

THE ABOLITION OF THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM AND THE XINHAI
REVOLUTION OF 1911

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The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 marks a historic moment in the history of modern China. By the end of the revolution, China's dynastic system, which had been in place for thousands of years, was radically and suddenly brought down to its knees and forced to disband forever. In its stead, a new democratic order was established, setting the standard for future Chinese governments.¹ Other than changing the nature of the government, the revolution sparked decades of lively intellectual debate, opened China further to the West, and introduced new radical ideas like socialism, feminism, and Communism. The importance of the revolution on China's modern course is unquestionable.

Given the importance of the revolution to the course of modern Chinese history, it is curious then that so little attention has been given to the causes that led to its success. The revolution was no small feat, reaching every province in China and commanding the attention of hundreds of thousands of Chinese. What elements made the revolution successful?

Popular lore accredits much of the revolution's success to the role played by Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance, which for decades had been stirring for an anti-Qing revolution. More informed scholars attribute the success of the revolution on the decentralization of the army into New Army Units, on the use of railway lines, and on the influence exerted by Yuan Shikai over the Beiyang army and the Manchu court.²

This narrative, however, appears to be incomplete. After all, had the Revolutionary Alliance not started nine other uprisings in the decade before the Wuchang Uprising? And had those uprisings not been crushed completely? As for the New Army, from where was it drawing

¹ It is important to note that while the system of government immediately following the dynastic order was democratic, the political order soon became fragmented and warlordism was quick to take hold. By pointing to the quasi-democratic nature of the governments of Sun Yat-sen and Yuan Shikai, I only mean to note that the revolution pointed the way to the possibilities of new forms of government, including democracy and totalitarianism.

² Jonathan D Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990): 262-268.

so many volunteers? The literature on the revolution appears to have few answers to these questions.

Recent scholarship on the history of Republican China has drawn attention to the reforms implemented during the Xinzheng (新政) or “New Government” Reform period and the role they played in facilitating the revolution. The literature argues that without the reforms the revolution would not have succeeded.³

This paper attempts to deepen that literature by exploring the role played by one of the most substantial reforms of the Xinzheng Reform period: the abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905. This paper proposes that the abolition of the imperial examination system contributed to the success of the revolution in the short-term and the long-term. In the short-term, it created a large pool of unemployed, disenfranchised, and educated literati numbering in the millions which served as a hotbed for dissent. The abolition also fomented the creation of new schools which spread Western and anti-Qing sentiment. In the long-term, these same literati served as agents of change within the most important structures of Chinese society. Given their education and their growing involvement in the Revolutionary Alliance, the literati joined the ranks of the New Army and the provincial assemblies, and from within slowly subverted them, turning them against the Qing court. Ultimately, these institutions led the revolution and disbanded the dynastic system. Had the examination system not been abolished, it appears unlikely that the New Army and the provincial assemblies would have taken their strong anti-Qing course.

This paper is divided in six sections. In the first section, I explore the history of the examination system, and the context of its abolition. In the second section, I study how the

³ Two such works include the Spring-Summer 1995 release of *Chinese Studies in History* and the October 2003 release of *Modern Asian Studies*, both of which deal exclusively with new research on the Xinzheng Reform period.

abolition of the imperial examination system affected Chinese society in the short-term, with a particular view at how it affected examination candidates. In the third section, I explore the role of the literati in shaping the New Army. In the fourth section, I study the role of the literati in shaping the provincial assemblies. In the fifth section, I study how the abolition of the imperial examination system led to further decentralization, loosening the court's grip over the country. Finally, in the sixth section, I end with conclusions and questions for further study.

*The Imperial Examination System – A Review*⁴

The Chinese imperial examination system traces its history back to the Western Han dynasty. Emperor Han Gaozu, seeking to bypass the power of the nobility, instituted the system, calling for senior officials to recommend men of talent for examination by the court for possible employment in the government. Over time, the system evolved, soon fully adopting Confucianism and the Confucian classics at the core of its contents and, during the Song dynasty, allowing all eligible candidates to participate in the examinations out of their own will rather than after being recommended by a senior official.

