

Effect of Chinese Imperial Examinations on the Great Divergence in Late Dynastic China

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Research Question:

To what extent did the characteristics of the Chinese Civil Service Examinations during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties contribute to differences in economic growth and culture between China and the West to bring about "The Great Divergence"?

IB Extended Essay in History

Word Count: 3,815

EE Advisor: Mr. Joseph Wilkerson

October 2015

Abstract

For nearly 1,300 years, the Chinese political system was distinguished by a special emphasis on academic prowess. Through the institutionalized civil service examination system that served as a means for government employment selection, individuals who would just be scholars in another civilization were put at the forefront of society, wielding the power to shape public policy. The civil service examinations were formative for China not just politically but intellectually, culturally, and socially, with impacts that led to economic tendencies. From this multifaceted outlook, to what extent did the characteristics of the Chinese Civil Service Examinations during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties contribute to differences in economic growth and culture between China and the West to bring about "The Great Divergence"?

To answer this question, a multidimensional approach was used to analyze the civil service system's effects on multiple spheres of Chinese society. These repercussions of the examinations and their diffusion into economics are interpreted with the help of writings of leading academics on the Chinese civil service system.

The conclusion reached is that the examination system did have effects that differentiated Chinese economic growth from that of European countries, and the primary contrast came from deep-rooted socioeconomic tendencies that played a role in a traditional system that served state interests. Factors made pervasive in the tenure of the examinations such as reverence of academia and classical study, emphasis on hierarchical stability, and family obligations were some of the key reasons for which Chinese financial thought differed from that of new Western capitalism. However, the civil service examinations, which proved to be resiliently flexible and were reformed many times to be more practical, were not the only cause for these inclinations, nor were they simply an anti-modern hindrance for Chinese development.

Word Count: 290

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Section A: Introduction

The rise of the European colonial empires marks perhaps the most resounding shift in geopolitical history. The newly-formed trade networks between the Old and New Worlds shaped the development of both counterparts, providing the basis for unprecedented long-distance exchange as new systems of imperialism arose to collect newfound wealth for European countries. Far to the east, Chinese emperors, in relative isolation, had ruled over a massive agrarian empire for millennia. At the time of Columbus's journey, theirs was the oldest, largest and wealthiest of the classical civilizations with illustrious records in the arts, poetry, and academics, thoroughly entrenched into an institution of its very own: the Chinese civil service system. This merit-based form of governance was the backbone of the Chinese state- it conveniently functioned not only for public administration but also served as a medium for Confucian thought in the political sphere, upholding traditional class structures while providing a pathway for social mobility.

This cultural and intellectual preeminence, however, started to wane during the Age of Discovery onwards as the political, economic and technological hearth of the world shifted west. In what economic historians note as "The Great Divergence", Western nations came on track to become financially foremost as capitalism on large and small scales, from imperialistic colonial ventures to commerce among merchants, proved more successful than ever before.¹ Compared to this dynamism in Europe, China was static- the examination system had been used there for centuries to rigorously select the people who were to have power. Academic success defined the aspirations of many within this empire every year, and this combined with the system's other

¹ The Economist BY C.W. "Economic History: What was the Great Divergence?" 2nd September 2013. *The Economist*. Web. 4 27 2015 .

effects makes it difficult to overstate the implications it had on China in context with the rest of the world. So how exactly did this formative, enduring institution affect the *economic* development and culture of this great empire, which so starkly contrasted with Europe in the time of the Great Divergence and that continues to occupy such a unique position on the political and economic landscape of today?

Section B: Analysis

A distinctive feature of Chinese civilization, the civil service system “constituted an institution unmatched by any other nation in the world”.² Its influence on the empire diffused through all spheres, and for centuries it “furnished the sole gateway for the attainment of social prestige and distinction”.² It is estimated to have first originated in the year 606, lasting 1,298 years until 1905.³ Officially sanctioned as the “Keju” system under the Han dynasty (221 BCE to 220 AD) and abolished during the Qing modernization reforms in the twentieth-century, its prolonged hold on the empire’s political structure affected Chinese thought both during its reign and long after. It solely constituted the state-orchestrated process for distinguishing the aspiring scholars considered worthy to serve in government. Certain tendencies deriving from the eminence of the examinations as an institution led to distinctions that helped set the stage for China to fall behind its occidental rivals in specific economic respects to cause what became known as The Great Divergence.

