucracy (Lo 1987; Lee 1982; Kuhn 2009; De Weerd 2007). The Song China emerged as one of the most prominent civilisations in the medieval world before collapsing into divisions and fragmentations and succumbing to the rising minority power in the north.

The Jin-Yuan Empire marked the first minority dynasty when the Mongols in the north defeated the last Song ruler and unified the empire (Franke 1987; Tillman 1995). The Yuan Dynasty initiated empire building that was substantially different from the Confucian court and customs of previous empires (Dardess 1974; Wang 1983). The political selection into the feudal bureaucracy was based on military skills and ethnic origins as well as the civil examination selection, with the former two criteria being more significant as the Confucian bureaucracy and customs gave way to Mongol customary law (Rossabi 1983). These three dynasties were all under constant external military threat, and they went through an extensive process of empire building with recruiting a new bureaucracy and establishing a new political and philosophical order. However, this extensive empire building did not construct

a state-supported education system to integrate divisive interest groups from the southern Han and northern minorities.

Yet, the value of traditional classical education was undermined by the minority rule. Many Chinese scholars regarded the Jin-Yuan era as the barbarian break in Chinese history (Wang 1983). The education-based examination system was criticised by the northern minorities for privileging the official-scholar class who strengthened the southern power in the imperial bureaucracy. Rather, education seems to have created further divide between the north and the south during the rapid and extensive process of the empire building. Classical education and its associated skills were not powerful enough to develop shared ideology and identity that served the imperial bureaucracy and the ruling. Therefore, the state formation argument cannot explain the lack of an imperial educational system during various episodes of the extensive process of empire building.

The Weberian account, developed from Archer's analysis of the rise of national education systems in England, France, Russia and Denmark, links the struggles and interaction among different social groups to the different development of educational systems (Archer 1979, 1982). Archer illustrated the emerging conflicts of interests in the educational provision between the traditionally dominant groups—the churches and the rising bourgeois class in the four cases in the sixteenth century. Such conflicts pushed the bourgeois class to employ either legislative power or ample wealth to substitute the educational provision in parallel with the church schools.

Imperial China provides an interesting case for assessing Archer's Weberian account. Compared to the two previous sociological explanations, the Weberian account raises a serious question on relations and interactions between different social classes in imperial China. Broadly speaking, there were the four main social classes in imperial China, including the gentry class, the peasant class, the artisan and craftsman class, and the merchant class (Spence 1999; Fairbank and Goodman 2006). The dominant educational group was the gentry class or the literati-officials, who traditionally controlled educational ideology and values. The artisans and craftsman, who were interested in the practical skills and vocational training, provided substitutes for the localised and private provision (Barbieri-Low 2007).

The artisans and craftsmen had neither political and legislative power nor sufficient wealth to create a parallel systematic provision of vocational training system. In other words, the artisan and craftsman class was not powerful enough to challenge the traditional education values and provision by the gentry class. Equally, the peasant class entirely relied on the gentry class for the use of the land (Moore 1966; Hsiao 1960). The merchant class had been marginalised for the commercial activities. There was an absence of a powerful social class that would challenge the ideology and status of a classical education promoted and implemented by the gentry class.

These three theoretical accounts, which were developed from the Western contexts, failed to attribute the rise of educational system to economic growth, the extensiveness of empire building and class conflicts in the context of imperial China. The dominant forms of classical education did not seem to support the productive

skills required by the economy and production. Nor did the classical education contribute to the formation of a united national identity. Nor was there a formation of alternative forms of education powerful enough to challenge the status of the classical education. The inadequacy of these sociological accounts is fully apparent in the problem of explaining the rise of the imperial education system in the Ming Dynasty instead of the previous economically more affluent Tang Dynasty and geopolitically more challenging Song and Yuan Dynasty. How then can we explain the rise of systematic provision of education in the following Ming dynasty?

The Development of Dynastic Education Provision in the Ming Dynasty

It was not until the Ming Dynasty was there a systematic development of educational provision supported and regulated by the imperial governments (Elman 2013; Ho 1962). The first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋) (1328–1398), highlighted the importance of education at the beginning of his reign: “the educational transformation of the people was the prerequisite for the ordering of the nation... Schools were the basis for such transformation” (Ming Wan-li, cited in Elman 2000: 38). The transformation suggested by Zhu Yuanzhang referred to the construction of a new bureaucracy and the formation of a new imperial identity and ideology, Neo-Confucianism, which legitimated the Ming power (Dardesss 1974; De Weerd 2007).

