

# The Domino Effect: Abolishing the Imperial Examination System and the Downfall of the Qing Dynasty

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*Received August 01, 2023*

*Accepted August 30, 2023*

*Electronic access September 15, 2023*

The once prosperous Qing Dynasty was on the brink of crumbling since the late 19th century as a result of continuous external and domestic pressure. As a result of the reform aimed at incorporating Western mechanism in hope to reverse the empire's downfall, the Qing court terminated the thousand-year-long elite recruitment method, the imperial examination system. Nonetheless, this discontinuity created an irremediable conflict in the socio-political structure and disrupted the status-quo between the commoners and the government, resulting in the spark of revolutionaries nationwide. This paper demonstrates that abolishing the imperial examination system led to a 'domino effect' such as the diminishing social mobility and intensified hostility in rural areas and the ferment of revolts that contributed to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. While prior research may have touched on the impact of the examination system's discontinuation, its link to the emergence of revolutionary sentiment and subsequent downfall remains under-addressed. This study bridges this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the intertwined factors that hastened the Qing Dynasty's collapse.

## Introduction

On September 2nd, 1905, Empress Dowager Cixi of the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), announced the abolition of all ranks of the civil service examination, also known as the imperial examination system. This event marked the end of an elite recruitment structure that, since its establishment in 605 BC, previous imperial dynasties used in various forms to select bureaucrats.<sup>1</sup> The examination system was crucial cornerstone of society under the rule of imperial dynasties, serving not only as a pathway for commoners to attain well-paid positions and prestige, but also as a means for achieving social advancement. Thus, Cixi's decision to abolish the system was a turning point in Chinese history that disrupted a thousand-year-long tradition, causing a ripple effect on Chinese society, and altering its socio-political structure.

The complexity of the abolition of civil service examination has been widely studied. Chinese historians such as Luo Zhitian, Liu Wei, and Yang Yuqing, who view the abolition of the examination system as inevitable, attribute its abolishment to internal and external pressures, namely the rise of various reactionary groups and economic plunder and land demands of foreign forces against the Qing Dynasty.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, some Western historians such as Rana Mitter, Daniel Leese, and Wolfgang Franke, appalled by the sudden termination of a thousand-year-long tradition, often focused on the impacts on the scholar-official class who had depended on the examination system.<sup>3</sup> When most scholars look at factors that con-

tributed to Qing's downfall, they tend to analyze them separately from one another and fail to explore the various ramifications of the examination system's abolition at large.

This paper examines a number of memorials, decrees, and in a minor part, war treaties from the late nineteenth century to construct a streamlined structure of the late Qing events and to demonstrate the 'domino effect' that the abolition of the examination system has created.

This endeavor is crucial not only for understanding the evolution of educational and administrative structures but also for unraveling the profound socio-political transformations that took root during this pivotal period. The research into the cause of the Qing Empire's downfall builds upon the works of both Chinese and Western scholars and organize them in a streamlined format to showcase the "domino effect" created by the system's abolition.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will also challenge some scholars' belief that the abolishment of the examination system was not a cause, but rather a sign of Qing Dynasty's collapse. The abolition was part of the reform agenda that the Qing government implemented in 1905 which also included establishment of a constitutional monarchy and regional consultative assemblies as a response to domestic pressure from the unsatisfied intellectuals and some scholar-officials. These measures decentralized the Qing government's control over regional matters and consequently weakened the overarching centralization system.

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The final blow to the Qing Dynasty was dealt by the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, yet the seeds of substantial collapse had been sown earlier, within the context of the late Qing period's political reform efforts. Therefore, this led to the belief that the abolishment of the imperial examination system was not the direct cause of the Qing Dynasty's demise, but rather an outcome intertwined with the gradual dissolution of the centralization, eventually leading it to exit the historical stage.

However, the paper will focus on the consequences of the system's abolition such as the decline in social mobility and the spark of revolutionary movements which are evidently significant factors that accelerated the empire's downfall. Again, it is clear that only a holistic understanding of the repercussions of the system's abolishment will reveal the deeper connections between this event and collapse of the regime.

As a result, my research will attempt to answer the following question: To what extent did the abolition of the examination system contribute to the fall of the Qing dynasty? This paper will analyze late Qing decrees and court memorials to shed light on the overwhelming desire among the officials to replace the old examination system with a Western model, an impulsive decision that led to the a series of consequences.

Moreover, by engaging with secondary sources and books written by late Qing scholars, I will also investigate the weight of Western political philosophies influxed into China after the Western education model was adopted, as it inspired hundreds of intellectuals who would become the leaders of revolutionary parties to question the legitimacy of the Qing government. Finally, I will use imperial Qing court documents to better understand the rising hostility between Qing officials and the common Han people, who would consist of the majority of the New Army. As the name suggests, it was a newly established army in the late Qing period trained in a Western model and this army would become a major force in toppling the Qing regime. In this regard, the modernization efforts, initially intended to bolster the Qing Dynasty's strength, inadvertently catalyzed dynamics that eroded its grip on power. I will analyze these sources in order to assess to what extent the end of the examination system generated a chain reaction that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Qing Dynasty.