New trends in the West of individualism, entrepreneurship, specialization and investment led to unprecedented economic development.⁴ Meanwhile, the civil service system of China perpetuated certain ideals that in some ways served as counters to these trends, possibly leading to stagnation by comparison. These are especially significant because in many respects, China, with its massive production-based population, was set to have the advantage.⁵ For most of its

² New World Encyclopedia. *Imperial Examinations (Keju) - New World Encyclopedia*. 8 April 2014. Web. 2015.

³ Yu, Hoi K. Suen and Lan. *Chronic Consequences of High-Stakes Testing? Lessons from the Chinese Civil Service Exam*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. Journal.

⁴ Bodde, Derk. "Chinese Ideas in the West." *Chinese Ideas in the West*. Committee on Asiatic Studies in American Education, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.

⁵ Bodde, Derk. "Chinese Ideas in the West." *Chinese Ideas in the West*. Committee on Asiatic Studies in American Education, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.

history Europe was culturally, intellectually and politically far behind Eastern Asia, but in preindustrial times, increases in education and literacy rates, which some scholars argue directly correlated with industrial development, started to emerge, and European nations started to become very wealthy. However, China's entire political system was based on academia, so why did they not experience such shifts? ⁶ Though historians continue to debate the precise timing of the Great Divergence, identifying its real cause is a subject of greater contention. From the Western perspective, German philosopher Max Weber described a cultural and ideological reason for the "European Miracle", in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." Weber asserted that religious teachings helped propel economic output in Protestant European countries by encouraging financially prudent and self-interested thought processes that ultimately desired wealth. He contrasted this to the East, which fell behind because these worldly goals were not regarded as highly. ⁷ In our comparative study of Chinese and Western economic circumstances, these cultural values as well as ideological, social, and political effects of the examinations will be evaluated in an attempt to pinpoint the causes of the Great Divergence.

⁶ Justin Yifu Lin, *The Needham Puzzle: Why the Industrial Revolution Did Not Originate in China*, The University of Chicago Press, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jan., 1995), pp. 269-292

⁷ The Economist BY C.W. "Economic History: What was the Great Divergence?" 2nd September 2013. *The Economist*. Web. 4 27 2015 .

Part I: Social Effects of the Civil Service Examinations

First and foremost in the study of the imperial examination system comes the preeminence of social philosophy in the form of Confucianism; the Classics of this state-sanctioned conservative, stability-focused philosophy were the sole subject tested, providing little encouragement for extensive experimentation or investigation of other disciplines. The sociopolitical priority placed upon the examinations forms another key characteristic. The examination system's primary function as the selection process for bureaucrats made it virtually the only way to political and economic success for an individual. From the start of Chinese civilization, the scholar class was treated with utmost respect and entrusted with the power to dictate public policy; "All of China's great scholars and philosophers [were] government officials, many of them [spent] long periods of their life in political posts".⁸ But perhaps more important is the fact that for many citizens, succeeding on the exams and becoming a bureaucrat was the most direct path to social mobility and wealth:

"Family clans often invested large sums of money in the education of their more brilliant students in the hope that they might eventually gain official rank and then they would be able to reimburse the family a hundred fold. Merchants and traders never had great social prestige in Chinese society and although some of them from time to time amassed large fortunes it was the official group who were not only the most honored but were also usually the wealthiest class in China. The examination system furnished a gateway to assured economic success."⁸

Thus, the priority upon examination preparation meant there was little specialization into careers such as medicine, religious study, or law, and little incentive for business and entrepreneurship.

