

A study of social mobility under the Imperial Examination System in Qing Dynasty based on Bourdieu's theories

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Abstract. The Imperial Examination System was the main means of selecting officials in ancient China, and was therefore seen as the main means of upward social mobility between classes. The main objective of this study is to examine the extent of social mobility among classes in the Qing dynasty through the imperial examination, based on Bourdieu's theory, and through indirect research methods such as comparative literature analysis, and to analyse the social and cultural outcomes of the imperial examination system, as well as its impact on the cohesion, values, and traditional norms of these classes and societies. The study concludes that despite the various reforms that the imperial examination system underwent during its existence, it failed to promote social mobility. This was due to the fact that the ruling class used the imperial examination system to consolidate their rule by strictly controlling the selection of talents and opportunities for class mobility. As a result, the imperial examination system led to institutional and social ideological rigidity.

1 Introduction

The Imperial Examination System was a method for qualified individuals to earn state official positions and social recognition through a multi-tiered competitive evaluation process. Over time, the Imperial Examination System gained social prestige and became the primary method of upward social mobility in ancient China. Its practical significance was to offer a potential solution for those seeking to change their identities. This successfully bound scholars to the Four Books and Five Classics, enabling Confucianism to exert control over society through them, ultimately consolidating centralised rule.

According to statistics presented by Wang Xianming, based on a sample from the Daoguang Jiachen Enke Zhi Zhou Zhongnian Lu (Record of the same year in the same province), 1,789 individuals succeeded in the imperial examinations throughout the country (excluding Guangxi) during the first year of the Xianfeng reign (1851). Furthermore, 249 individuals were elevated to the rank of jinshi, accounting for 3% of the total [1]. No improvements were made as the text lacks context and is already concise and clear in its language. It can be inferred that the imperial examination system expanded the foundation of feudal authority in the Qing Dynasty, providing an opportunity for the general populace to transcend their social class. However, owing to the stringent control of social mobility implemented by the ruling class, gaining a new social identity through the imperial examination system was a difficult feat to accomplish. In fact, the challenge of moving from one

class to another through the imperial examinations differed among various classes.

The primary objective of this research is to examine to what extent social mobility was attainable by classes during the Qing dynasty through the imperial examinations in the light of Bourdieu's theories and to analyze the social and cultural results resulting from the imperial examination system and The impact on the cohesion, values, and traditional norms of these classes and societies.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1. Bourdieu's theories

2.1.1 Culture reproduction

Cultural reproduction pertains to the transformation of the world by human beings. Social stratification is influenced not only by economic factors but primarily by cultural factors. Bourdieu posits that the ruling class of society controls the direction of structural change and schema of power distribution in all fields of society, primarily through the educational system. As the ruling class monopolizes the culture and values of society, cultural reproduction embodies transformation strategies and practices of reproduction between different capitals by legitimizing and ideologizing the class's values[2]. Bourdieu's critique of higher education centres around

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the concept of cultural capital - the core concept and entry point - and is a powerful tool for analyzing the higher education field.

2.1.2 Field theory

For Bourdieu, the social space consists of fields of human action. Social structure is not abstract and can only exist as a social space of symbolic practices performed by actors in various arenas. This is closely linked to the "existential mentality" of the actors involved in symbolic practices and the different types of social practices implemented by actors in the context of power struggles and contests. The concept of field is underpinned by networks of multidirectional social relations. These basic building blocks of the field are not fixed structures or forms but rather a combination of historical and current, tangible and intangible, concrete and abstract, ongoing and fixed, and physical and spiritual elements [2].

2.1.3. Capital theories

Bourdieu proposed four key capital theories: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. This paper primarily utilizes cultural capital and symbolic capital as its theoretical foundations. Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital through his research on the French education system. The attainment of cultural capital is frequently achieved through exposure, making its transmission more covert and challenging to discern than that of economic capital. Bourdieu identifies cultural capital as comprising three states: firstly, the physical state, which is expressed as a relatively constant disposition of the mind and body; secondly, the objective state, which represents the imprint or realization of theories and can be conveyed through material means. The third stage concerns institutionalization, as indicated by society's recognition of qualifications [2]. Symbolic capital is often unrecognized and can be perceived as both without value and a form of power that is considered legitimate when demanding recognition, obedience, or service from others.

