

*Creating ‘Virtuous and Talented’ Officials for
the Twentieth Century: Discourse and Practice
in Xinzheng China**

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‘It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.’ Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Central Xinzheng Reform and the Twentieth-Century Chinese State

The effort of the Qing dynasty to transform itself and forge a new set of relationships with society in its last decade has been one of the less explored areas in the scholarship on modern China. Although this set of radical initiatives, collectively known as the *xinzheng* (‘New Policy’) reforms attracted a good deal of commentary from its contemporaries, until recently it has been relatively understudied.¹ There are two reasons for this neglect. First, conventional

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¹ Although the *xinzheng* period has been well covered by two superb monographs on the transformation of Chinese education in the early 20th century—Sally Borthwick, *Education and Social Change in China: The Beginnings of the Modern Era* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983); Paul Bailey, *Reform the People: Changing Attitudes towards Popular Education in Early Twentieth Century China* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), until the 1990s there were only three major works on the *xinzheng* period that even partly covered the reforms from a central government perspective: Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China, 1898–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1931); Mary Wright’s Introduction in *China in Revolution: The First Phase* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), and Chuzo Ichiko, ‘Political and Institutional Reform, 1901–11’ in John K. Fairbank and K. C. Liu, *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Happily, in the 1990s a generation of younger scholars began to publish on this period, with Roger R. Thompson, *China’s Local Councils in the Age of Reform, 1898–*

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periodization has divided historical turf between Qing historians (for the Qing dynasty 1644–1911), Republican historians (for the period between 1911 and 1949) and political scientists (who cover 1949 to the present). Second, since the dramatic narrative for the first three-quarters of the twentieth century has been largely understood as a process of ever more radical forms of revolutionary change, scholars have understandably been more taken with exploring the antecedents of revolution and/or locally based studies of elite transformation than they have been with exploring a case of seemingly bona fide failure. The central government-initiated *xinzheng* reform period (1902–1911) has thus borne the full brunt of a Whiggish interpretation of history; too late to command the attention of most Qing historians, too early for the majority of Republican historians, at best a prologue for the real revolution to come, and at worst an abortive failure.

This gap in the historiography has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring wider understanding of the origins and evolution of the twentieth century, ‘modern’ Chinese state. As the title of Mary Wright’s still relevant volume from 1968 suggests, China’s ‘century of revolution’ began as much from above as it did from below in the immediate aftermath of the Boxer debacle. For questions concerning state building and institutional transformation, one could go further. The *xinzheng* era between 1902 and 1911 is *the* key watershed in the transformation of the Chinese state into something recognizably ‘modern’, for it is not until this time that the central government unambiguously altered its agenda to become the leading player in the search for ‘wealth and power’. This fundamental shift of agenda sharply reversed over a century of de facto devolution of informal administrative authority and initiative to both regional viceroys and local elites, and required a thorough transformation of the central state’s ethos and organization if it were to establish a much more proactive presence and take on a new set of tasks. These new tasks ranged widely, and included much augmented military modernization, the complete reorganization of the central bureaucracy, the belated promotion of modern education and commerce, investment in infrastructure, and the attempt to work through a new set of relationships with provincial and local elites through constitutional

1911 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Douglas Reynolds, *China, 1898–1912: The Xinhai Revolution and Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) as excellent examples of this newer generation of work.

reform. In short, the *xinzheng* program was nothing less than an attempted revolution from above.

Political analysts from Machiavelli to Samuel Huntington have noted that political reform from above is a venture fraught with risk, as it invariably carries the potential to mobilize blocking conservative opposition from within and/or raise expectations that cannot be satisfied by the system's ongoing capacity to deliver.² Indeed, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the conditions could hardly have been less favorable for thoroughgoing reform from above. The Qing had just been humiliatingly defeated in the Boxer Rebellion. Its central government was fiscally crippled by harsh indemnity payments to foreign powers and a high rate of foreign debt, it commanded but weak extractive capacity despite half a century of proliferating locally based informal state organizations that exacted fees and payments from the peasantry without supervision and auditing by the formal bureaucracy, and it had but little input into the 'modern' schools springing up in a variety of locations. Given these objective circumstances and immediate structural constraints, it should come as no great surprise that in the medium run, the combination of too much promise, too little institutional capacity for delivering on those promises, and the eventual defection of the dynasty's natural base of support overcame both the *xinzheng* reforms and the dynasty itself.