⁸ Paul F. Cressey, *The Influence of the Literary Examination System on the Development of Chinese Civilization*, The University of Chicago Press *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Sep., 1929), pp. 250-262

As there was no age restriction for taking the exams, some spent decades simply trying to pass.⁹ Academic success and appointment to the bureaucracy defined the aspirations of the Chinese, contrasting greatly with the inclinations that characterized Europe at the same time, where profit was seen as an end in itself. Many scholars also suggest that the focus of the examinations on literary classics and its lack of specialized math or science training were also reasons for which China did not industrialize and innovate as rapidly as the West.¹⁰

However, Benjamin Elman, Professor of Chinese Studies at Princeton University and the leading intellectual on the imperial service examinations, cautions against these views in his foremost work, *A Cultural History of Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China*. He argues that the emphasis on classical learning by the examinations was essential for maintaining cultural unity and permanence for the Confucian system, and their polemical way of thought had a value that elevated the scholar-gentry above the most specialized of workers. He also references the reform movements that surrounded the system during Ming and Chi'ing rule, the last dynastic eras of China and the regimes coinciding with European growth. Chi'ing scholar Shao Ch'angdong, for example, was a staunch supporter of practical policy questions in lieu of essays on classics. Other scholars such as Wei Hsi expressed dislike for the infamous "eight-legged essay", a formal, strictly-structured writing exam, and instead advocated for examination reform with emphasis on practical knowledge. Elman asserts that "Even those who praised the selection system saw much room for improvement."¹¹ These debates for changing the exams

⁹ Benjamin A. Elman, *Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China*, Association for Asian Studies, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Feb., 1991) , pp. 7-28

¹⁰ Paul F. Cressey, *The Influence of the Literary Examination System on the Development of Chinese Civilization*, The University of Chicago Press *American Journal of Sociology* , Vol. 35, No. 2 (Sep., 1929) , pp. 250-262

¹¹ Benjamin A. Elman, Gordon Wu. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* . Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Hardcover.

highlights that their monolithic focus on classical study was noted within China and also reflects that they were not completely static- applicable policy questions and more natural studies were indeed put into the exams to “[widen] their scope in the reformist era after 1860”.¹²

Understanding Confucianism is essential to study of the civil service examinations, which directly prioritized the study of these teachings for all who wished to be part of the scholar-gentry. Confucianism is a moral and political philosophy codified by the 5th - 6th century BCE political theorist, Confucius. It was a unique system- spiritual as well as worldly, with emphasis on ancestral veneration alongside practical application of societal ethics and family values for the sake of public order. The ideology was concerned with real-world relationships at local and state levels, and more importantly with the upholding of tradition, in the form of a system of reciprocated ethics, which was fundamental to communal wellbeing and greater stability for China. From its inception, Confucianism was a call for conservation and revival; a tribute to the moral traditions of Ancient China. At the time of Confucius, China had degenerated into political instability marked with ethical decline, and to counter these pressing trends that in his view were eroding Chinese culture and history, he codified principles that served to bring stability to the masses. He consolidated ideas of the family, school, society and the kingdom as a whole and created a system of reciprocated ethics for order in the production-based peasant society. As a practical method for effective governance as well as cultural and intellectual unity, the political elite of China utilized these teachings to maintain social order and control upon an expansive empire.¹³ This concept of gripping onto the old while facing the future was the agenda of

¹² "Civil Service Examinations." *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China* 48.1239 (2009): n. pag. Berkshire Publishing Group LLC. Web. 05 Aug. 2015.

¹³ Kyong-Dong Kim, *CONFUCIANISM, ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEMOCRACY* Lynne Rienner Publishers, *Asian Perspective* , Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue on APEC (Fall 1997) , pp. 77-97

Chinese statesmen centuries after the philosopher's time. Confucius's emphasis on tradition helped define the very purpose of Imperial Service examinations, which was to firmly establish a creditable, classically-educated scholar class at the top of society to uphold Chinese history and culture in dealing directly with national issues and the legislative process.¹⁴

Part II: Cultural & Ideological Effects of the Examination Systems

One of the most important effects relevant to the examination system is its impact upon thought process within the empire. The very concept of an imperially controlled academic-system for employment meant that the educational system was dictated by the government. The curriculum was meticulously tailored to test for mastery of Confucian classics. The diffusion of Confucian principles was highly prioritized in the Sung, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties as an intrinsic element of the public order as well as private and family life, and their spread provided perhaps the most influential tenet of the Great Divergence by forming an *economic ideology*.¹⁵ This comprises of the specific working-class or business philosophies of a country. In "Competitive Examinations in China" from *The North American Review*, William A.P Martin attributes the public reverence towards scholars to a foundational principle of merit-based success that the civil-service examinations essentially perpetuated by their grip on Chinese society and politics. This cultural tradition of holding diligent study and merit to high esteem are conveyed by the quote "Employ the able and promote the worthy,"¹⁶ and the use of examinations meant that one's very capacity to serve was determined by his academic excellence. Perhaps what caused an even greater admiration for those in the bureaucratic system was the fact that

¹⁴ "Confucianism." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 22 Aug. 2015.