Table 2.1 summarises how educational provision in imperial China was fully integrated into the progressive keju examination system. The primary degree was Shengyuan or Xiucai, which qualified entry-level licentiates at the local level. The shengyuan level of education was provided by prefectural or county state schools or private academies. State academies or private academies provided advanced training for the next level of qualifications. The Juren, Gongshi and Jinshi were

Table 2.1 Integration of school provision into progressive examination systems (the Keju)

Degree level	Progressive examination levels	Types of schools
Shengyuan (生员) or Xiucai (秀才)	Entry-level licentiates at the county, prefecture and town level	Prefectural or county state schools; Private academies
Juren (举人)	Graduates from triennial provincial exams	State academies Private academies
Gongshi (贡士)	Graduates from triennial national exams	State academies Private academies
Jinshi (进士)	Graduates from triennial court exams	State academies Private academies

Note State academies were set up by official initiatives. Private academies were established by private families or clans
Source Ho (1962), Elman (2013)

degrees qualified from the triennial provincial, national and court exams, respectively. State and private academies were set up for specific purposes of different levels of examinations. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the total number of state schools was around 1200 across the country, recruiting 0.05 % of the total population, which might be estimated as a 0.09 % enrolment rate for male students in reality since women were not eligible for educational opportunities (Ho 1959).

When compared to the modern national education system, the imperial state education did not provide universal access for all social groups, nor did it have compulsory elements. The education curriculum went through drastic changes to accommodate shifts in the ruling ideology, and neo-Confucianism became a dominant feature of the new curriculum (Dardess 1974). Education at various levels was designated to achieve the requirements in the curriculum and prepare students for various levels of examinations. Successful students who progressed well were provided with scholarships, tax reductions and other privileges, while students who failed to progress within a certain time frame would be punished and expelled from school (Dardess 1973; Huang 2009; Wang 1986; Bol 1990). The empire-wide school networks were created to prepare students for different levels of examinations and gradually became quota-based pathways (Ho 1962: 172). As Elman put it, schools in the Ming and Qing Dynasties functioned like ‘examination stations’ prior to official appointments in the local and central bureaucracies (Elman 2013: 97).

What historical factors and social features from the Ming Dynasty could have contributed to the development of imperial education systems? What historical preconditions of the Ming Dynasty were sharply different from the previous empires? It can be argued that the Mandate of Heaven was not sufficient to give legitimacy to the Ming rule in part because the previous successive historical stages were ruled by the Northern minorities between the Sui and Yuan Dynasties and in part because the First Emperor rose to power from a much less legitimate route—namely, as leader of the peasant rebellion movements. The beginning of the Ming Dynasty could be characterised by a long struggle with three closely related priorities: checking the minorities in the North, checking the power of the Southern clans and checking the majority of the peasant population. What linked the three priorities together was a systematic development of civil service examinations (the Keju) throughout the whole country.

The Keju system was a useful mechanism for limiting the power of the northern minorities because the military selection for the imperial bureaucracy which was preferred by the northern minorities became gradually obsolete. The keju also achieved a balance between the royal power and the affluent landed aristocracies in the south. The interdependence between the crown and the southern clans became consolidated through the civil service examinations. On the one hand, the wealth and rent of the southern clans could be protected by consistent success on the exams by filling the positions in the imperial bureaucracy. On the other hand, the Crown employed the examination system, which functioned as a restraining mechanism to keep the southern landed aristocracies in check. Moreover, the extensive development of the keju also effectively linked the majority of the peasant population to

their landlords through the filial lineage or the clans. The following section links the three initiatives to the historical configuration of the rise of the empire wide civil service examination.

The Formation of Empire-Wide Civil Service Examination System

First, the systematic development of the empire-wide competitive civil service examination system as the legitimate social selection process in the Ming Dynasty was substantially dependent on sociopolitical conditions marked by the presence or absence of an alternative route of social selection. Figure 2.2 provides a chronological development of the keju system in relation to the presence of alternative social selection. In the initial stage of the formation from the Sui to Tang Dynasty, civil service examinations served as a political tool to limit alternative military and aristocratic power centres and to draw the sons of elites from newly established regions into the government (Lee 1988; Herbert 1986; Twitchett 1976). The conflicts between the new elites and the old military and aristocratic families resulted in a compromise to allow for alternative social selection and a reward system, including recommendations and military selection (Wechsler 1974; Moore 1999; Herbert 1988). Political and social circumstances became more complicated in the subsequent Song and Yuan Dynasties when social conflicts evolved not only between the old and new powers, but also between the dominant Han and northern minorities (Ho 1987; Lee 1982; Eberhard 1962; Franke and Twitchett 1994).