But in another less obvious, but perhaps more lasting way, the *xinzheng* program was not a swan song for a historical era about to pass; it laid the groundwork for another to come. Once the Six Boards were reorganized into the precursors of modern ministries and the Confucian civil service examinations were abolished, there was no question of returning to the old order. In so definitively breaking with the past and recasting the role and functions of the central government, the *xinzheng* reforms laid down a basic agenda for central state action that virtually all of the Qing's successor regimes of the twentieth century would imitate and struggle to achieve, albeit through a variety of different tactics. Well after 1911, military modernization for national defense, modern education, more effective systems of taxation and extraction, the promotion of infrastructural projects, and mobilizing the support of 'the people' would all continue to feature as key state-building projects, irrespect-

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. 21–2; Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 148–66, and *passim*.

ive of regime. Perhaps the most important and lasting set of *xinzheng* initiatives was the unitary central government's attempt to augment its institutional capacity to project its authority both further and more systematically into provinces and sub-provincial level in order to carry out this ever larger range of state action. Provincial and local elites may have contested the central government's aspirations (and indeed much of the politics of the late *xinzheng* and early Republican periods can be understood in this light), but from the *xinzheng* period on, *all* central government figures—whether military, Guomindang, or Chinese Communist Party—would, with absolute consistency, claim the unitary and indivisible nature of the Chinese state, ceaselessly reiterate the central executive's legitimacy in making appropriate decisions for the whole, and initiate any number of actions to translate those ideals into reality.

In addition to its pro-active legacy of central government aspirations to state building and a range of specific initiatives from military modernization to modern education, the *xinzheng* era also bequeathed to its successors a complex of structural dilemmas that the dynasty had either unwittingly unleashed or proved unable to reverse; notably the ongoing reduction of the central government's share in the real amount of taxes and fees being collected,³ and the beginnings of institutional disjointedness within the central bureaucracy as different models and methods of appointment were imported into different functional areas.

One indication of the period's lasting relevance can be seen through the reformers' own diagnoses of the state's most serious problems, and the 'cultural lenses' through which they perceived desirable solutions. After returning from the Government Reform Commission (1905–06) to investigate political systems abroad, Dai Hongci and Duan Feng jointly memorialized with a set of recommendations for government reform (*gai guan zhi*) in August 1906. They stated quite forcefully that the effective implementation of constitutionalism in China would first require a lengthy period of government reform—as had been the case in Meiji Japan. Getting the state in sufficient order first, appropriate state-led education of the people second, and constitutionally based participation a distant third thus figured in the earliest twentieth century discussions of how to

³ Esther Morrison, *The Modernization of the Ch'ing Bureaucracy* (Radcliffe University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1959); Paul Hickey, 'Fee Taking, Salary Reform, and the Structure of State Power in Late Qing China, 1909–11', *Modern China* 17:3, pp. 389–417.

remake the Chinese central state from above. This rank ordering of priorities went on to figure prominently in the political philosophy of Sun Zhongshan and his heirs in the Party-states of the 1930s, 1940s and beyond.

In a line of reasoning that neatly captured the key institution-building dilemma that would plague the Chinese state for decades thereafter, the Dai/Duan memorial stated 'without first reforming officialdom, individuals hold sway rather than laws; [if] officialdom is first reformed, law will be hold sway rather than individuals'—and that the latter was a far preferable state of affairs to the former, because the law [if first institutionalized] would be autonomously effective irrespective of the individual in office. The memorial continued to outline a set of outstanding problems with state institutions that could serve as a diagnostic checklist for the central state's key deficiencies for the remainder of the century: the need 1) for a responsible cabinet in order to unify central administration; 2) for a clear demarcation in the functions and responsibilities of central and local government; 3) for a clearly defined corps of assistant officials to relieve the work burden on responsible officials; 4) for functional rationalization, clear delineation of work responsibilities between specialists within the different organizations in the central bureaucracy and amalgamation or abolition of redundant state organizations such as the Board of Rites; 5) for thorough reform of local government to be more responsive to the needs of the people; 6) for the central government to work in partnership with local governments to increase the flow of tax revenue; 7) to provide established channels of upward mobility for clerks and petty assistant officials in the central bureaucracy to cut down on malfeasance, and 8) to simplify the (civil service) personnel system of appointment, transfer, promotion and emolument.⁴ With the possible exception of item 7 (at present the corruption of full officials with discretionary access to permits and funds is considered to be an even more serious problem than the malfeasance of undersalaried petty clerks), each of these is still an ongoing source of concern for the contemporary Chinese state. Despite a century of revolution and reform, official responsibilities remain blurred, individuals continue to have influence beyond the statutory scope of the offices they inhabit, much of

⁴ 'Chushi geguo kaocha zhengzhi dachen Dai Hongci deng zou qing gaiding quanguo guanzhi yiwei xianyu zhe', *Guangxu* 32, 12/6. In *Qingmo Choubei Lixian Dang'an Shiliao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1979), pp. 367–82.

the real tax that falls on the countryside is collected through unmonitored and only semi-formalized extrabudgetary revenue, the demarcation of responsibility between central and local governments and between different layers of local government continues to be vague in statute and even vaguer in practice, and informal arrangements (if not outright corruption) throughout the bureaucracy are endemic.