From the time of the Ming dynasty, the examination system was divided into several levels, offering degrees and other benefits to successful candidates at each level. At the lowest level, candidates participated in preliminary examinations in their district city and then in the district capital. Those who were successful could then participate in the lower-level examination in the prefectural capital. Successful candidates in the prefectural examination were conferred the title of *shengyuan* (生员) or government student and given certain privileges. Once conferred the title of government student, candidates were considered members of the class of the degree-holders or literati; however, they were subject to annual routine re-examinations to

⁴ Much of the following section is drawn from Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

maintain their title. After the prefectural examinations, candidates could participate in the middle-level examination in the provincial capital; successful candidates received the degree of *juren* (举人). After receiving the *juren*, candidates could participate in the metropolitan examinations, usually held in the nation's capital, where, if successful, they could receive the degree of *jinshi* (进士). Finally, the few remaining candidates participated in a final examination before the emperor and his advisors. The most successful among these candidates received specific official appointments at the highest levels of government.

At the time of its abolition, the examination system exhibited several characteristics that many members of the intelligentsia saw as signs of weakness. First, the examination sought out men of moral rectitude who fit the bill of being “obedient to their elders and incorrupt” and being “virtuous and good, square and upright.”⁵ The examinations did not seek candidates with technical knowledge or political ability. Second, the examination did not include Western topics, like engineering and science, which many Chinese literati agreed was necessary to preserve the country. Instead, the examination included sections on poetry, dissertation, current affairs, and the eight-legged essay, among others. Third, the examination consistently sought out a certain uniformity of thought, looking to minimize creativity and individual opinion as much as possible. This was due to the state's adoption of a neo-Confucian interpretation of the Confucian classics which called for unquestionable adherence to Confucian orthodoxy.⁶ Fourth, the examinations had candidates go through the various levels before reaching the emperor. Many saw great monetary waste in having candidates go through so many levels, especially at a time of budget tightening, when the court could offer few jobs to successful candidates.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

For these reasons and others, the court released an edict in 1905 calling for the abolition of the examination system. The court was motivated in part by the criticisms being leveled against the system, but also by China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) by a fellow Asian nation further motivated court officials to propel the country on the path of reform. Unbeknownst to court officials, however, the reform of the examination system was about to set in motion a series of steps that would bring about their demise. I explore these steps below.

Immediate Consequences of the Abolition of the Examination System

The abolition of the examination system in 1905 resulted in a serious blow to a considerable section of Chinese society, not just to candidates and other degree-seekers.

It is important to remember that the examination system in dynastic China was important for several reasons, key among them being that the examination system served as an instrument of social mobility, guaranteeing to most Chinese that hard work and knowledge could result in a position at the imperial court. Chinese from all backgrounds, whether rural or urban, could look forward to a future of success and power, gained by careful study and participation in the examinations. And more than just a vain hope, this promise that *anyone* could succeed at the examinations delivered. For example, a study by E.A. Kracke of examination lists of 1148 and 1256 demonstrate that approximately sixty percent of all successful candidates came from non-official backgrounds (that is to say that neither their parents nor grandparents had earned a degree).⁷ More recent scholarship suggests that a significant majority of successful candidates at

⁷ E.A. Kracke, "Family vs Merit in Chinese Civil Service Examinations Under the Empire," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 10 (September 1947): 103-121.

the intermediate and higher levels from the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty came from poor backgrounds.⁸

The examinations were also important for the prestige and power that they bestowed on successful candidates. In his review of the history of the examination system, Wolfgang Franke mentions a few of the benefits: "exemption from labor service or from the tax replacing it, protection against involvement in other people's law suits and demeaning punishments for minor offenses, and certain prerogatives of a ritualistic nature."⁹ Other benefits included permission to wear scholarly robes and other outer garments that distinguished scholars from others. The benefits extended to the successful candidates and to their families, thus encouraging millions of Chinese to participate in the system.