## Historical Background

The imperial examination system constituted the foundation of the socio-political system in China, although in various forms, for over 1300 years. The contents of the exam varied from discipline to discipline and changed over time.<sup>5</sup> However, some subjects remained unaltered. Confucian classics like *The Analects*, *The Five Classics*, *The Four Books*, po-

etry, essay, political science, and current affairs were central to the examination.<sup>6</sup> China was a hierarchical society, but this system allowed the bottom social classes (that is, peasants, artisans, and merchants) to climb up the ladder and become scholar-official.<sup>7</sup> The role was so coveted as it represented the pinnacle of social class. Moreover, this prestige came with important practical privileges such as exemption from corvee and the right to pardon for minor offenses.<sup>8</sup>

Half of the "successful examinees" (*jinshi*) who passed the imperial examination during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties were raised in peasant families in which none of their ancestors had acquired a government position before.<sup>9</sup> This means that the system allowed people from all backgrounds to enter politics and acquire a prestigious social status. However, the exam was arduous and, therefore, highly competitive.<sup>10</sup> It nonetheless remained as the only path which the commoners could climb up the social ladder.

The examination system remained intact even when the Manchus took over China from the Han Chinese in 1644. The Manchus were amalgamated by different nomadic tribes of Jurchens originated from the northeastern region of modern-day China. Although they established the Qing Dynasty on Han-controlled territories, they did not seek to eradicate or displace the existing governance institutions such as the emperor system. The Qing court was mainly occupied by the Manchu aristocrats, granting Manchus privileges and outlawing intermarriage with Han Chinese. Nevertheless, Qing officials retained Confucianism as the orthodox state religion and Ming political institutions and departments.<sup>11</sup> The Manchus consolidated the support from Han Chinese by using the Chinese way of governing. To keep watch over the Han Chinese, Manchus utilized the examination system as a device to reduce the discontent and hostility of the commoners. However, in the last decades of the Qing Dynasty, they experienced a series of radical social changes that placed the Qing Empire on the brink of disintegration as a response to two main factors: internal conflicts and the encroachment of foreign powers.<sup>12</sup>

The internal conflict was mainly caused by the inefficiency and corruption of the Qing administration system. Firstly, the taxation system had placed heavy pressure on the peasants. While the Qing court promised to not levy extra taxes on peasants, regional officials often collected multiple times more taxes than they were entitled.<sup>13</sup> Disappointed by overtaxation, peasants frequently led revolts throughout the empire beginning in the early 19th century to make protests against the state or oppose taxation. Although the Qing army managed to quell the peasant rebellions, it had been a detrimental effort that consumed a considerable amount of money in the treasury.

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In addition, the Qing Dynasty was troubled by European imperial powers who desired silver and trade privileges in China. Through bribing Chinese custom inspectors, British merchants brought significant amount of opium to the Qing Empire. The circulation of opium in the Qing Dynasty had many adverse effects on the economy, military, and well-being of the citizens. The opium trade resulted in an increasing loss in the amount of silver as the opium continued to be imported. Smoking opium also deteriorated the discipline of the Qing army. It did not only weaken the bodies of soldiers but also their morale in combat. In the late Qing period (1840–1911), opium dens were frequented by all classes and there were approximately 19 million opium smokers across China.<sup>14</sup> To alleviate the problem, the Qing government immediately banned the trade and use of opium. However, their response prompted the British government to engage in warfare with the Chinese, leading to the First Opium War in 1839. The latter ended with the defeat of the Qing Empire and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, which required China to open up four ports for foreign trade, cede the island of Hongkong, and pay a total sum of 22 million silver dollars in war reparations.<sup>15</sup>

As of that moment, the Qing government was on its descent. While these factors did contribute to the significant decline in Qing's military and economic power, they were not sufficient to topple their regime. Instead, the Opium War allowed the Qing government to realize the dramatic difference in military strength between the foreign power and itself. Many Qing officials viewed this moment as a crucial opportunity to envision changes and reforms to the current system. Specifically, some intellectuals proposed to eliminate the examination system in favor of academies that offered a Western curriculum. Reformists like Kang Youwei (1858–1927) contended that imperial examination only emphasized the sense of moral superiority rooted in Confucian values rather than the practical skills the Qing Empire needed to resist foreign incursions.<sup>16</sup> The examination only tested candidates' ability to memorize Confucian classics, but lacked any practical knowledge deriving from science or mathematics. The reformists looked up to Japan as a model for modernization. Indeed, the Japanese Meiji Revolution of 1868 was a significant step in the country's modernization and, after various negotiations, Japanese ministries were able to revise the unequal treaties imposed by foreign nations. Qing's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 exacerbated the pressure to adopt Western institutions as more officials were convinced that without reforms, the empire would eventually be occupied by Western powers. Thus, as demanded by scholars and officials, the Qing government began to shift its focus from traditional Confucian knowledge to a Western approach of learning modern technologies and institutions. Throughout the late Qing period, the Qing ministers carried out a series of unprecedented reforms, transform-

ing the economic, educational, military, and administrative aspects of China by either modifying or replacing old conventions with modernized institutions.