¹⁵ Benjamin A. Elman, *Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China*, Association for Asian Studies, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Feb., 1991) , pp. 7-28

¹⁶ William A. P. Martin, *Competitive Examinations in China*, University of Northern Iowa, *The North American Review* , Vol. 111, No. 228 (Jul., 1870) , pp. 62-77

they were not seen as people with inborn privilege but rather those with the knowledge, skills, and determination to be doing their work. Indeed China's system remained true to this aspect of awarding merit more so than any other civilization of the time. In effect, not even the emperor could appoint officials by means of nepotism- wealth or hereditary social status meant little in an examination system, though of course these factors influenced who was able to prepare for them.¹⁷

In the greater picture, the value placed upon study was significant because it reflected that it was hard work and academic prowess that made one respectable and influential in Chinese society, instead of the commonplace standards of affluence or background that determined social standing in other contemporaneous civilizations. Furthermore, throughout Chinese history, merchants were seen as an indispensable yet lowest part of the occupational hierarchy because of their role of simply profiting from the production of others, lacking their own contribution to communities. Though many Chinese merchants became wealthy and influential, they were considered too depraved to represent Chinese culture.¹⁸ Despite societal attitudes towards merchants improving and their numbers increasing in later dynasties such as the Ming (1368-1644), the inherent disdain of profit-driven individuals within a state ruled by scholars and fed by farmers meant that conditions for entrepreneurs contrasted greatly with those of Western Europe, where markets facilitated new methods of commerce and investment.¹⁹

¹⁷ Paul F. Cressey, *The Influence of the Literary Examination System on the Development of Chinese Civilization*, The University of Chicago Press *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Sep., 1929), pp. 250-262

¹⁸ Farmer, E. L... (1999). [Review of *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*]. *China Review International*, 6(1), 54-56.

¹⁹ Bodde, Derk. "Chinese Ideas in the West." *Chinese Ideas in the West*. Committee on Asiatic Studies in American Education, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.

In a hierarchy inevitably marked by disparity, Chinese citizens were taught to suppress individual desires for the benefit of the group by remaining true to their niche for maintaining societal stability. Many sociologists suggest a cultural dimension of collectivism- repeated research findings on China confirm the presence of a “group orientation”, which is unsurprising considering some central concepts in Confucianism- familial values, respect for elders, avoidance of conflict, and integrity to one’s role in society.²⁰ As the examinations were what made Confucianism directly relevant, they served to perpetuate these values.

Contrary to popular notions, the examination system was not simply a one-sided, anti-modern hindrance that opposed cultural and intellectual change. Nor did the exams serve as an impediment to scientific study or technological innovation- in fact, “evidence documented [by] Joseph Needham [show that], except in the past 2 or 3 centuries, China had a considerable lead over the Western world in most of the major areas of science and technology.”²¹ The priority placed upon the examination system rather allowed them to be an essential medium through which governmental institution related to the individual, and they played a part in maintaining cultural unity by countering provincial and regional values.²²

Part III: Political Effects of the Examination System

The imperial examinations served a very clear political purpose within China that in turn effected macroeconomic development of the empire. Confucianism was made directly relevant to

²⁰ Benjamin A. Elman, Gordon Wu. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* . Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Hardcover.

²¹ Justin Yifu Lin, *The Needham Puzzle: Why the Industrial Revolution Did Not Originate in China*, The University of Chicago Press, *Economic Development and Cultural Change* , Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jan., 1995) , pp. 269-292

²² New World Encyclopedia. *Imperial Examinations (Keju)* - *New World Encyclopedia*. 8 April 2014. Web. 2015.