The *xinzheng* attempts to reform late imperial bureaucracy were simultaneously framed by the cultural and institutional environment of the late Confucian order while bequeathing a set of symbolic and institutional legacies of remarkable staying power to the post-Qing twentieth-century state. The civil bureaucracy was an integral component of this attempt to recast long-standing political and social institutions in order to carry out a fundamentally transformed vision of the state, and as such can be seen as a veritable microcosm of *xinzheng* aspirations and shortcomings. Throughout the 1902–1912 period, the civil bureaucracy was simultaneously the object of *xinzheng* reform (through a series of initiative for gradualist reform followed by the abrupt cancellation of the civil service examinations in 1904–05) as well as a critical prospective agent and eventual implementor of *xinzheng* reform (in actively implementing the sorts of initiatives the reforms envisioned for the central state—without a competent and loyal bureaucracy the state’s new agendas could not possibly be carried out).

The founding document of *xinzheng*, the Edict on Reform promulgated by Ci Xi on January 8, 1901 in effect stated as much:

the first essential, even more important than devising new systems, is to secure men of administrative ability (*zhi ren*). Without new systems, the old systems cannot be saved; without men of ability, even good systems cannot be made to succeed.⁵

The simple indispensability of the central bureaucracy to the *xinzheng* project renders it a significant subject for study in its own right, but the *xinzheng* era attempts to reform the bureaucracy also shed light on wider issues of continuity and change for the twentieth-century Chinese state. The *xinzheng* program looked abroad to foreign models in its reform of *guan zhi* (the official system/the bureaucracy) as much as in any other arena of reform. But unlike

⁵ The Edict on Reform of January 29, 1901 is the founding document of the *xinzheng* reforms. It is reproduced in *Guangxu Chao Donghua Lu*, Vol. 4, pp. 135–6, and is translated in full in Reynolds, pp. 201–4.

modern police, postal systems, or commerce bureaus that could be created more or less from the ground up, the late imperial state already possessed a long history and developed repertoire for recruiting, evaluating, and rewarding civilian officials. In perhaps no other realm of state action was there such a paradoxical pull towards both the past and the future; and in no other realm of state reform save the military did the state's efforts to simultaneously centralize and push through a new curriculum lead to such unintended catastrophic results in terms of institutional fraying and eventual breakdown.

Key legitimating symbols of civilian officialdom like the *keju* civil service examinations remained stubbornly resistant to change despite the rapidly changing social and institutional context of the early twentieth century. Despite the sudden abrogation of the Confucian *keju* civil service examinations in late 1904 as unreformable and inappropriate for the needs of a modern country, centrally administered and monitored 'new' civil service examinations reappeared only two years later, and continued to be held in different forms until the end of the dynasty. In addition, a well defined set of tropes about 'virtue and talent' (*de yu cai*) and 'upright and capable' (*jian neng*) officials continued to shape the range of the imaginable and desirable for civil service reform—with profoundly tenacious afterlives in the subsequent Republican period. These almost unchallengeable assumptions about the natural legitimacy and fairness of a 'career open to talent' through centrally legitimated and/or administered open civil service examinations, and the importance of the 'virtuous and talented' official as key to creating a modern and powerful China continued to resonate throughout the remainder of the twentieth century despite the implosion of the state under warlordism, the rise of the Party-state in the 1920s and 1930s, invasion and civil war, and more extreme phases of revolution from above and below on both sides of the Taiwan Straits.

Redefining the 'Virtuous and Talented' Official

Confucian state doctrine had long assumed that good officials needed to possess both personal morality (*de*) and objectively effective ability (*neng* or *cai*) in some sort of balance. The normal way in which the late imperial state both conferred status and selected for individuals of sufficient 'virtue and talent' was through regularly scheduled,

murderously competitive civil service examinations held at the local, provincial and metropolitan levels, and it was presumed that the long years of study that examination success required would *ipso facto* simultaneously socialize individuals into the ethical norms of virtue. ‘Talent’ was similarly defined in a quite loose way: it tended to be reduced to a working definition of ‘administrative effectiveness’—effectiveness given the limited range and aspirations of the late imperial agrarian state.

Of course, the harsh examination regime of late imperial China did not necessarily produce ‘virtue and talent’; in practice it at least as often produced pedantry and generated an enormous amount of waste, as the overwhelming majority of those who studied for the examinations never qualified for office. From the Tang dynasty on, examinations were continually criticized on grounds of ineffectiveness; the heavily classical curriculum forced examinees to ‘study things they will never use and later use what they never have studied (*suoxi fei suoyong, suoyong fei suoxi*)’.⁶ Elman suggests that in fact, the purpose of the ‘examination life’ was less to select virtue and talent for public life than it was to bind the state and local elites into a common literati culture, institutionalize and standardize the impartial selection of the latter, and transform the literatus into a political servant of the people and the ruler.⁷ But whatever the practical objections to the examination system—and they were many both before the *xinzheng* era and during it—the trope of the virtuous and talented official remained unchanged, as did the positively charged norm of impersonal and fair selection through something very much like the *keju* system. What changed radically during the *xinzheng* period was what ‘talent’ came to mean: how it was redefined, what it specifically denoted, and which institutions were deemed appropriate to define and validate its standards. The *xinzheng* decade witnessed an extraordinary acceleration on three fronts. First, the very definition of ‘talent’ was invested with new content—technical knowledge of specifically ‘modern’ Western subjects. Second, the inculcation of both moralistic ‘virtue’ (*de*) and functional ‘talent’ was increasingly handed into the remit of ‘new schools’ (*jiaotang*), with appropriate topping up of functional knowledge and skill at institu-

⁶ Cited in Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 213.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xxviii–xxix, pp. 123–4, 240–1 and *passim*, 371–2.

tions of higher learning overseas. And third, the domestic institutions that defined, standardized and conferred status to the 'talented' became increasingly fragmented, disjointed and out of sync with each other.