## Criticism of the Civil Service Exam and its Abolition

Recognizing the declining power of the empire after humiliating defeats against foreign powers, critics including many Qing ministers and young intellectuals began to challenge the existing system, which included the imperial examination.

The reformers, represented by Senior Secretary Weng Tonghe (1830–1904) and intellectuals like Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Kang Youwei (1858–1928), attributed the lack of talents in statesmanship and military as well as the underdevelopment of modern education to the civil service exam system.<sup>17</sup> Kang Youwei targeted the rigid style of eight-legged essay, part of the examination that required examinees to reflect upon specific Confucian ideas and write in a strictly standardized form, in his petition to Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908):

When using an eight-legged essay to recruit elites, those who passed will not know which dynasties Sima Qian and Fan Zhongyan were from and when Emperor Gaozu of Han and Emperor Taizong of Tang ruled. Nor will they know the geography of Asia and Africa and the politics of Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Kang believed writing eight-legged essay limited the creativity of millions of the young intellectuals in the country who would then serve in the bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup> Learning Confucian texts written thousands of years ago instead of science, mathematics, politics, and language hampered China's modernization progress and thereby causing the enormous gap with other European countries.

In addition, the Qing ministers criticized the lack of impartiality of the imperial examination. Indeed, unfair means and favoritism proliferated despite the prevention measures that existed. Usually, the name of the candidate was covered on the exam paper, so that the examiner did not know whose paper it belonged to.<sup>20</sup> In addition, all test papers were passed down to special copyists who would reprint them before candidates' responses were reviewed by the examiners.<sup>21</sup> This practice prevented the recognition of handwriting during the evaluation process. If misbehavior during testing like cheating was discovered, the test candidate would be immediately disqualified and displayed in public carrying a cangue (i.e., a type of wooden pillory). If the examiner was found guilty of malpractice, he would be dismissed, exiled, and even sen-

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tenced to death.<sup>22</sup> Throughout history, Chinese dynasties had carried out numerous regulations to prevent violations of impartiality during testing.

Nonetheless, many candidates in the Qing Dynasty decided to cheat through various means. Some candidates carried unauthorized work and concealed them in a pen tube, pencil box, snacks, and clothes they brought in. Some bribed the proctor to inform the test materials beforehand or the examiners to curve the marks of a test paper.<sup>23</sup> In the most notorious fraud case during the imperial examination in 1858, more than fifty candidates out of around three hundred candidates who passed the examination were convicted of cheating and three examiners were sentenced to death.<sup>24</sup> It was a peculiar phenomenon that while the Qing court stipulated strict guidelines and regulations during testing, more students gambled their lives for a reputable and wealthy government position once they passed the examination. The most prominent reason could be the limitation for men to seek their way and advance to the upper class. The imperial examination system's determination of one's ultimate fate resulted in a common belief that one would take any resort to secure a promising future or bring glory to his ancestors. Thus, every time the Qing court published a new decree, a countermeasure would arise in response. Meanwhile, troubled by foreign and domestic affairs, Qing officials' surveillance weakened. Preoccupied with more urgent matters, the central court and local governments gradually became more "lenient" and had loose regulations during testing.<sup>25</sup> In the late Qing period, the examination system that had been known for its justness and transparency failed to sustain its consistency and steadily declined.

In 1905, the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War also contributed to creating a fertile ground for the abolition of old systems such as the imperial examination.<sup>26</sup> As the first-ever Asian nation to defeat a European power in the modern era, Japan's victory sparked off Qing intellectuals' and officials' reflections. How did its former tributary state transform into a major power so rapidly in the past fifty years? Scholars and reformers quickly pinned it on Japan's modernization by endorsing a Western style of administration, military, economy, and education. It prompted the Qing officials to actively seek potential remedies for the empire from Japan, which had advanced to a "superpower" in East Asia by adopting a Western model of administration. On the other hand, Chinese dynasties had been adhering to traditional Confucian knowledge for thousands of years, which could be reflected in the sole use of the imperial examination system to select officials. The established authority of the system was thought to be unyielding to change; thus preventing China from adopting Western ideologies. Consequently, the intellectuals considered the system obsolete.