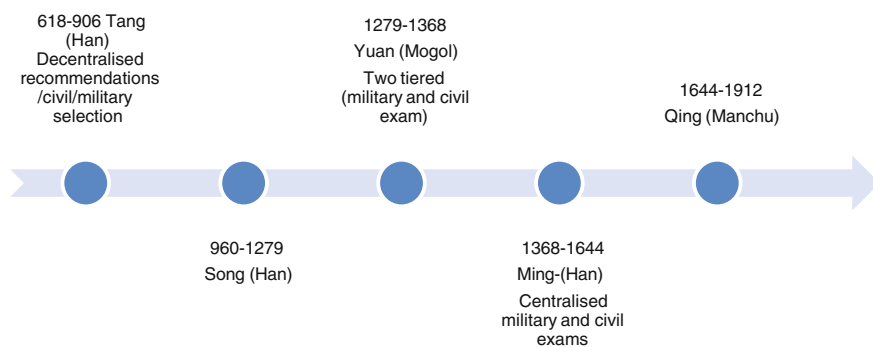


Fig. 2.2 The evolution of the Keju selection criteria. *Source* Oxnam (1975), Elman (2000)

The complications in sociopolitical and military circumstances had a great impact on the civil service examination system. Social selection in the Yuan Dynasty changed drastically from the previous civil service examination, and minority status became an advantage for obtaining official posts in the central bureaucracy (Ho 1962). Military achievements were also given political rewards. The leading minority Mongols as well as other minorities accounted for more than 50 % of the quotas of the jinshi and juren, even though they only made up only around 3 % of the registered population between 1314 and 1366 (Dardess 1974; 161).

The Tang-Song-Yuan Dynasties was a period of feudal rule, shifting between the traditional Han and northwest minority groups. It was this period that marked the first minority empire—the Liao of the Jurchens and the subsequent Yuan of the Mongols (Wittfogel 1947; Tillman and West 1995). The Jurchen and Mongol empires signified the minority's military and political power over the Han majority (De Rachewiltz 1966); however, the south remained the economic and cultural centre of the empire (Bol 1987). The Jurchen and Mongol ruling classes had advantages in military and legitimised political power while the Han had superior knowledge and cultural accomplishments. This divide created a conflict of interest in the mechanism of social selection.

The Yuan bureaucracy reformed the civil service examination system to adapt to the demands of the ruling Mongols (Langlois 1981). A dual selection system was created to accommodate changes in the political and military domains. Two-tiered examinations, dual selection processes and differentiated quotas were introduced for the Hans and Jurchens, Mongols and other minorities (Lao 1981; Dardess 1973). Minority groups were granted lower selection criteria and higher quotas compared to those for the Chinese Han (Tillman and West 1995; Langlois 1981). This legacy of two-tiered selection criteria was inherited in contemporary access to higher education in China.

The Ming empire re-established the examination system as the ultimate channel for political and social selection. The recommendation system and other alternative routes were abolished (Elman 2013). As Elman put it, the civil service examinations “performed important social, cultural and political functions for those during the rise of the Ming Imperium, which successfully drove the Mongols and their allies out of the south and north China” (Elman 2000: 61). By the Ming Dynasty, the civil service examination became the sole pathway to the empire bureaucracy from the local to the central level. Therefore, the systematic development of the keju effectively hindered the chances of upward social mobility for the minority groups during the selection process.

In addition, to keep the northern minorities in check by suppressing the ladder of prestige through military service, the second priority of Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang was to create a rough balance of the power between the Crown and the Southern landed gentry class, in which the Emperor's power predominated but left

a substantial level of wealth and independence to the southern clans (Chan 1984). The key to such a balance was the civil service examination system. The landed Southern clans mobilised their resources within the patrilineal lineage, invested in lineage schools, and guaranteed degree-holders at the local, provincial, and even central governments through legitimate routes the civil service examinations (Ebrey and Watson 1986; Hymes 1986).

Degree-holders were then granted land ownership as a reward for their merit, which extended the lineage's wealth (Ho 1962; Elman 2000). Moreover, their material gains were extended through the policy influence in governments. For instance, the distinctive nature of the agrarian cultivation in Chinese history was its form of rents—cultivation of rice instead of monetary forms (Moore 1966). Therefore, what mattered most to the southern landlords was rice production. By filling the official positions with the lineages' representatives, the southern clans were able to influence the government's investment in the irrigation infrastructures in the southern provinces, which benefited the growth of rice crops. As Moore put it, "the link between office and wealth through the lineage was one of the most important features of Chinese society" (Moore 1966: 165).

The keju system was also an effective mechanism which linked the majority of the peasant population to the landlords through joint interests in degree-holding and in the meanwhile, by inducing peasants to accept their socioeconomic status. It has been argued that the keju system only allowed a small scale of circulation among the elites as the linguistic and academic requirements were unattainable for the majority of peasants (Elman 2013; Ho 1962). However, the distinctive Chinese demographic and cultural character,—namely the family lineage,—linked the mass population to the landed property (Ebrey and Watson 1986). The family lineage or the patrilineal clans could be argued as an illustration of functional structuralism, which functioned as a micro-social mechanism of stratification.