2.2. Historical context

In ancient China, education has historically served as the primary means for the lower classes to advance upwards. Education, as a public good, plays a crucial role in maintaining the harmonious function of society, and refining the social class structure. However, education resources have not been evenly distributed and children from varying backgrounds have not had equal prospects to acquire higher education. Nobles and gentry born with capital had greater access to superior educational resources, making it relatively easy for them to ascend to the upper class since they were born into it. Conversely, few commoners in the lower and middle classes had the means to provide their children with quality education, let alone tenant servants with no educational rights. This

resulted in an imbalanced distribution of power across all aspects of society. With the ruling class tightly controlling the system, most people had limited opportunities to break through the class barrier under the imperial examination system of the Qing Dynasty.

3 Background information of the classes in Qing Dynasty

3.1. The noble class

The Qing Dynasty was a regime established by ethnic minorities, primarily those from Manchuria, the rulers were determined to maintain the ethnic identity of Manchuria, which is why they did not forget the significance of "the Eight Banners".

To preserve the Manchurian national identity, the consecutive rulers remained mindful that "the eight banners are the foundation of the dynasty" and stressed "first respect for Manchuria".

Consequently, the ruling elite of Manchuria opened the imperial examinations to the Banner people. The Imperial Examination under the Banner system was revised to allow participation in the literature examination and offer special privileges.

Standardisation of examinations for the Manchu people was also implemented. Additionally, the Qing dynasty established a translation examination for the eight banners, reflecting the Manchurian influence, and a translation examination for the status of the clansmen.

The Qing Dynasty established the translation examination for the eight banners, reflecting the characteristics of the Manchu people. They also introduced the clan examination, a privileged assessment for members of the clans [3].

3.2. The gentry class

Gentry, including the clan, family, and wealthy individuals, is a distinct social class in Chinese feudal society. It is primarily made up of educated local landowners who have returned to their hometowns or retired from small and medium-sized government positions. The community includes influential figures such as clan patriarchs, rich merchants, and plutocrats who hold significant power in rural areas. Having sufficient land was a prerequisite for the gentry, as it was not feasible to hold an official position and reside in the countryside as a gentry simultaneously. Typically, one would become an official before being accepted as a gentry. Hence, one can perceive current officials as the future gentry, while the present gentry represents the officials of the past, and they belong to the idle class in Chinese society. [4].

3.3. The servant class

During the Qing Dynasty, regulations for the imperial examinations at the grassroots level dictated that individuals classified as "high-ranking prostitutes or

domestic servants" were prohibited from taking the examination. Consequently, tenant labourers were notably absent from the imperial examinations. Obviously, in the imperial examination - an assessment used for social advancement and demonstrating status - it remained a challenge for tenants who had long been absent from the household to receive impartial treatment [5].

4 The cultural reproduction in the education system of the Qing Dynasty

4.1 The impact of the Imperial Examination System from the perspective of the ruling class based on the theory of cultural reproduction

Although Bourdieu's theory is mainly based on the French higher education where he lived and studied, at the same time, this research on higher education and culture within the framework of production theory can also be used to study the education situation in Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty, especially under the unique imperial examination system in the middle and early stages of the Qing Dynasty. This analysis from this perspective is an attempt to use a new theoretical framework to explain this research field, and this attempt has research value.

In Bourdieu's system, it is believed that the "special benefits" that children from different social classes can receive within the same education system are directly related to the distribution of cultural capital within their social sphere. Bourdieu believed that a cultural monopoly based solely on power relations would gradually form in this system as the ruling class monopolized, legalized, and ideologized their own culture and values. In this context of the education system, the school provides confirmation of the initial cultural capital gap for each student, making the habits generated by individual high-capital families the achievements that each person can achieve in higher education, and in this case, achieving power relations in production.

Under the national education system of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial examination system has always been regarded as the most important part of the national education machine. The imperial examination system has always been the most important talent selection mechanism and education system in China since the Sui Dynasty. This education system trains a knowledge-based workforce for Chinese society year after year. However, at the same time, the education system of the Qing Dynasty had a different color from other regions in history at the beginning of its establishment. In the Qing Dynasty, the treatment of Manchu and Han scholars was different, and the Qing Dynasty implemented a policy of ethnic discrimination[6]. In the social system of the Qing Dynasty, the Eight Banners emerged as a new privileged group in Chinese history, which was unparalleled in any previous dynasty. The Qing Dynasty, as a country established by a minority ethnic group on the land of

Chinese culture, classified its ruling class as a special privileged class, such as the Eight Banners, along with other related interest communities.