The Ministry of Education in the Qing court described the Japanese education system as more modernized and advanced than the Chinese imperial examination system in three ways: it served the country, served the military, and served practicability.<sup>27</sup> Japanese education allowed its citizens to be "a united force like roaring waves that never dwindle and a family, like solid rocks that never crumble."<sup>28</sup> Schools cultivated students with a sense of patriotism and taught them to love the country as their home. Also, the concept of serving the military had turned every man into a soldier. A memorial from the Ministry of Education read:

The Minister investigated the Japanese primary schools. During past times, children played joyfully which developed their nature of vivaciousness. When an order is announced, they line up methodically and walk out of classrooms with discipline like a soldier. The Minister also investigated teacher-training schools that had the sternest bounds of discipline. Students who attended practiced shot put and wrestling. Schools held various sports competitions. The government instituted laws and policies that encouraged their investments in physical training and its purpose is easily understood. If China could enforce and promote this policy, it is possible to reinvigorate the fighting spirit of the masses.<sup>29</sup>

It can be seen that all levels of schools in Japan promoted physical education and ensured that these students all have the potential to serve their country in the army one day. Moreover, Japanese schools, different from the Chinese system, served practicability. The latter means not only emphasizing book knowledge and theories but also applying them to reality. While Chinese education was centered around Confucian classics, Japanese education approached various fields like handicrafts, drawing, field studies, and the cultivation of one's moral character. The Ministry's memorial concluded, "To acquire practicability, everyone must be able to be a farmer, an artisan, a merchant, or a scholar-official."<sup>30</sup> Mindful of these three aspects, the Qing government constructed its education system in the style of the Japanese. The imperial examination system was viewed as an obstacle on the Qing Dynasty's path to modernization and its abolition was deemed inevitable.

The criticism of the examinations consisted of two elements: the system failed to generate potent officials and clashed with the promotion of a modern school system (xinshi xuetao). Back when Cixi took over from Emperor Guangxu in September 1898, she restored the use of eight-legged essays in examinations because she considered the emperor's reform to be too radical.<sup>31</sup> Every candidate studied and memorized ancient Confucian classics solely for the examination as they had been doing for the past hundreds of years. Social activist and scholar Liang Qichao summarized their characteristics as

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someone who examines the old knowledge assiduously and doesn't know anything else beyond that. As a result, the examination system produced government officials that were not familiar with modern science and politics. Second, the examination system hampered the development of modern schools. These schools aimed to modernize traditional Chinese education by incorporating subjects like science, mathematics, foreign languages, and practical skills. They represented a departure from the traditional Confucian-based education system and were often established under the influence of missionary efforts and foreign advisors. The purpose of these schools, according to Li Hongzhang, a Qing diplomat and statesman, was to "understand the gist of Western ideas and adopt them."<sup>32</sup> Although students who attended them could also be qualified for a government position, most of them considered taking the imperial exam as a backup plan. Zhang Zhidong, a foremost reformist and provincial official, pointed out, "A student's future only depends on one day of examination, while he must endeavor in years of research in the academy."<sup>33</sup> Rather than spending years of work in academies, most students were more willing to seek chances through imperial examination. Therefore, many Qing ministers considered the imperial examination could not coexist with the modern school system as most students were reluctant to choose the latter.

Amid the high tide of ever-increasing demand to reform and criticism of the existing examination system, many Qing officials urged the immediate termination of the examination system due to its impotence to fuel the empire with scholar-officials that held innovative ideas. The Viceroy of Liangguang and Grand Coordinator of Guangdong suggested Cixi to "abolish the civil service exam and promote modern schools."<sup>34</sup> Pressured by Qing ministers' memorials to eliminate the imperial examination system, Empress Dowager Cixi became convinced that once its abolishment was enacted, Qing Empire would again become the predominant world power. However, she did not foresee a series of chain reactions caused by the absence of a system that had been the backbone of many Chinese dynasties. While the once magnificent Qing Dynasty was going downhill, the various reforms carried out by the Qing court seemed only pretentious and futile, and the consequences that emerged after the end of the imperial examination system sped up the downfall of the Qing Dynasty.

## Studying Overseas and the Spark of Revolutionary Movements

The education policy in the late Qing period shifted from Confucian classics to Western knowledge. To compensate for the vacuum created after the abolition of the imperial examination

system, the Qing court promoted the modern school system. It re-launched the study abroad program, sending students to the United States, Japan, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany to learn their methods of administration and guide the modernization process of the Qing Empire. These students who mastered Western ideologies and broadened their worldview revitalized the political structure of the Qing government. Yet, many of them had realized the fundamental reason for China's inability to compete with other modernized countries was the authoritarian style of government. Learning from the West, they started to see their own country through a different lens. As a result of this phenomenon, young intellectuals started to gather to spread revolutionary ideas and organize rebellions, and their ultimate goal is to overthrow the Emperor.

The signing of the Burlingame-Seward Treaty in 1868 opened a portal in which Americans and Chinese could travel to each other's countries easily. The Qing government took this opportunity to send a selective group of children overseas to study advanced Western techniques and philosophies.<sup>35</sup> The first group of Chinese international students departed in 1872 to the United States. Thirty male students, with an average age of 12, quickly immersed themselves in Western education. Over the next 3 years, another 90 students were sent to the United States.<sup>36</sup> Some of them even ended up in world-renowned universities, like Yale, Harvard, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, the program halted in 1882 when Empress Dowager Cixi annulled it. Reports from the ministers claimed that these Chinese students had "forgotten their roots, lacked reverence for adults, and could not be used for the government."<sup>37</sup> Influenced by Western culture, many of these students dressed in suits, converted to Christianity, and some even cut off their queues that signified their Qing identities which were intolerable to the Qing ministers.