Of course, none of this was clear at the outset of the *xinzheng* reforms. Despite its landmark status in the annals of radical reform from above, the Reform Edict of January 1901 was couched in generalities as to the appropriate mix of 'blending together the best of the Chinese and the foreign'. The question of how 'real talent' (*zhencai*) should be determined was left vague, and some of its passages suggested a real reluctance to shortchange virtue and ethics: 'if a person's shortcomings or strengths are disregarded . . . then reform will become nothing more than empty words.' The Reform Edict settled on a comforting sounding formula of appropriate balance between principle and practical knowledge, as 'newly arrived officials [are keen to] discuss wealth and power, but are often confused [about ethics], while Confucian officials talk about ethics, but don't grasp [practical] affairs.'⁸

But once the Reform Edict had broken the post-1898 moratorium on discussion of systemic reforms within the central government, later policy recommendations had no such ambivalence about downgrading the relative importance of virtue in the previously fused and indivisible trope of 'virtue and talent' for aspiring officials. 'Talent' (*cai/ rencai*) was invested with a new, and lasting set of connotations: expert and technical knowledge of 'modern' subjects. The first major memorial on this topic was a joint Zhang Zhidong/Liu Kunyi memorial in July 1901, which explicitly equated 'talent' (*rencai*) with modern topics, and proposed a complete overhaul of the educational system in order to train such talent: 'in seeking men of ability for the realization of a better administration . . . unless men of ability are trained it is impossible to strive for survival; unless schools are opened, it is impossible to train men of ability.'⁹ Meanwhile, questions of virtue and morality were shunted into the discussions and debates on modern education for the remainder of the *xinzheng* period. Such was the early confidence in modern education that reformers presumed that new schools would take on the inculcation

⁸ 'Shangyu', *op. cit.*

⁹ Translated in Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Center for East Asian Studies, Harvard, 1960), p. 52.

of proper *de* through continuing to teach a modified form of the Chinese classics in combination with ‘honoring the monarch, Confucius, the public good, and a martial spirit.’¹⁰

The recasting of the content of ‘talent and ability’ to mean technical competence and functional knowledge in modern subjects, and the effective channeling of this new form of talent into the realm of officialdom posed a real challenge in terms of supply and institutional coordination. Not only did a large reservoir of technical talent have to be created with all due speed, but new career paths had to be established for the recruitment and promotion of that talent into the bureaucracy almost as soon as the ‘new talent’ became available. Generating a sufficiently large supply of talent, as well as the institutional coordination between different state institutions to credential and recruit that talent led to a range of ultimately political problems that the counselors of 1901–04 had not entirely anticipated. Rapidly increasing the supply of ‘talent’ was achieved through two initiatives: sending large numbers of Chinese students to study abroad, particularly to Japan, and promoting the creation of a standardized system of modern schools throughout the Empire.

Throughout the *xinzheng* period, the numbers of Chinese students in Japan burgeoned out of control, jumping from zero in 1900 to around 8,000 in 1905, and possibly peaking as high as 12,000 in 1906 before dropping to around 4,000 at the end of the decade. Unfortunately, a significant minority of the overseas students in Japan failed to acquire sufficient technical knowledge, or worse, became susceptible to radicalization and anti-dynasty sentiments.¹¹ Within China, a program for the whole-scale establishment of a modern school system modeled on that of Japan was set forth in 1904 with the ‘Regulations for the Schools’ (*Zouding Xuetang Zhangcheng*), and a new central government Board of Education (*Xue Bu*; the name was not changed to the more familiar *Jiaoyu Bu* until 1912) was established in late 1905 to define standards, promote modern curricula, and establish control over education down to the level of the private country school through registration and review of examinations.¹² But despite the establishment of the

¹⁰ Bailey, p. 39.

¹¹ Reynolds, pp. 48, 58–61.