Moreover, privileged classes like the Eight Banners have a high political status, so they enjoy many privileges in the imperial examination. When taking the imperial examination, the Manchu and Han people are divided into two rankings and hired separately. At the same time, these Manchu groups also have fixed admission quotas, which ensures that these groups have sustained cross-generational influence on politics[7]. Moreover, the difficulty of these classes of people in the exam is much simpler than that of Han civilians who normally participate in the exam. According to the relevant laws formulated by the Qing Dynasty, the children of the Eight Banners did not even need to translate Chinese during the imperial examination, and they had special translators to assist[8].

The same group of people who enjoy privileges in the education system as the previous privileged class are relatives of the imperial family. In fact, this group continues to exist in monarchy countries around the world and has existed as a privileged class throughout Chinese history. In fact, the participation of members of the imperial family in the imperial examination did not begin during the Qing Dynasty. However, the most unique aspect of the imperial examination for members of the imperial family during the Qing Dynasty was that it gradually became an institutionalized system during the Kangxi period [9]. Compared to ordinary people, the imperial family also had many privileges on Imperial Examination, such as that members of the imperial family did not need to participate in the selection of the lower echelons, and even the emperor was worried that this was too preferential [10].

The Imperial Examination System of the Qing Dynasty inherited from the education system that had already been used in various dynasties of China, and on the other hand, it was repaired and reformed in order to facilitate the rule of the Qing government. One of the most prominent characteristics of the Qing Dynasty was its multi-ethnic education system, in which the Manchu nobility, as a direct comrade class of the Qing government, directly controlled more special interests under the Chinese education system compared to the Han people. This represents that they have higher social and cultural capital. This influence is reflected in his education system, which leans towards all his privileged classes. Thus, a cultural ideology based on Manchu nobility emerged, achieving the continuation of rights in the Qing Dynasty's education system.

4.2 The impact of the Imperial Examination System on social mobility

Because the demand for intellectuals in the Qing Dynasty society was only to ensure the normal operation of the national government, the illiteracy rate in China remained above 90% throughout the Qing Dynasty, which first ensured the government's control over the country. Secondly, the government ensures the absolute

implementation of the idea of loyalty to one of the emperors in public opinion and provides generous economic and social class rewards to the intellectual class working in the government, ensuring that the remaining 10% of people can be in the same interest community as the government, jointly safeguarding the economic and power monopoly in society achieved through the monopoly of knowledge. And what is needed to achieve this is to ensure that 90% of the people will not encroach on the interests of these 10% groups. Correspondingly, a long-standing political system in China has been promulgated, even the imperial examination system, which has been the method for selecting officials in all dynasties in China since the Tang Dynasty. Simply put, it is to conduct exams through Confucian research, and those who pass the exams can become officials.

This may seem like a very fair system, but in reality, it is not. For example, the Qing government strictly restricted which professions and their relatives could not take exams, such as servants, prostitutes, local government guards responsible for prison cells, those chasing thieves, those transporting goods, and various entertainment industry practitioners such as singers and dancers [11]. The Qing Dynasty strictly stipulated that no one in his family (great grandfather, grandfather, father) who participated in the Imperial Examination could engage in these jobs. This measure was not strongly related to the moral system of Confucianism pursued at the time. In fact, the Qing government itself had many doubts about this matter, and policies were often changed. However, in summary, the law prohibiting Pariah (i.e. those who engage in low-level work and are discriminated against) from taking the exam is unquestionable. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the significance of the Imperial Examination for the country lies in selecting officials, and the country's demand for officials is limited. Therefore, the government needs to select only the best and appropriate talents.

The specific means by which the Qing Dynasty implemented these restrictions was through its public education system. In the Qing Dynasty, public schools were divided into local schools and central schools, with local schools being divided according to cities and having almost no teaching purpose. Their role was more important in the Qing Dynasty imperial examination system, which was to review the background of personnel who would undergo the imperial examination in the future and eliminate some individuals with unqualified identities. Therefore, all students need to have already enrolled in these local schools before they can take the imperial examination.