Yet, the program was quickly restored. In 1901, when the Qing government initiated a series of reforms, the overseas studying program received renewed support from the ministers. Finally, the imperial examination system was abolished in 1905. Since then, Qing ministers pushed forward the modern school system and encouraged students to study abroad again. A memorial jointly submitted by Qing ministers Zhang Baixi (1847–1907), Rong Qing (1859–1917), and Zhang Zhidong advises, "A person who is diligent, self-disciplined, and aspiring, no matter if he is a Manchu or Han, he should be sent abroad. Compared to foreigners, we lack the application of pragmatism. We should send people across the world at once and it will only benefit us."<sup>38</sup> To guarantee a smooth transition from the old to the new system, the Qing government established a reward system for those who were willing to study abroad. The government adopted a set of guidelines proposed

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by the Viceroy of Huguang Zhang Zhidong:

Chinese overseas students who graduated from foreign schools are rewarded according to their academic degrees. Students who attend middle school for 5 years will receive subsidies. Students who receive a high school diploma or attend school for 8 years will be given the title of “juren” (equivalent to the second rank in Chinese scholar degree standard). Students who receive an undergraduate degree will be given the title of “jinshi” (equivalent to the first rank). The above students will be qualified for a government position according to their degrees. Students who earn a master’s or doctorate degree will be automatically promoted to Hanlin Academy (an academic and administrative institution consisting of a group of elite scholars who assisted the court with secretarial tasks).<sup>39</sup>

The promise of an esteemed title resulted in a surge in students studying in foreign countries. Japan became the most favorable country for Chinese students for its close distance to the Qing Empire. In 1901, there were merely 274 overseas students in Japan. The number increased rapidly to 608 the next year. Over the course of the next four years from 1903 to 1906, Chinese international students in Japan climbed from 1300, 2400, 8000, to 12000. Similarly, Chinese students who traveled to other countries also expanded.<sup>40</sup> By 1911, there were around 800 students in the United States and around 400 students in Europe. Moreover, between 1905 and 1911, 1399 international students received the title of jinshi from the Qing government.<sup>41</sup> The study abroad movement had transformed into an enormous campaign funded by the government at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the Qing officials, preoccupied with expanding their overseas program, failed to anticipate the disastrous possibility: that these students would become increasingly receptive to democratic ideals and the rights of citizens, ultimately leading them to challenge the very foundations of Qing imperial rule upon their return.

From the 1850s to the 1900s, there was an inrush of Western beliefs, which caused a dramatic reconstruction of the knowledge structure, cultural traditions, values, and mode of thinking among Chinese intellectuals.<sup>42</sup> Students who attended modern schools or went abroad became acquainted with Western political philosophies. Some of them rendered the American Independence and French Revolution as examples that China needed to follow in order to resolve problems like the preservation of national integrity.<sup>43</sup> Building on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Han nationalist Zou Rong (1885–1905) argued that starting a revolution was the only way to protect his countrymen from a failing government.<sup>44</sup> This reshaping of the intellectuals strengthened their critical thinking abilities and fostered independence from the Qing authority. A New York

Times article published on July 23rd, 1881 wrote, “China cannot borrow our learning, our science, and our material forms of industry without importing with them the virus of political rebellion.”<sup>45</sup> As the bond between the government and its people was weakening, these students became the first to challenge the Qing court.

Intellectuals who studied abroad took part in various activities that prompted the spread of revolutionary ideas. To promote Western ideologies, many intellectuals undertook tasks like translating Western literature into Chinese. This way, capitalism, nationalism, democracy, and even social Darwinism were introduced to China. Hu Shi (1891–1962), a Chinese politician, and philosopher recalled that when *Evolution and Ethics* was published in China, it immediately became one of the most popular books among middle school students.<sup>46</sup> A large number of the overseas students that returned were either invited to become teachers at modern schools or founded academies on their own. They used modern schools as a platform to disseminate revolutionary ideas.

In addition, some intellectuals became the leaders of various revolutionary organizations such as Huaxinghui (China Arise Society), Guangfuhui (Restoration Society), Gongjinhui (Advancement Society), etc. They played a determining role in invoking anti-Qing sentiment by publishing newspapers that propagated revolutionary ideals, protesting against the government, secretly making alliances with the New Army, and even leading rebellions in their regions. It would be remiss not to mention the most influential person in early 20th century China Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), who later became the first president of the Republic of China. In 1878, when Sun Yat-sen was only 13, he sought schooling in Honolulu, learning English, history, mathematics, biology, Latin, and art. At the age of 17, he attended college in Hong Kong, where he began to develop an interest in Western political philosophies which impacted his later career as a revolutionist. In 1894, Sun Yat-sen and his companions founded the first revolutionary organization in Honolulu, called Xingzhonghui, or Revive China Society.<sup>47</sup> The mission of the organization was to “expel Tartar barbarians (Manchus), revive Zhonghua (Han Chinese identity), and establish a unified government.”<sup>48</sup> Revive China Society secretly organized an anti-Manchu rebellion in Canton in 1895, but the plan was disclosed to the Qing government and ended with Sun Yat-sen being exiled to Japan. In 1905, Sun Yat-sen formed the largest revolutionary party during his exile in Japan, named Tongmenghui, or the Chinese United League. They instantly set up a newspaper office run by Chinese international students in Japan and published articles condemning the corruption of the Qing ministers and calling upon the overturn of the government.<sup>49</sup>