¹² Borthwick, pp. 71–2, and First Historical Archives (hereafter FHA), Xue Bu Archives, 525/19-1, Files 10–11. These two files, although from the slightly later date of 1909–1910 well illustrate the extent to which the Xue Bu was to claim powers of oversight and standardization; it is full of multiple drafts of regulations to standardize teaching materials—complete with the subjects to be covered, lesson plans, and sample lectures.

new schools and the Board of Education for integrating them into a national framework, serious problems remained. There was significant social resistance to the disestablishment of old style private schools (*sishu*), modern schools were expensive and more restrictive in terms of access, and the Board of Education, despite its pretensions to standard setting and regulation had virtually no fiscal resources by which to enforce compliance.¹³

Institutionally coordinating these new sources of talent with regular channels of recruitment into the bureaucracy required the simultaneous reform of the Confucian *keju* system and the credentialing of new students. In theory this was a straightforward matter of gradualist transformation of the civil service examinations to test modern subjects. In practice civil service examination reform turned out to be no less problematic a venture than securing an adequate supply of talent.

Between 1901 and 1905, *keju* reform proceeded in three stages: reshaping the content of the examinations without significant administrative restructuring (1901–03), more radical attempts to integrate the modern schools with the existing *keju* system by gradually shifting official qualification and degree conferral to the new schools while retaining old degree titles (1903–04), and then abrupt abrogation in late 1904, with the subsequently sharp downgrading of the status of both the Boards of Rites and Officials.

The first, in retrospect very modest, stage of reform remained entirely framed by an extant literati discourse that had long criticized the examinations' uselessness in selecting men of talent for government office. First to go was the infamous eight-legged essay, which was abolished as an examination subject in 1901. Second was the strengthening of the third section of the examinations devoted to essays on practical policy. Beginning with the 1902 examination cycle, essays on the classics (which until then were first and most important) and on practical governance (previously in third position) were transposed in rank order, and a new set of questions on foreign politics and governance comprised the second section, to include both Chinese and foreign systems of governance. And last was the tentative revival of the 'specialist examination'—first held in 1903 at the metropolitan level to a small group on economics.¹⁴

¹³ Borthwick, pp. 76–7, Elman, p. 624.

¹⁴ Franke, pp. 52–3, Elman, Table 11, 'Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the late Ch'ing Dynasty after the 1901 Reform', p. 737.

What is notable about this first stage is how attempted reform of the *keju* occurred by stretching the boundaries of known categories and precedents rather than by radically bursting beyond them. It was assumed that foreign forms of learning had to come in and provide the new standard for assessing talent, but that this new content could and should coexist with older forms of learning within an incrementally reforming set of institutions; as long as reform occurred in a gradualist manner, integrating incrementally reformed national civil service examinations with a still new modern school system was expected to proceed smoothly. But this optimism reckoned without the resistance of conservative examiners who dragged their feet and continued to reward policy questions that stressed ‘Chinese learning’ rather than ‘foreign learning’ irrespective of the new rank ordering of examination subjects.¹⁵

The next set of initiatives in 1903–1904 noted the difficulty of coordination between old and new systems, and stressed the importance of institutionally linking the new schools with qualifications for office, when Zhang Zhidong and Yuan Shikai resubmitted an earlier memorial that requested a gradual reduction of the examination quotas and their replacement with corresponding numbers from new schools.¹⁶ Ultimately, the locus of examination credentialing and degree status for entry into government service was to be shifted to a full developed network of new schools, with those who passed the course at the higher elementary level receiving the degree of *linsheng*, *zensheng* or *fusheng*; with those who graduated from middle schools to become *ba gongsheng*, *yu gongsheng*, and *sui gongsheng*, those who graduated from the upper level schools (*gaodeng xuexiao*) to receive the *juren* degree, and those who studied abroad or at the Imperial University to be awarded the *jinshi*.¹⁷

The stage was now set for the abrupt—and to all unexpected—abrogation of the old style *keju* in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. While this crisis was international in scope,

¹⁵ See Elman, pp. 596–601 on the ways in which examiners slanted their assessments on the modern policy questions to reinforce ‘Chinese learning’.

¹⁶ A full translation of this memorial and its corresponding edict is in Franke, 59–64. Interestingly, this memorial dealt at some length with the sticky problem of how to compensate the many thousands who had spent their lifetimes studying the wrong curriculum. *Shengyuan* under the age of 30 were eligible for immediate entry into the new schools; those between 30 and 50 for new normal schools. Those with *juren* status were eligible to enter government service via examination into the ranks of copyists or receive appointments as assistant department magistrates.

¹⁷ Franke, p. 66.

it was in large part played out on Qing territory. Coming so soon after the Boxer Debacle and widespread fears that China was likely to be carved into colonies, this sudden intrusion of belligerents triggered pained awareness of the empire's continued defensive fragility. This in turn shocked the parameters of the *xinzheng* internal discourse on *keju* reform out of incremental gradualism and into rapid decisive action: immediate abrogation of an examination regime that was ill suited to China's urgent requirements (although the examination cycle then underway was allowed to proceed to completion).¹⁸

The sudden abrogation, decisive as it was after years of discussion and months of incremental *keju* reform, did not resolve any of the outstanding issues that had put a drag on the pace of reform in the first place: how to accommodate the thousands who had invested lifetimes investing educational resources in a now obsolete standard, how new standards would be set, how a new 'regular path' to government service would be established, and how 'virtue and talent' would be henceforth defined and evaluated.