The promise of raising successful candidates from destitution to glory at the palace and the benefits that were bestowed on successful candidates were enough to encourage millions of Chinese to participate in the system. Franke notes that at the preliminary examination level at least 1,000 to 2,000 candidates participated in each district city, and that ten times as many participated in the prefectural level examinations.¹⁰ Fan Peiwei notes that examination halls at most provincial capitals had a capacity to hold more than 10,000 candidates at a time; the Henan Examination Hall, for example, had a capacity for 11,866 candidates.¹¹ Charles Keyser Edmunds provides even more precise numbers, noting that during the late Qing dynasty 760,000 candidates competed biennially for the first degree, 190,000 candidates competed triennially for the second degree, and up to 1,000,000 candidates competed in preliminary examinations in

⁸ Ping-ti Ho, "Aspects of Social Mobility in China, 1368-1911," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1 (June 1959): 330-359.

⁹ Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963): 8-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ Fan Peiwei, "Educational Reforms, 1903-1904," *Chinese Studies in History*, 28 (Spring-Summer 1995): 85-100.

district cities.¹² Edmunds's estimation does not account for the number of candidates taking the examination at the third level; it also does not account for the millions of holders of the first degree who were subject to annual examinations, which they were required to pass to maintain their status as members of the literati. What these numbers point to is an enormous proportion of Chinese society which was fully invested and involved in the examination system and in what was termed the examination life.

The above information points to the degree to which Chinese society relied on and participated in the examination system. We should consider, then, what happened when the Qing court suddenly and completely abolished the age-old system. More specifically, I will discuss some of the immediate ways in which the abolition of the system facilitated the success of the 1911 revolution.

First, the modern school system that replaced the traditional examination system favored the elite rather than the people, eliminating completely the elements of social mobility that characterized the examination system. The modern school system favored the elite by making study abroad the decisive stage of Chinese education, by affording privileges only to those who had studied abroad, and by tightening the budget for scholarships to study abroad. In his study on social mobility in China, Y.C. Wang finds that foreign-trained Chinese received almost four times the salary of holders of the first degree. By studying the listings of *Who's Who in China* magazines from the early 1900s to the late 1930s, he also finds that most successful Chinese government leaders, academics, and industrialists had studied abroad.¹³ More importantly, Wang finds that studying abroad increasingly became a privilege experienced only by the elite:

¹² Charles Keyser Edmunds, "The Passing of China's Ancient System of Literary Examinations," *The Popular Science Monthly*, February 1906: 104-105.

¹³ Y.C. Wang, "Western Impact and Social Mobility in China," *American Sociological Review*, 25, no. 6 (December 1960): 843-855.

from 1905 onwards, he finds that the number of students studying abroad with a government scholarship decreased sharply; this in effect implies that students from a wealthy background became more and more the only ones with the resources to study abroad.¹⁴

Second, the decree of 1905 mandated that the various governor-generals and viceroys establish modern schools along Western lines in each province. Notice that the instructions by the court were for the provincial leaders, not central leaders, to establish the schools and to create the curricula. What we find is that the governor-generals and viceroys established schools that advocated an anti-Qing line; they also established schools which taught Western politics, including ideas on revolution, revolt, freedom, and individualism. The court's voluntary decentralization of power ultimately worked against them by facilitating the rapid spread of subversive ideas which led to their downfall.

Third, and as has been mentioned, the decree encouraged candidates and aspiring members of the literati to study abroad. While studying in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States was more prestigious, we find that a majority of Chinese students studied in Japan, where there was strong anti-Qing sentiment. A great number of students who traveled to Japan joined the various secret societies and the Revolutionary Alliance; those who joined neither group were equally exposed to the ideas espoused by the two groups in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and discussions. Many of these students, after returning to China, spread those same anti-Qing ideas to others.