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Thus, tides of revolutionary activities swept across the empire and a gigantic revolution was looming. Since 1900, several revolutionary organizations caused a series of uprisings led by Western-educated intellectuals. It is ironic to note that the study abroad program that was given high expectations to rejuvenate the Qing government and strengthen its regime ultimately backfired on them. The abolition of the imperial examination system and the imposition of a Westernized education system provoked the intellectuals to rebel against the status quo.

## The Decline in Social Mobility

In replacement for the imperial examination, the Qing government devised an alternative, the modern school system; however, it shut down the only platform where commoners could compete openly with people from the upper class. The modern school system unintentionally placed the existing elites at an advantage over the commoners.<sup>50</sup> It did not resolve the existing bribery issue. This reform, which seemed more Western and less rigid, indirectly contributed to the loss of impartiality. In fact, the existence of modern schools encouraged corruption because students were evaluated based on their daily performance at school in contrast to the traditional examination system which was exclusively based on candidates' test scores. Unlike the anonymity that examination provided, elites in the modern school gained more advantages over students from the middle or lower class. As the evaluation process of the new system was subject to more factors, it was also more susceptible to external influence. Elites were less likely to be found guilty since regulations were unspecified and loose.<sup>51</sup> Corruption intensified as elites and other powerful groups dominated these modern schools and thus many commoners were reluctant to attend. Yao Ying (1785–1853), a former Qing county magistrate, wrote during his journey in southwestern regions of China that ambitious young intellectuals did not go to the Western schools and only those “dregs of feudalism” went.<sup>52</sup> When the new system could not provide an equal opportunity for commoners to obtain power and prestige, it became limited to a small group of elites.

In addition, because the new system was founded in a short period of time, Qing ministers failed to address common problems like faculty resources, lack of textbooks supplies, expenditure, and career paths. A Qing minister shared his concern regarding the feasibility of the new system, “Schools in each province lack sufficient funds to operate, and administrators have asked the government to raise more money; however, provincial governments could not fulfill their needs.”<sup>53</sup> Also, Huang Yunfan, an official who worked in the Qing cabinet, stated in a report:

Although ministers of the Ministry of Education are sparing no efforts to support the operation of the modern school system, it has been difficult to raise sufficient funds to carry it out in every county. Regions that are suffering from poverty could not afford to construct a proper academy within one or two years. Many of the local officials acted in a perfunctory manner, thus, slowing down the progress. If adjustments are not made, not only schools will not be able to function, but both Chinese and Western knowledge will be lost in the process; therefore, students with talents will not be able to express their full potential.<sup>54</sup>

This phenomenon was partly the result of an accumulation of astronomical military spending and war reparations in the late Qing period. In the Boxer Protocol alone, signed in 1901, the Qing government was demanded to pay a total of 450 million taels of silver to 13 countries and the amount was equivalent to at least twenty years of the Qing government's annual income.<sup>55</sup> Combined with corruption, famines, and the outflux of silver due to the opium trade, the money that the Qing government allocated was inadequate to support the management of such a nationwide program. On that account, a tremendous number of former test candidates could not or chose not to be part of the new system.

The absence of the imperial examination system signified the “interruption in the link between exam performance and political status.”<sup>56</sup> Although the modern school system was aimed to transition the intellectuals from the previous system, it still led to the existence of a large group of people who could neither go to modern schools nor achieve social status through examination due to a lack of school facilities. These intellectuals or exam candidates who were dissatisfied with the government would eventually become a major force in leading revolts against the government.<sup>57</sup>

As social mobility was diminishing, social classes solidified. Imperial examinations throughout Chinese history had been centered on Confucian classics. Past rulers hoped to spread the core value of Confucianism, loyalty to authority, through the process of selecting officials.<sup>58</sup> It was conducive to maintaining the legitimacy of emperors' reigns of power and resolving societal conflicts by creating a balanced interests relation between classes. Thus, building such an elite recruitment structure not only granted intellectuals from lower classes a chance to move upward but also assembled loyal ministers for the empire.<sup>59</sup> Unconsciously, Chinese intellectuals and scholar-officials had all been immersed in the idea of fidelity to the ruler. However, when the Qing government abruptly terminated the examination system, intellectuals, especially those from the lower classes, were outraged by the decision.<sup>60</sup> Without the imperial examination system, one's

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fate was predestined regardless of attempts to influence or alter it. Thereby, families deemed their children's entrance to the examinations as their priority. Yet, the disappearance of the path to the upper class ignited commoners' dissatisfaction and indignation.<sup>61</sup> Historian Xiao Gongqin claimed, "One of the consequences of the abolition of the imperial examination is the aggregation of anti-government power from a collective social-psychological frustration."<sup>62</sup> The Qing court's decision to cancel imperial examinations both encroached on the interests of many intellectuals and destabilized the regime by wearing down the support of commoners.