After Abrogation: the Post-1905 Reinvention of Keju

What is most astonishing about the so-called abolition of the civil service examinations in 1904 is that within two years different wings of the central government found it necessary to revive something that looked very much like civil service examinations. Centrally sanctioned examinations of one sort or another held in every year between 1906 and the fall of the dynasty (when preparations for yet another round of examinations were underway).¹⁹

These post-1905 examinations differed from the pre-1905 *keju* system, and for all their temporal continuity with the *keju* system, they anticipated the future in important ways. When the Board of Rites lost control over this important sphere of state standardization and selection, the ad hoc functionalism of examinations ensued. Rather than providing a proactive standard of generalist achievement from which officials would be selected, the post-1905 examinations were fundamentally reactive in nature. They were designed to

¹⁸ See Yuan Shikai/Zhang Zhidong memorial in *Qingchao xu wenxian tongkao*, juan 87, xuanju 4, pp. 8455-7.

¹⁹ Elman, p. 613.

keep some sort of regular path to government office in operation, and as such attempted to fulfil a number of sub-goals: 1) setting minimal common standards for prospective officials now streaming to prospective public service from a hodgepodge of different backgrounds; 2) ameliorating the worst of the confusion due to the abrupt abrogation at the end of 1904, and 3) providing a gatekeeping function to overcome ongoing structural problems of quality control in the new schools. It was bad enough that many of the graduates from new schools had uncertain standards and qualifications. Even worse was the uncomfortable reality that there were far more appropriately degreed graduates from the new schools than there were available positions in the bureaucracy. The sudden obliteration of the previous *keju* standard did not do away with the long-standing bottleneck of aspiring officials waiting for a restricted number of positions; if anything the sudden flux and uncertainty in the question of standards and qualifications seems to have made the bottlenecks worse. As early as mid 1907, the Ministry of Rites noted with some alarm that ‘for the provincial level examinations there were already three times as many [qualified individuals] as there were open positions’—and that another [supplementary] examination had to be held ‘as quickly as possible to determine positions’.²⁰

In theory, the Board of Education (*Xue Bu*) took over all the credentialing, assessment, and therefore examining necessary for both the educational sector and recruitment into the bureaucracy; it was formally placed above the Ministry of Rites in 1906, when the latter’s remit was drastically curtailed. And in fact, the Board of Education did take a lead (either directly or indirectly) in organizing many of the examinations that were offered between 1906 and 1912. During these years the Board of Education set year-end examination standards for the new schools. From 1907 on, it also organized annual examinations for returning students, particularly returning students from Japan, as well as frequent (re)examinations for *you xuesheng* (students who passed the modern school examinations, but who were still ‘drifting’ in search of formal appointments) to revalidate original school-leaving examinations, and additional special sittings of examinations for *juren* from the pre-1905 *keju* regime. These annual (re)validation examinations paralleled the *zige kaoshi*

²⁰ FHA 490 20-1/ File 18. Communication from Board of Rites to Board of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, received on Guangxu 33, 4th lunar month.

(qualification examinations) of the Republic. Through these qualification examinations, the state retroactively claimed symbolic unity and the unification of standards, but the centralized qualification standard examinations themselves were progressively institutionally de-linked from the provision of official positions.

But another type of examination held by the post-*keju* Qing state was not merely symbolic and retroactive. While much work remains to be done on this topic, some of the more functionally oriented newly re-organized and 'modernized' central organizations of the state began to hold their own appointment examinations (*renyong kaoshi*) within two years of the abrogation. Luca Gabbiani's paper in this special section describes not one, but two examinations held by the Board of Civilian Affairs for registrars and clerks; the first in what seems to have been an ad hoc manner to fill posts shortly after the establishment of the Board in 1907 and a second, evidently better organized examination of 1910, deliberately timed to coincide with the large numbers of office seekers who had flocked to Beijing for the general metropolitan examinations of late 1909.²¹ Although the details are sketchy, there were similarly specialized examinations, albeit at a probable higher level of entry, for the Supreme Court of Justice [Da Liyuan] for which a special examination was held in 1910, and the Board of the Army.

Yet another model halfway between the complete control held by the Education Board (for returned and most 'drifting' students) and the seemingly complete autonomy held by the Board of Civil Affairs in its examinations of 1907 and 1910 was an informal collaboration between the Board of Agriculture/Industry/Commerce and the Board of Education. This institutionally anticipated similar informal coordination between the National Government Examination Yuan and specialized functional ministries in the 1930s and 1940s. In both cases, functional organizations did not hold their own examinations per se, but were expected to 'send over' their experts to sit on a special *xiangshi weiyuanhui* (assistant examination committee) to advise the generalist examination body on appropriate questions and to do the eventual grading of the examinations. Thus as early as the autumn of 1907, a functionally special examination was held to