The family's representatives in the local or central bureaucracy were at the top of the family structure, whose positions in the governments protected the interests of the clan. The landlords or the heads of the family clans were at the middle of the family structure, and were responsible for consistently providing a pool of the most intelligent and competent candidates by establishing clan schools, employing experienced teachers, and providing education in the extended families (Beattie 2009; Chow 1994). The peasants were at the bottom of the family structure; their responsibilities were primarily the labour of the land (Ebrey and Watson 1986). The shared interests among all members of the family were the landed property and the productivity of the land. The peasants relied on good crops to pay rent to the landlords, and the landlords needed the vast and productive land to produce more wealth (Hymes 1986; Moore 1966; Elman 1990). Degree-holders in the bureaucracy not only legitimised the family's fortunes, but also provided political support such as taxes implementation and irrigation projects for their clans.

The key to this social mechanism was the peasants' acceptance of their status. It is worth noting that the vast majority of the population of peasants, was excluded

from civil service selection in reality (Eberhard 1962; Elman 1990). Although these social groups were legally entitled to compete in the examinations, the barriers in reality were paramount. It was expensive to invest in classical education, which was the key to the civil service examinations. This financial barrier prevented most peasants from entering the examination competition. Due to the limitation of technological advancements such as printing, books and paper were luxurious commodities that poor peasants could not afford. Equally, the peasants could not afford the opportunity costs of the examinations since the training was expected to take many years of arduous study. Therefore, for aspiring and talented children of peasants, lineage schools provided the opportunities, resources and training required to enter the examinations. The Keju system performed an important social function of meritocracy by inducing the majority of the peasants to accept their function and status as labourers of the land and believe the selection into officialdom based on merit, intelligence and hard work.

The Keju and Social Mobility

Between 1400 (the Ming Dynasty) and 1900 (the Qing Dynasty), the civil service examinations were developed empire-wide to cover more than 1300 counties, 140 prefectures, 17 provinces, as well as in the capital region (Elman 2009: 407). By the middle of the Ming Dynasty, an estimated around 500,000 civil officials or licentiates existed in the population of around 150 million, with a rough ratio of 1 civil official or licentiate per 300 persons in 1600 (Elman 2009: 408). By the middle of the Qing Dynasty, there was an estimation of 500,000 civil officials or licentiates in the population of around 350 million, representing around 1 civil official per 700 people in 1850 (Elman 2009: 408). The scale of the Keju selection was magnified to provide scholar-officials to all levels of bureaucracy. However, the exact nature of this selection has not been properly examined and researched. Existing literature highlights that the Keju selection was an exclusive privilege among the social elites and that it only permitted the circulation of the limited official-gentry (Eberhard 1962; Elman 2000; Ho 1962). Social mobility was evidently limited between different spectra of social structure. In other words, there had been limited upward social mobility from peasants origins to the scholar-official status (Ho 1962; Elman 2013). However, the nature of social mobility among the gentry class remained unclear. Was the Keju an effective mechanism of meritocracy for the gentry class?

This section examines the nature of social mobility among the gentry class through the Keju selection in imperial China. Again, the modern sociological account of contest and sponsored social mobility will be extended to analyse historical evidence of the Keju selection. Ralph Turner's noted work on social mobility proposed two contrasting types of class structure that allow a greater or lesser degree of social mobility (Turner 1960). One is the contest system society;

and the other is the sponsored society. Turner's theorisation of social class was primarily developed by analysing modern industrial societies, such as the US and the UK. However, the concept of the contest system and sponsored societies could also be extended to understand how civil service examinations in Imperial China had a long-lasting impact on social structure in China.

In imperial class structure, it can be argued that movement was fluid among the upper social classes. The uncertainty hinged on the success in the civil service examinations, which played a crucial role in the fluidity of the elite class. However, there were other factors that also contributed to the fluidity, including dynastic successions and political intervention. For Turner, a contest system allows an 'open contest' for elite status, and an individual's effort matters in this competition (Turner 1960: 856). Two main criteria characterise the contest system: "the rules of fair play" in the competition for elite status and a wide range of "strategies" available for candidates to use (Turner 1960: 856). In contrast, a sponsored system does not permit open competition for elite status. Instead, "elite status is given on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy" (Turner 1960: 856). In a sponsored system, candidates are selected for the elite circle because of their connections or sponsorship.

Turner's conceptualisation of two contrasting social structures and implications for social mobility drew criticism for its oversimplification of the complicated dynamics of social selection and reward (Mounford-Zimdars 2015). Imperial China provides several interesting attributes as a context for examining Turner's distinction between these two systems. The class structure and social selection in imperial China are characterised by both the contest and sponsored models. On the one hand, in terms of social selection, the competitiveness and intensiveness of civil service examinations for political positions in local and central bureaucracies certainly meet the contest pattern. The length of the classical education and intensiveness of the training that led up to examinations involved individual effort and determination.