Secondly, in order to ensure the registered residence registration of personnel, for example, there is a special kind of examination set up specifically for the children of salt merchants. Because of the particularity of salt merchants' work, it is usually impossible to carry out the imperial examination in registered residence registration places, so the imperial court specially set up this kind of examination to ensure the interests of salt merchants.

However, because the number of salt merchants is much smaller than the number of people conducting the imperial examination at the local level, many students hope to pass the exam in this less competitive examination venue through impersonation [12], and the certificates presented by local schools can be used for testing. In summary, both of these are aimed at strengthening the authority of the imperial examination, a significant social activity, and maintaining the symbolic capital of the beneficiary class in order to achieve the goal of stable governance.

Another type of ancient Chinese central school, known as "Taixue," had a more systematic education system that included principals, lecturers, and students [13]. In Taixue, the sources of students can be roughly divided into three types:

Firstly, candidates who have passed the imperial examination but are waiting for promotion due to insufficient vacant positions are considered candidates with potential symbolic capital. They are temporarily placed in the "Imperial Academy", waiting for future promotion opportunities. The success of these candidates in the imperial examination also recognized their cultural capital and obtained corresponding symbolic capital through this cultural capital.

The second type of students are mostly the children of military nobility or royal clans, who enjoy special treatment due to their special status [14]. This special treatment can be seen as symbolic capital, as their social status and family background enable them to have better resources. This, to some extent, reflects the inequality of social classes and the impact of symbolic capital on individual status.

The third type is students who obtain admission qualifications by paying a large amount of money, in fact, they are using economic capital to obtain symbolic capital [15]. They may lack social status and special background, but by paying a large amount of money, they are able to enter Taixue, receive education, and obtain social and academic capital, providing themselves with opportunities for advancement.

Overall, the student selection method of Taixue can be explained as the embodiment of symbolic capital in the field of education. Through existing cultural, social, or economic capital, these different candidates are able to acquire knowledge, retain, and enhance their previous class status in society.

5 Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper concludes that the Qing dynasty's imperial examination system failed to facilitate social mobility, and instead benefited those from higher classes. Individuals from more privileged backgrounds found it easier to obtain merit and secure official positions through the examination system. From its invention to its abolition, the imperial examination system has served as the primary way for individuals to ascend social classes.

The imperial examination is an important field that reflects the Qing Dynasty's characteristic of "revering the

Manchus" and its policy of "following the example of the Ming Dynasty". After the Qing Dynasty entered China, in order to achieve the goal of long-term rule, it had to adapt to the political ecology of the Central Plains, so under the strategy of "revering the Manchus and following the example of the Ming Dynasty", it adopted the policy of "revering Confucianism and Taoism". In order to achieve the goal of long-lasting rule, the Qing adopted the policy of "revering Confucianism and emphasizing Taoism" under the strategy of "referring to the Han Dynasty and following Ming Dynasty". The Qing rulers provided Manchurian Banners with a wide range of career paths and opportunities, and the official positions available to them were varied and wide-ranging, also wide range of official positions for them to choose from. The special system of official vacancies in the Qing dynasty gave the Banner people a certain advantage over Han Chinese officials.

Although Bourdieu's theory is primarily based on French higher education, where he lived and studied, it can also be applied to the education system in Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty. In particular, it is helpful for analyzing the unique imperial examination system during the middle and early stages of the Qing Dynasty, within the context of production theory. This analysis, approached objectively, aims to elucidate the research field through the application of a novel theoretical framework, making it a valuable contribution. Bourdieu believed that a cultural monopoly based solely on power relations would gradually form in this system, as the ruling class monopolized, legalized, and ideologized their own culture and values. In this context of the education system, the school provides confirmation of the initial cultural capital gap for each student, making the habits generated by individual high capital families the achievements that each person can achieve in higher education, and in this case, achieving power relations in production.

In conclusion, the student selection method of Taixue may be seen as a representation of symbolic capital within the education sector. Using pre-existing cultural, social, or economic capital, diverse candidates are able to gain knowledge and thus maintain or elevate their existing social class in society.

Author's contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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