²¹ Luca Gabbiani, 'The redemption of the rascals: the Xinzheng Reforms and the Transformation of the Status of Lower Level Central Administration Personnel', Paper prepared for the AAS Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, April 2002, pp. 11–13 in manuscript text.

check on ‘drifting students’ (*you xuesheng*) ‘depth of scientific knowledge’ in agriculture, industry and commerce.²²

Whether Board of Education controlled, directly administered by functional boards to recruit for their own needs, or through some combination of the two, the institutional link between examination success and substantive appointment was clearly becoming weaker in the post 1904 *xinzheng* era. Like the Examination Yuan some twenty-odd years later, the late Qing Board of Education seems to have had no direct say in whom or how many of the individuals it ‘properly’ credentialed would be appointed. While in theory the Li Bu (Board of Officials) still had this remit, there is scant evidence that in practice this was exercised with any uniformity after 1905. Like the Guomindang era Ministry of Personnel it preceded, the late *xinzheng* Li Bu was at most able to *request* that properly credentialed examinees be considered for positions.²³

National level, open civil service examinations still held symbolic importance, but there is little to suggest that the various examinations between 1906 and 1911 held by the Education Board for ‘drifting’ students, returned students, or old-style *juren* systematically resulted in official appointment. By the last few years of the dynasty, these examinations were increasingly institutionally de-linked from actual appointment, and were well on the way to becoming mere ‘credential exams’ (*zige kaoshi*) rather than ‘appointment exams’ (*renyong kaoshi*)—a perennial sore point for the many who passed the exams and waited in vain for an official position, both in the late Qing and after.²⁴

The second notable difference between the ad hoc examination system of 1906–1911 and its more formalized and regular *keju* predecessor was the increasing variety in the types of people who were examined, and the subsequent proliferation of non-commensurate topics that nevertheless required *ex post facto* state validation. Left-over *juren*, returned students from Japan and elsewhere, legal specialists, and for that matter the ever larger numbers passing through the modern school system with now seriously debased minor degrees had been educated to wildly different standards in a plethora of sub-

²² FHA 490/ 20-1 (Board of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce Archives), File #18. Document dated Guangxu 33, 8th Lunar month.

²³ FHA 490/20-1, File 18. Communication from Li Bu to Nong/Gong/Shang Bu, dated Xuantong 3, 4th Lunar month.

²⁴ See my ‘The Examination Yuan in the 1930s: Symbol and Reflection of the Reconstituting State’, *Modern China* 20:2, April 1994, p. 218.

ject matter. The function of the examinations was to establish a minimal form of quality control and ideological conformity, but what stands out is how the subjects being tested to a putatively uniform standard were as non-commensurate as apples, oranges, and pears.

In 1909–10 alone, the Education Board held two fundamentally different kinds of examinations: a general exam for provincial graduates of present *fusheng*, *linsheng*, *gongsheng*, *yu gongsheng*, and *zengsheng* status that seems to have been geared towards the acquisition of secretarial (*shuji*) status. Extant examination essays from 1909–10 suggest that examinees came from throughout the country, ranged in age from 19 to more than 50, but with the majority in their 20s, and were vouched for by established officials in other government bodies, typically other central government organizations.²⁵

The questions on this examination requested discourses on statecraft topics with only slightly modern twists: 'Government cannot exist without adequate finance'; 'Ministers cannot lose righteousness as long as they don't part from the Way'; 'selection of talented men is a contemporary matter; one cannot borrow talent from different eras'. No indication is given as to how difficult the examination was to pass, but the answers that were rewarded suggested that being well versed in the classical curriculum and history was merely the first hurdle; to excel required that one also be able to apply that classical learning to contemporary affairs. The standard referred to by examiners indicated that intellectual rigor and diplomacy in communicating even harsh words with grace, ability to convince, and clarity of calligraphy were the most important features in assessment.²⁶

The implicit expectation that the aspiring official be thoroughly grounded in classical Chinese culture and philosophy while able to apply that culture and philosophy to the contemporary world was the way of the future. Apart from the use of full classical Chinese rather

²⁵ FHA 525/19-1 (Board of Education), File 1. Examination Papers, File 1 (of 6). In this box, there were 120 examination papers from Xuanton 2. The majority of these examinations were without names or comment, but a minority of eleven still had original slips that confirmed name and basic biographical information (age, native place, prior highest degree achieved, and the name, status and institution of the guarantor). These eleven hailed from Jiangxi, Shuntian, Shandong, Henan, Anhui, Hunan, Sichuan and Jiangsu. Another sitting of the same examination in File/ boxes 5–6 suggest that another group had at least 300 examinees, drawn from somewhat different provinces, including Zhili.

²⁶ FHA 525/19-1, Files 1, 3, and 5 contain examinations with different questions; box 5 contains evaluation criteria.

than the hybrid mix of vernacular and classical Chinese that became the norm for documentary Chinese in the Republican period, there was little difference between the questions asked on the late *xinzheng* period examination and those on the general (*guowen*) component of the *gaokao* (upper civil service examination) and the *gaokao waijiao lingshi guan* (upper civil service foreign service consular examination) of the 1930s.