Candidates' effort played an important role in the competition and in the examination outcomes (Peterson 1979; Ko 1994). On the other hand, the classical education curricula were representative of elite culture in terms of their moral, aesthetic, and intellectual standards and values. Moreover, the requirement to master the classical education involved financial investment and opportunity costs in the training (Miyazaki 1976). Therefore, the imperial Keju system can be characterised as a sponsored contest with competitive examinations in form and sociocultural reproduction in nature. However, some questions arise from this particular selection. To what extent did the Keju facilitate social mobility among the gentry class? How did the keju function as an effective mechanism to prevent the growth of modern capitalists and commercial merchants in later Imperial China? The following section examines the contest and sponsored nature of the Keju selection.

Classical Education, Cultural Capital and Contested Mobility?

The intergenerational reproduction of cultural resources in symbolic and concrete forms can best be illustrated in the Chinese history of imperial civil service examinations. This examination-based social selection in imperial China was a competition for social rewards between candidates from families with different cultural traditions and different levels of cultural resources and facilities. The variation in cultural resources created educational advantages or disadvantages for candidates' progression in the civil service examinations. When referring to the implications of cultural capital on examination selection, Elman put it this way: "unequal distribution of educational resources meant that those from families with limited traditions of literacy were unlikely to compete successfully in the degree market with those whose family traditions included classical literacy" (Elman 2013: 47).

Some questions arise regarding the relationship education, cultural capital, and civil service examinations. How did education and literacy become a social stratifier in imperial China? How much did cultural tradition matter in this context? What could account for cultural capital in symbolic or concrete forms in imperial China? Did the civil service examination create social divisions between different social groups or solidarity within social groups through a competition of cultural traditions and cultural capital? This section aims to provide answers to these questions. I will explore the implications of cultural capital for educational and examination outcomes by analysing the contents of civil service examinations and highlighting their impact on training and education for such levels of competition.

Prior to analysing the contents of the imperial civil service examinations, it is necessary to highlight some features of the Chinese language and its implications for education and examinations. There was a distinctive difference between basic literacy and classical literacy in the Chinese language. The former involved approximately 1500 characters, which could be learned from the *Thousand Character Text*, *Hundred Surnames* and *Three Character Classic* (Elman 2013: 47). This basic literacy was merely functional in imperial society, and families from both high and low social classes tended to provide such training in reading and writing these characters. Classical literacy, however, required a mastery of around 400,000 characters primarily from the Four Books and Five Classics as well as other classical literature (Elman 2013: 48). This classical literacy contained "linguistic terseness, thousands of unusual written graphs, and archaic grammatical forms" (Fei 1953: 71–72) that required memorisation and robust training and tutoring from an early age (Waltner 1983). Apart from the written language, the spoken vernacular had a variety of dialects.

Different dialects not only reflected different cultural traditions, such as northern and southern vernaculars, but also affected the grammatical forms of the written language (Chen 1988). Particularly because the northern dialect was institutionalised as the official language, the candidates who were brought up in different vernacular origins had to be trained to speak the official dialect (Elman 2014;

Crossley and Rawski 1993; Crossley 1994). Moreover, candidates had to adapt to grammatical differences in the written form of the northern dialect. Both written and spoken languages created a cultural and linguistic barrier that segregated candidates from different geographical backgrounds and vernacular origins (Elman 2013). In this sense, cultural traditions did matter in the imperial context of education and civil service examinations.

Imperial civil service examinations were primarily tests of classical education. However, the tests included a variety of graphs (more than 400,000), moral concepts from classical literature and stylistic composition of writing, which were designed to measure a candidate's different levels of competence, from memorisation, to classical literacy and argument which was later developed into the eight-legged essay (Leung 1994; Elman 1990, 2013). The rigidity in formatting eight-legged essays brought about strong criticism for its symbolic association with China's cultural stagnation and economic backwardness (Chen 1988; Hughes 1967). However, this invention of essay writing can be linked to the rise of civil service examinations. This strict requirement in essays somehow pioneered a standardised examination formula more commonly accepted in modern education systems. The rigid restriction allowed examiners to check the number of legs and characters for accuracy in the essays, thereby standardising marking criteria.

Apart from memorisation and arguments, the examinations also tested candidates' handwriting competency, that is, the style of calligraphy. The Chinese language's uniqueness lies in its written form—Chinese characters. The standard style in examinations was the 'regular calligraphy'; however, there were other different styles including the 'small-character', the 'cursive', the 'running' and the 'seal' forms of writing (Ledderose 1972: 4). The quality of calligraphy was taken into consideration by examiners along with the content of the answers; the training in calligraphy was one of the most robust and persistent components of classical education (Chaffe 1995).

Training started from an early age, with people repeatedly drawing each stroke of an individual character to master a proper style of writing. Moreover, given the limited availability of paper and ink in imperial times, the training for calligraphy also involved an investment in cultural resources. "The four treasures of the scholar's studio" referred to the writing brush, ink, ink stone, and paper, which were essential for practising writing classical Chinese (Elman 2013: 51). In this sense, educational outcomes on the civil examinations were partially determined by the investment of cultural capital in concrete resources.