The common people who could no longer advance upwards in society through the examination system primarily chose to join the army, not to demonstrate fidelity to the emperor, but primarily as a means to survive. Besides taking the examination, excelling in the battlefield was the only alternative for commoners to climb up in ranks and gain government positions.<sup>63</sup>

As for the intellectuals who couldn't have access to the modern school system, they found other ways of climbing up the societal ladder. Entering the New Army (xin jun), a newly established corps trained and equipped under Western military standards, had become one of the booming trends as these scholars obtained an opportunity to improve their social status and receive recognition in this way.<sup>64</sup> Groups of dissatisfied intellectuals and commoners gravitated towards this avenue, sensing its transformative power and recognizing it as a potent force in shaping their aspirations for change. This convergence of motivated intellectuals within the New Army would later emerge as a formidable catalyst, driving their participation in a pivotal force of rebellion against the existing order.<sup>65</sup> Soldiers and officers with scholarly backgrounds consisted of a substantial proportion of the New Army. In the eighth and twenty-first legions of the New Army, scholars made up 72% and 55% respectively of the total number of soldiers.<sup>66</sup> In the late 1900s, the New Army had a total number of approximately 2 million well-equipped soldiers.<sup>67</sup>

The New Army gradually outnumbered and replaced the regular Qing army corps: the Manchu Eight Banners and Green Standard Army. The Manchu Eight Banners had vanquished the formidable Ming army in the 17th century slowly became lax in discipline and poorly trained as the Qing Dynasty enjoyed a relatively peaceful period during the 18th century.<sup>68</sup> Since the Eight Banners' positions were hereditary and privileged, their successors were unwilling to endure demanding training in the army. On the other hand, the Green Standard Army mainly formed by the Han Chinese was granted limited power by the Manchus. They were aware that Han's rising power will only deteriorate the stability of their

regime.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the Green Standard Army was equipped with outdated weapons, maintained in lower numbers than the Eight Banners, and deployed across the empire. Qing's regular army force could not survive the attack of the European army.

The Qing government was in dire need of a powerful army that could stand against the imperialist invaders. And yet, the establishment of the New Army posed underlying threats to the regime. In fact, it was these soldiers, disgruntled scholars who had joined the army, that eventually led to the fall of the Qing Empire. On October 10th, 1911, the Xinhai Revolution erupted in Wuchang, then 14 other provinces declared independence within two months.<sup>70</sup> Yuan Shikai, the commander of the Beiyang New Army, forced the last Qing emperor to abdicate on February 12th, 1912, ending the rule of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>71</sup>

## Intensification of Conflicts in Rural Areas

The abolition of the imperial examination system also disrupted the political structure in rural areas. Regional officials experienced hardships carrying out a series of modernization reforms, especially after the termination of the examination system. The disappearance of an established system resulted in a degradation of the rural gentry, a local ruling class that connected peasants and the government, and intense opposition from peasants. This opposition did not play in peasants' favor, as it contributed to the socioeconomic gap between rural and urban dwellers which ultimately amplified the sense of their detachment from the Qing court and even rebellious ideas. The ever-growing imbalance exhausted the hopes of the peasants and their confidence in the Qing government, undermining the legitimacy of Manchus' rule.

The rural gentry had been an indispensable to government's administration at local levels. Government officials often administered indirectly through this special proxy in rural areas. The gentry class had long existed before the Qing Dynasty since the examination system was in place.<sup>72</sup> Although the establishment of a strong bureaucratic system allowed past dynasties to rule efficiently to a certain extent, it was troublesome to implement orders in the countryside as transportation and communication tools were limited. The central government thus incorporated the rural gentry into the political structure due to its inefficacy to govern the vast territories of the empire.<sup>73</sup> This class was mainly composed of retired government officials and examinees. These more knowledgeable people returned to their villages or towns and acted as agents who owned certain political and social statuses between the central government and the peasants. First, the rural gentry was responsible for informing the peasants of any announcements

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and ensuring the decrees posted were put into effect. At the same time, they also acted as intermediaries between the peasants and the government. Second, the rural gentry assumed an administrative and executive role in local infrastructures. For example, they usually took on tasks such as collecting money to repair canals and roads and providing disaster relief when droughts occurred.<sup>74</sup> Third, the peasants looked up to the rural gentry because the latter had received a Confucian education.