At the same time, though, the late Qing Board of Education held a very different kind of examination for a much smaller and specialized cadre of returned students and ‘drifting’ students. For these examinations, both the questions asked and indeed the languages in which the questions were asked could not have been more different. This second type of examination was in turn sub-divided into three groups, two for returned students and the other for regular ‘drifting’ students. All groups were tested on modern subjects of their choice: either law (*faliu*, *fazheng ke*) or commerce and economics (*shangke*). The former included contemporary policy questions in Chinese and either Japanese or French, as well as a straight foreign language test; the latter included compulsory questions on general economic theory and governance (in French), mathematics, and general policy in Chinese. It isn’t entirely clear whether the regular ‘drifting students’ had to sit the same questions (minus the language requirement) as the returned students with a choice of law, government and law, or commerce and economics, but they certainly had to answer a mix of general questions that ranged from the heavily classical (‘How should the gentleman cultivate healthy habits in the people?’) to the mixture of classical-with-contemporary-applications seen in the *shuji* examination above (‘Education is the first principle in building the country’).²⁷ With only slight changes in the wording, these questions, too, could have been offered on the generalist and special subject *gaokao* of the 1930s and 1940s—despite the changed political context of the central Party-state.²⁸ When provided with anything other than an implacably hostile state in which to operate, key features of this literati high culture continued to exhibit remark-

²⁷ FHA 525/19-1. File 2.

²⁸ Although the political vocabulary differs slightly, as does the stress on the primacy of the Party-state in making all well and good, the sample examination questions in the *Gaodeng Kaoshi [Putong Xingzheng Renyuan, Caiwu Xingzheng Renyuan, Waijiao Guanling Renyuan] Kaoshi Quanshu* (Shanghai: Sanmin Tushu Gongsi, 1935) are striking in their similarity to the examination questions of a quarter of a century before in the last years of the Qing.

able tenacity. It managed to survive several decades of institutional fracturing, to eventually reinsert itself in an only modestly updated fashion once there was an even semi-viable central state in existence to attach to.

Examinations and Historical Afterlives in the Twentieth Century

The *xinzheng* consensus that did away with the Confucian civil service examinations in late 1904 discovered, *ex post facto*, that getting rid of the *keju* only revealed how much something very like the *keju* was necessary for the functioning of the state. (The epitaph of 1904 might have read: 'The *keju* is dead; long live the *keju*!') Why was this? What accounts for the extraordinary staying power of the 'examination life' despite the 'decanonization' of both examinations and classical curriculum during the *xinzheng* era and the subsequent collapse of the central state in the early Republic? Or, put slightly differently, how could open civil service examinations be so abruptly 'decanonized' while still preserving enough legitimacy to keep popping up, hydra like, every time a central state strong enough to institute them came into existence for the remainder of the Republican era?²⁹

There may be no definitive answer to this question, but it is likely that a combination of practical efficacy, positive legitimacy, and sufficient malleability kept the idea of examinations closely linked to the evolution of the modern Chinese state. As a practical matter, an examination regime gave the state a way to keep the numbers swarming to take up positions in the bureaucracy to manageable numbers, to establish quality control, and perhaps most importantly, to ground itself on long established principles of legitimacy to the educated: through fair provision of a career 'open to talent' through a 'regular path' to office. These practical and legitimating functions had of course always been intimately bound up with the *keju* and they did not suddenly disappear at the end of 1904.

What did irrevocably disappear at this time was the late imperial standardization of content as examinations began to accommodate a diverse set of 'new subjects'. In focusing so entirely on increasingly technically defined forms of 'talent', the field of 'virtue' was almost

²⁹ I take the idea of decanonization from Elman's title of Chapter 11, 'Delegitimation and Decanonization'.

entirely ceded to schools or other extra-examination sources. And with the loss of generalist, standardized content came the first signs of procedural fraying, even within the different organizations of the central government, as the Board of Officials increasingly had to request that Board of Education qualified individuals get a look in for new appointments, and as individual functional boards found it simpler to directly recruit for their own empty positions; trends that would accelerate in the Republican period.

The ad hoc way in which the post-1905 examinations were held, their increasing diversity in subject matter, and the ways in which central examining and appointing organizations were beginning to lose control over the process even within the central government all pointed to the post-1911 future; one in which effectively functioning civil service examination systems were as much a reflection of extant state power as they were a means to achieve it. Republican era regimes from Yuan Shikai through post-1949 Taiwan would all struggle with the hard choices of realpolitik that made it so difficult to enforce these ideals. But the ideal of the career open to talent and fair and meritocratic bases for recruitment into state service remained, as did the practical and functional reasons for having these methods of recruitment. And over the very long run of the twentieth century, the combination of positively charged ideal and practical mechanism for dampening down patronage while selecting for technocratic talent proved compelling enough for open civil service examinations to be revived—even in the People's Republic in the 1990s.