The implications of the civil service examinations for education and training were substantial. It was estimated that male pupils started basic literacy training from the age of 4 or 5, moving on to a classic moral and philosophical education with more difficult texts and literature, such as Confucian philosophy of filial piety and the doctrine of meaning, the Daoist Great Learning, classic Analects and Mencius, and some poetry, then to writing training of Four Books the Five Classics and the Erya analytical research of the Records of Rites, the Spring and Autumn Annals the age of 12 to 13, before finally moving on to and the Tso Commentary (Wakeman 1975; Elman 2013).

This section has highlighted the nature of classical education and the length and depth of the training required to enter the competition of the civil service examinations. The ‘meritocratic’ nature of classical education functioned as an uncertain factor in the competitive and successive civil service examinations. Such uncertainty favoured the Crown to maintain a firm control over the landed southern clans and their associated wealth and status linked to the scholar-officials. Even within the most culturally advantaged families, it was difficult to maintain such a level of competition generation after generation.

Such inconsistency in producing office-holders throughout the generations was confirmed in Ho’s research on social mobility in Imperial China. In the early Qing Dynasty, it was estimated that 50–60 % of the juren and jinshi degree-holders had fathers or grandfathers who had obtained similar degrees (Ho 1962). This rate increased to 60–70 % in the late Qing Dynasty (Ho 1962). Therefore, it could be argued that the civil service examinations contributed towards a degree of contest mobility among the culturally advantaged class. It could also be argued that the keju functioned as meritocratic selection for the privileged gentry class, which consolidated the control of the Crown in imperial China.

Sponsored Mobility: Surnames, Lineages and Inter-marriage

Another aspect of the civil service examination is its seemingly meritocratic form which allows the candidates to advance their elite status through their social connections and sponsorship. There tended to be a financially powerful, culturally resourced network connected to the Keju success. The interplay among the candidates, their social familial network, and the civil service examinations reflected the power and influence of this unique literati class in imperial China. Existing literature has explored how families developed different strategies to attain and maintain cultural capital for their male children’s classic education training (Chaffee 1995; Hymes 1986; Ebrey and Watson 1986; Elman 2013). However, we know little about how these strategies had an impact on the degree of social mobility. This section links the historical analysis of cultural strategies in the Keju competition to some evidence on social mobility.

The previous section highlighted the difficulty level of the civil service examinations by analysing the cultural contents and the corresponding training and pedagogy requirements. Even with the most dedicated minds, it was still highly competitive to survive the examinations. In this section, I begin with a general description of the successful progression rates of the examinations and their corresponding composition in the whole population from a variety of sources. Due to the lack of comparable historical data, I chose the data representing the Keju selection between the late Ming and the late Qing Dynasties. The lowest county level of examinations selected the Sheng-yuan degree-holders and the quota was

Table 2.2 The selection rates and the percentage of the population of all types of degree-holders

	Type of degree-holders	Successful rate	Percentage of the population	Source of statistics
National examinations	Jinshi	0.00016*	0.04–0.07**	*Chen et al. (2015); **Hao and Clark (2012)
Provincial examinations	Juren	0.33–0.5*	**0.02–0.035	*Campbell and Lee (2010, 2011); **Hao and Clark (2012)
County examinations	Sheng-yuan	By quota	0.4–0.7	Hao and Clark (2012)

assigned by the central bureaucracy. It was estimated that the sheng-yuans accounted for between 0.4 and 0.7 % of the total population between the mid Ming and late Qing Dynasties (Hao and Clark 2012) (Table 2.2).

The secondary level of selection occurred at the provincial level, which selected the degree-holders for the jurens. Campbell and Lee (2010, 2011) estimated that the successful rate of the provincial examinations was between 0.33 and 0.5 % of all candidates in their analysis of the historical data. This successful rate indicated that the Jurens represented around 0.02–0.035 % of the whole population between the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Hao and Clark 2012). The most competitive examination was the national selection for the jinshi degrees, which were also named as the Palace Examinations. Chen et al.’s estimate about the successful rate at the national level was 0.00016 for the Jinshi degree (Chen et al. 2015). This accounted for between 0.04 and 0.07 % of the whole population (Hao and Clark 2012).

Therefore, one could anticipate the difficulty of producing the scholar-officials consistently within one family over consecutive generations. The kinship and clan played an important role in consistently producing degree-holders with the family extension. Hao et al.’s research illustrates that the six elite surnames accounted for up to 15–20 % of the total Juren degrees at the provincial level of Zhejiang and Jiangsu in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Hao and Clark 2012: 13). Hence, it is necessary to examine how the family clans and social networks mobilised their resources to sustain their Keju success. It is also necessary to investigate how families from different social groups developed strategies to attain or maintain cultural capital for their male children’s basic educational training.