Fourth, the provisions of the 1905 decree guaranteed government jobs for holders of the second and third degree, but left nothing to holders of the first degree. More than denying them any privilege, the decree also invalidated their degree by instructing them to enroll in the modern

¹⁴ Ibid., 852.

schools then being created across China. The disenfranchisement of the non-elite caused by the abolition of the examination system must have been tremendous.

Finally, the decree of 1905 left millions of rural and poor Chinese with few alternatives to make an honest living. Their limited alternatives included joining the military, participating in local politics, enrolling in modern schools, or becoming bandits and thugs.

Taken together, these five immediate consequences of the abolition of the examination system fostered a climate ripe for revolution. The poorest Chinese, now unemployed but knowledgeable of the weaknesses of the system, joined secret societies, which for long had called for the dethronement of the Manchus, or joined the army, which was strictly divided along provincial lines. The wealthiest Chinese, on the other hand, though equally as disenfranchised, took advantage of the opportunities being offered abroad. While abroad, these students joined the Revolutionary Alliance and became fully submerged in the anti-Qing movement. When they returned – to join the army, the central government, or the provincial assemblies – they worked to subvert and ultimately bring down the Qing court.

In the next section, I explore the role of the literati in the New Army.

The New Army

During the Xinzheng Reform period and as part of its efforts to reinvigorate and reform the country, the Qing court mandated that the old armies be reorganized into New Army divisions. The efforts were aimed at eliminating corruption in the army, which was rampant before the reforms; decreasing waste, by keeping only those soldiers who were fit to serve; and improving command of the units, by giving greater leadership roles to provincial military leaders. One of the perverse consequences of these measures, however, was that soldiers in the army fell to strict provincial loyalties. Reform edicts mandated that provincial governors and

viceroys recruit locally¹⁵; this, in effect, guaranteed that soldiers would not shoot on their own people when the revolutions began. A second consequence is that the armies served as recruitment grounds for the revolutionary, anti-Qing societies, and that they served to spread the ideas of these societies. During the revolution, the New Armies took a leading role in removing governors loyal to the Qing court, defeating military forces loyal to the Qing, and establishing provisional, independent military governments in the provinces. In fact, it was New Army division that sparked the Wuchang Uprising which ultimately led to the start of the revolution.

It is important to note, however, that the spread of anti-Qing sentiment within New Army ranks did not happen spontaneously. In fact, it was the literati who carried and spread the ideas of revolution. Hatano notes that as many as 25% of all New Army recruits were members of the class of the degree-holders, and that “[t]hese soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and lower commissioned officers became the core of the expanding revolutionary activity in the army.”¹⁶

Many literati joined the army because of the nationalism fueled by China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War; others joined because of the benefits that they could gain from joining the ranks (for example, after 1903, those who joined the army and their families were exempt from forced government labor).¹⁷ In this and other ways, the army came to replace the examination system as the surest method to success.

But more than just joining the New Army, the literati directed its course. Hatano notes that many literati joined the army for the express purpose of propagating revolutionary ideas, particularly ideas espoused by the Revolutionary Alliance.¹⁸ This is specially so for those literati

¹⁵ Edmun S.K. Fund, *The Military Dimension of the Chinese Revolution* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 25-30.

¹⁶ Yoshihiro Hatano, “The New Armies,” in *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913*, by Mary Clabaugh Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 371-372.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 381.

who had studied abroad in the military schools in Japan. Many of these members joined the Revolutionary Alliance and then spread its ideas from within the ranks of the New Army. These same members plotted the Wuchang Uprising and took power in the various provinces during the revolution.

The link between the abolition of the examination system and the transformation of the New Army into an anti-Qing interest group is thus undeniable. Many students turned to the army after the abolition of the examination system as a source of employment; many others, particularly the wealthiest who studied in Japan, joined the army with subversion in mind. Had the examination system not been abolished, we may not have seen this same course.

But the New Army was not the only element of the revolution that made it successful. Indeed, we find that the various provincial assemblies that declared independence and supported the provisional military governments founded by the New Army were also essential to the success of the revolution. I turn to them in the following section.