However, the abolition of the examination system de-gentrified this social class, causing enormous instability throughout the country. It became a trend for the rural gentry to seek opportunities in the urban areas and leave the countryside.<sup>75</sup> And this was a one-way migration for most intellectuals in the empire because education flourished in urban and developed areas. The past cycle of retired government officials and intellectuals returning to the rustic areas disappeared when their incentives and attachment weakened. As time passed, the composition of the rural gentry became degraded as landlords, local tyrants, and ruffians took over the power in rustic areas, causing dire conflicts in the rural society.

This kind of degraded gentry was defined by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) as the “evil gentry” (*lieshen*) in 1927.<sup>76</sup> Even prior to that, court officials had penned numerous accounts where they described the corrupted deeds of this social group.<sup>77</sup> As the “evil gentry” gained power in Chinese rural areas, they abused it. A former examination candidate made several observations in his diaries:

Those who are in charge of rural affairs reap unfair gains. Many of them forcibly occupy public properties to only profit themselves. Indignant peasants are generally afraid of speaking up against the rascality of the village men. Particularly the cunning ones, who secretly ally themselves with the local officials. When they are prosecuted for committing major crimes, officials usually grant them pardons.<sup>78</sup>

The Qing court continued to rely on the rural gentry even for the implementation of new reforms such as the constructions of modern schools. However, as the latter needed much more funds than traditional academies, the “evil gentry” deceived the peasants by collecting more taxes than was needed for the project, aggravating their financial burden.

Threatened by the escalating power of the “evil gentry,” peasants gathered and organized counteractions to express their exasperation. Peasants’ past admiration of the rural gentry became superseded by their indignation and resistance to the immoral gentry. The magistrate of Changge county of Hunan province forced the peasants to collect an extra three hundred wen for the construction of a modern school. Changge

peasants proclaimed, “The local gentry have come seven times to levy taxes this year and we have reached the limit of our forbearance. Our properties are devoured by the greedy gentry and officials. We will unite and fight those who stand against our way.”<sup>79</sup> The peasants from Ji’an of Jiangxi province brutally assaulted the tax collectors.<sup>80</sup> When local officials attempted to arrest those who instigated the violence, they met fierce backlash from the peasants. The modern schools also became targets of these rioting peasants. Deemed as the cause of their misfortune, they sabotaged the infrastructure of the modern schools and set them on fire.

Since the late Qing period, hostility between the peasants and authorities was exacerbated, weakening the Qing government’s control over the rural areas. The abolition of imperial examination disaffected the traditional rural gentry and intellectuals from the government, compromising the centripetal force of the society. The roles that traditional rural gentries played, such as tax collection, local infrastructure repairment, security and well-being of the villagers, etc. were an essential cornerstone of Qing Empire’s rule of its vast territory. Hence, when the evil gentry failed to perform such tasks, administrative regions in the rural areas became obsolete, prompting the local people to protest, riot, and seek other means to survive. Intellectuals from the rural areas who would have followed the path of a traditional gentry gradually transformed into independent individuals or even outliers of the Qing Empire. Instead of pursuing a traditional social advancement cycle through the examination and becoming a scholar-official, they became disillusioned in the rule of the Qing and joined various revolutionary parties to overthrow the government.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that the fall of the Qing Empire was the result of a ‘domino effect’ that began with a series of reforms, first and foremost the abolition of the examination system. As shown above, the abolition of the examination system eroded social mobility, created discontent among peasants, gave way to new ideas coming from the West, and finally led to a revolution that dramatically changed China. Understanding the causes and consequences of the abolition of the examination system provides a profound insight into the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. It helps explain the motivations behind the intellectuals who spearheaded major rebellions during the late Qing period, as well as the reasons why the New Army turned against the Qing government.

Nevertheless, the core values of traditional Confucianism remained there to support the new political system side by side with Western political philosophy. This meant that disruptions

were significant, but continuities with the old systems and an appreciation for late Qing changes shaped modern China just as much. The modern school system embodied the reluctant compromise between the reformers and conservatives. Confucian values of fidelity to the emperors, veneration of the ancestors, and those from the classics – Analects, Doctrine of Means, and Great Learning – were strictly upheld, while the teaching of Western political philosophy, contradictory to the former, seemed awkwardly placed into the general curriculum by Qing reformers.

Nonetheless, the modern school system paved the way for the development of contemporary Chinese education. While the traditional imperial examinations ceased to exist along with the 2000-year-long monarchical regime, the successive Republican government based its educational reforms on the Qing modern school system. That came as no surprise as the leading figures of the republic had studied under the Qing system. Numerous respected scholars and politicians such as Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), the former cabinet minister in the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China, Mei Yiqi (1889–1962), the former principal of Tsinghua University, and Chu Coching (1890–1974), the most esteemed meteorologist in China, had all been cultivated from the education institutions that existed since the Qing Dynasty. As noted above, the educational reforms of the late Qing Empire led to the fall of the dynasty itself. Still, it remains unanswered to what degree the abolition of imperial examinations influenced the promotion of Confucianism in the education system under both the Republican and Communist regimes. However, it is clear that the abolition backfired on the Qing Dynasty.

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