The most common strategy developed by both rich clans and less affluent merchant families was lineage schooling (Freedman 2004; Chang 1955; Esherick and Rankin 1990). The lineage schools were established by the same patrilineal families, which extended further in the agriculturally productive south (Moore 1966: 165). These lineage families functioned like a corporation, with a hierarchical structure and shared interests (Esherick and Rankin 1990; Ebrey and Watson 1986). The top of the lineage families tended to be landlords or officials who rented their

lands to poor peasants from the same lineage. The shared interests were to produce degree-holders to maintain the lineage's political power in the local bureaucracy.

Hence, donations from rich families were used to build schools, purchase books and employ private tutors for male children in the same lineage (Hymes 1986; Ebrey and Watson 1986). Most of the endowment for lineage schools came from wealthy families; less affluent families could also free their aspiring children from labour in the fields and send them to the lineage schools (Esherick and Rankin 1990; Watson 1985). The lineage families maximised their resources and facilities to obtain or maintain cultural resources and provide education for their offspring. Once the lineage schools produced degree-holders at the local level, the official status would in turn enhance the lineage's economic, social and political status within the region.

Inter-marriages between culturally rich families were another strategy for maintaining and strengthening cultural capital (Elman 2013: 129). One powerful lineage tended to extend its social, cultural, and political advantages by linking to another equal lineage through marriage (Beattie 2009). Another common strategy was education trust funds established by less well-off individual families (Ebrey and Watson 1986; Wakefield 1998). An education trust fund was more or less a concrete representation of cultural capital, which aimed to inspire younger generations to pursue success in civil service examinations and a career in the local or central bureaucracy. The education trust funds provided financial rewards to the younger male family members for their competition in civil examinations (Watson 1985; Wakefield 1998); hence, the higher level of the examinations a young male member attained, the more rewards earned from the trust fund. Cultural capital in both concrete and symbolic forms was reproduced from one generation to the next in pursuing success in civil service examinations. In other words, civil service examinations became a social mechanism for generating the intergenerational reproduction of cultural capital. However, these strategies developed by different social groups had great implications for the unequal distribution of cultural capital and the subsequent status in civil service examinations.

Civil service examinations in imperial China were not simply a competition of cultural capital and resources or legitimised elite language and cultural status of the Way of Learning; rather, its association with attractive social rewards also contributed to different cultural strategies. The desire to maintain or obtain cultural capital triggered the considerable accumulation of social capital and corporate initiative. Lineage networks, inter-marriages between clans, and education trusts also enabled families to act together more effectively to pursue shared interests; that is, the success in the civil service examinations. These strategies in turn strengthened cultural capital within extended social networks and brought about considerable social cohesion, thereby enabling lineage to work more effectively in agricultural production and extend land ownership with support from their political contacts in local and central bureaucracies. In this sense, the Keju selection functioned as a mechanism of sponsored mobility of the gentry class.

Keju Quotas, Social Mobility and the State

The civil service examinations in Imperial China were not simply a sorting machine that distributed wealth and prestige among the gentry class. The imperial government had considerable control over the selection process. In particular, the quota system, which was introduced in the early Ming Dynasty as part of the state's regulation of the examinations, played an important role in manipulating social opportunities through the Keju and creating geographical stratification that had a long-term impact on the Chinese society. The state's control of the keju quotas was manifested in all levels of the examinations (Rowe 2012; Elman 2013).

At the lowest county level, the sheng-yuan quotas were fixed by geographical location in descending order of quantity from the metropolitan cities to ordinary prefectural cities, large counties, and ordinary counties (Ho 1962). For example, the quota of sixty candidates was assigned to prefecture capitals such as Nanjing and Beijing, and forty to other prefectures by the mid-fifteenth century (Elman 2000: 259). At the higher degree level, the juren quotas were set by another geographical indicator—the province. The quota degree system was argued to be a fair geographical representation (Elman 2000: 259; Ho 1962: 222), based on “the population of the province, land tax and cultural tradition” (Elman 2000: 184–185).

The rationale for introducing the quota as a permanent fix in the civil service examinations was mainly twofold. First, establishing quotas across different regions aimed to maintain the meritocratic nature of the examinations, which was based on the track record of successful candidates in a given province (Elman 1990; Ho 1962). Hence, culturally rich provinces around the Yangzi Delta were assigned significantly more quotas than northern areas, due to the better performance by their candidates in the examination system (Dardess 1973; Elman 2013). Second, the Ming selection inherited the legacy from the past of the minority Jin-Yuan empires, which was the representation of minorities (Langlois 1981; Tillman and West 1995). Since minority groups were disadvantaged in the examination competition, which was defined in terms of Chinese vernacular and philosophy (Wang 1983; Crossley 1994), the quota system protected ethnic minorities' routes to various levels of bureaucracies.