public policy through examinations: Kyong-Dong Kim in “Confucianism, Economic Growth and Democracy” asserts that the system of social norms derived from Confucianism heavily emphasized hierarchical balance at all levels for the sake of the state. Ideologies of public order were conducive to the ascendancy of government- the central empire’s usage of Confucianism and the examinations to govern meant that the state was “virtually the only institution responsible for the general well-being of the people”, and that its authority was “overwhelming and omnipresent in the life of the ordinary people”.²³ Kim makes the connection that these ideologies influenced entrepreneurship and innovation, in that the constraint of individual pursuit and self-interest in an already starkly divided political and class structure was an impediment to not only worker morale but also innovation in business and technology. He argues that despite the revered concept of class-mobility by merit and the stories of successful bureaucrats from humble origins, Confucianism as an imposed sociopolitical structure hindered to some extent the economic growth that required “some degree of innovative individual initiatives”.²⁴ Even past the level of the state, these tenets still influenced citizens at the personal level. Confucianism’s key emphasis on family loyalty in fact took precedence to loyalty to the state, and this was reflected in their practices at the time of economic modernization: attaining capital was a means to promote familial wellbeing. This obligation to one’s brethren was also something that burdened individuals who sought for financial success on their own.²⁵ Still, Kim cautions against using the exams and Confucianism in isolation to explain the principles of frugality and self-

^{23,25} Kyong-Dong Kim, *CONFUCIANISM, ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEMOCRACY* Lynne Rienner Publishers, *Asian Perspective* , Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue on APEC (Fall 1997) , pp. 77-97

²⁵ Benjamin A. Elman, Gordon Wu. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* . Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Hardcover.

restraint that influenced socioeconomic conditions in the late dynasties. Arguing that these ideas were pervasive in many other Eastern and even Western major religions, he states that Confucianism cannot be the sole determinant of Chinese behavioral economics. Kim does not consider Confucianism to be the Eastern counterpart of the Weber's Protestant ethic, but acknowledges the influence it had on economic culture and growth in China- its priority in family politics and society and how its examinations secured these ideals by providing a path to political power to those diligent enough to prepare for them.²⁶

²⁶ Kyong-Dong Kim, *CONFUCIANISM, ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEMOCRACY*
Lynne Rienner Publishers, *Asian Perspective* , Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue on APEC (Fall 1997) , pp. 77-97

Section C: Conclusion

China's expansive empire was ruled for millennia by a centralized bureaucracy based on cultural orthodoxy, with officials determined by rigorous examination. Its emphasis on academic prowess and upholding of Confucian values affected life at all levels. Our initial analysis of the examinations was through a social lens. The examinations, as virtually the only pathway for social mobility, essentially defined the aspirations of the Chinese population, not leaving much room for specialization into other potential economic sectors. However, the examinations were not socially oppressive or monolithic, as evidenced by various reform movements in late dynasties. Culturally and ideologically, the examinations had their effect by institutionalizing the power of intellectuals in Chinese society, as well as by upholding key concepts of social stability and class structure for the sake of stability. In extension, the cultural emphasis on group wellbeing as opposed to self-interest that characterized the Chinese masses for centuries played their part. These factors, especially at the onset of the Age of Discovery amidst flourishing Western banks, joint-stock, colonialism and trade, shaped an empire that was less prone to capitalistic and free-market ideals with its tenets of collectivism, familial obligations, and societal etiquette. While these were essential for Chinese stability as well as cultural unity, it remains that they affected the potential for individual initiatives so necessary for economic growth. Ideologically, Chinese reverence for diligent study meant that intellect and classical acumen determined who was to be appointed to the most prestigious and influential positions on the social ladder. Finally, with respect to political structure, the tight influence wielded over education through administration of these exams meant that they were used as an agent of Confucianism- the philosophy that would serve as a means for status-quo and orthodoxy in the interest of the state. This conveys a very different setting than that in Europe, in which new,

more-secular initiatives led to commercial zeal that produced unprecedented economic growth. In China, academic success served as not only a path to political power but also wealth, meaning that a considerable proportion of the Chinese public would value education over other possible pursuits. These factors alongside the fact that little practical, scientific knowledge was tested attest to the idea that the exams served as quite a differentiating influence. The civil service examinations were significant for China in more than a few ways- they shaped it politically, socially, and culturally, and, as proven, economically to some extent. In no other civilization have testing papers so influenced statecraft, thought process, and public life than in dynastic China under the reign of the illustrious civil service system- and it would ultimately help contribute to the economic gradient that arises between the East and the West in The Great Divergence.

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