However, it was no more than a political manipulation of social selection through examinations. For example, culturally rich provinces such as Jiangsu and Anhui in the Yangzi Delta historically produced more jurens than other provinces; however, the northern metropolitan province of Jilin was given the largest quotas of the jurens when Beijing was chosen as the capital city in 1421 (Elman 2013: 48; Peterson 1979). The quota system also revealed a deep-seated division between the south and the north, and the political intervention through the quota system manipulated examination selection for candidates from different geographical origins.

The south–north divide became even more acute since the foundation of the Ming Dynasty after two hundred years of minority rule in the north (Hartwell 1982; Grimm 1985). Table 2.3 illustrates the ratio of the jinshis from southern and

Table 2.3 The ratio between the jinshis from southern and northern origins between 1371 and 1433 in the early Ming

Total	Southern	Northern
3169	2583 (81.5 %)	586 (18.5 %)

Source The table developed from Table 2.5 in Elman (2000)

northern origins between 1371 and 1433 in early Ming. It is shown that the jinshis from the southern provinces accounted for 81.5 % in contrast to just 18.5 % of those from northern areas. As discussed previously, the southern just Han clans retreated to education and maintained their cultural advantages after suffering political and military humiliation at the hands of the northern minorities during the Yuan-Ming transition. However, the legacy from the Yuan-Ming minority past remained significant in the political, economic, and cultural domain in the newly built Ming Empire.

The political centre of the Ming Dynasty was first settled in Nanjing in the south; the Yong Le Emperor subsequently made the decision to relocate the capital city to Dadu in the northern part of China—between 1415 and 1422 (Hartwell 1982; Elman 2000: 240). The change of the location highlighted the strategic importance of the north for the Ming Empire in terms of guarding against threats from northern minorities (Miyazaki 1976). Coinciding with the capital relocation was the institutionalisation of the northern dialect as the official language. The Peking dialect was selected as the official Chinese language since 1425 (Elman 2000, 2013),—a status that still applies to the contemporary Chinese language. Since there had been significant differences in phonetics, grammar and written form between the northern and southern dialects (Elman 2014; Crossley and Rawski 1993), the preference for the northern language had great implications for civil service examinations as the language was the main medium of tests. The official language was used as the main linguistic method at all levels of examinations. The intentional consequence was to give a linguistic advantage to northern candidates and a disadvantage their southern counterparts in meritocratic selection.

However, the change in the tests and the linguistic barrier did not prevent southern candidates’ domination in local, provincial and national examinations. The quotas were introduced to enforce the representation of northern candidates and limit the power of the southern clans. Particularly at higher levels of the competition for positions in the central bureaucracy, the quota was set as 6:4 for southern and northern candidates in 1425, and it was modified to 55:35:10 in 1427 for southern, northern and central candidates in metropolitan examinations (Elman 2000: 359).

Geographical inequality is probably the most enduring social inequality in China’s history. The quota system was a particular illustration of the political manipulation of different regional interests. Geographical inequality in agricultural production, land taxes, cultural traditions and political power played an important role in determining educational opportunity and social selection in imperial China. Political intervention was evident in creating linguistic barriers and selection bias in

the civil service. The rhetoric of meritocracy and equality masked the reality of uneven chances of candidates from different geographical origins in the examination-based social selection and in political rewards in imperial bureaucracy.

Conclusion

This opening chapter has explored the philosophical origin of Chinese meritocracy in imperial China. The Confucian meritocracy promoted social selection by the Keju, which was used as an ultimate political tool to justify the legitimacy of the literati-scholar class in each dynasty and to safeguard their status and privilege through the shifting political circumstances of different successive dynasties. By examining the development of the Keju and the dynastic school system, I have argued that the Confucian meritocracy was a top-down model in which social selection came prior to the availability of social opportunities. The rise of a national dynastic education system was closely related to the development of the civil service examination system rather than economic advancement and empire building. Moreover, it was fully integrated into the civil service examination system. Characteristics of the late imperial educational and examination systems, including the classical learning, quotas and elite selection, revealed deeply rooted regional disparity and political intervention in balancing contrasting regional interests. The competitive civil service examinations resulted in a complicated process of cultural and social reproduction. The Keju was not simply a competition of cultural capital and resources; rather, its association with attractive social rewards also contributed to different cultural strategies. The desire to maintain or obtain cultural capital triggered the considerable accumulation of social capital and corporate initiative. Lineage networks, intermarriages between clans and education trusts also enabled families to act together more effectively to pursue shared interests; that is, success in the civil service examinations. These strategies in turn strengthened cultural capital within extended social networks and brought about considerable social cohesion, thereby enabling lineage to work more effectively in agricultural production and extend land ownership with support from their political contacts in local and central bureaucracies. Social selection through civil service examinations has long been associated with social mobility; however, it was no more than a sponsored contest with competitive examinations in form and sociocultural reproduction in nature.

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