Provincial Assemblies

The creation of provincial assemblies was approved by the Qing court in an edict of 1908 implementing elements of democratization in the Chinese state. The edict called for the popular election of provincial assemblies in 1909 and for the formation of a national assembly in 1910; the edict further called for self-government at the local level by 1915, and for the popular election of a national parliament in 1917.

The provincial assemblies served several roles during late-Qing China. Provincial assemblies had authority to pass laws concerning provincial matters. They also served as a link between the court and the people, often relaying to the court local sentiment toward the different measures being implemented across China. The establishment of provincial assemblies also

reinforced the power of the wealthy gentry: while they had once exercised a certain degree of control over local matters due to their privileged position, they now exercised that power from a legitimate position in the provincial government. Finally, provincial assemblies served as a hotbed of subversion, factionalism, and anti-Qing sentiment.

It is in this last sense that the literati played an essential role. Dispossessed of the examination system as a road to wealth and power, many literati soon turned to local matters and to the foundation of local branches of the Revolutionary Alliance. As has been mentioned, those who studied abroad became immersed in the anti-Qing movement, and when they returned to China, they were given prominent positions in government at the central and local level. Many of these literati ran for provincial assembly elections and won.

The role played by the provincial assemblies in the revolution was crucial. When New Army units removed the forces loyal to the Qing in the various provinces, it was the provincial assemblies that legitimated the new provisional military governments by helping them and by recognizing them as legitimate. The provisional assemblies also took decisive action when they declared independence from the central government. Finally, provisional assemblies dealt a serious blow on the central government by sending delegates to the Nanjing National Assembly established by Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance, rather than sending delegates to the Beijing National Assembly supported by the central government.

Through all this, it was former members of the literati that took a leading role. For example, during the revolution, Tang Hualong, a leading member of the Hubei Provincial Assembly, recognized the provisional military government set up by Hubei New Army troops and took up a position in that government. Tang was a member of the literati that had studied in

Japan during the 1900s and returned to China in 1908.¹⁹ Tang 's profile is similar to that of many other provincial assembly leaders: educated, disenfranchised, and fiercely anti-Qing. Although it is difficult to show causality, it seems unlikely that the provisional assemblies would have taken such a leading role had the nation's brightest not been cut off from the examination system.

Severing the link between the state and the people

The decision to abolish the examination system had one more long-term consequence that ultimately facilitated the success of the 1911 revolution: it helped sever the link between the court and the people.

We should remember that for nearly three millennia successive Chinese dynasties had held on to power by the legitimacy granted to them by the structure of Chinese government. That structure included the dual system of memorials and edicts, whereby officials requested changes to the court through memorials and the court approved memorials through edicts. A key characteristic of this system is that little could happen at the local level without the approval of the emperor, thus granting tremendous power to the emperor and the court. Another element of the structure was the examination system, which gave an added measure of legitimacy and need for the court – after all, before the system was abolished, no one who did not take and pass the examination could be considered educated; it was the Chinese state that decided who was educated and who was not.

The abolition of the examination system and the establishment of provincial assemblies unraveled this structure completely. By eliminating the examination system, the court made itself obsolete to the intelligentsia, provincial leaders, and the gentry. If local schools now

¹⁹ John Finchner, "Political Provincialism and the National Revolution," in *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913*, by Mary Clabaugh Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971): 191.

determined who was educated and who could obtain an employment, then what was the point of maintaining a corrupt court in far-away Beijing? The same goes for provincial assemblies. The assemblies now became the focal point for local and regional problems. Assemblies now had the authority to pass laws and to fix problems, something that the Qing court had proved unable to do for long. Moreover, the assemblies were led by Han Chinese and not by Manchus. These measures thus quickly proved that eliminating the dynastic system and replacing it with an enlarged version of self-government was feasible and indeed desired by most.

Conclusion

Through this research, I sought to explore the role played by the abolition of the examination system in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. This paper set off by proposing that the abolition of the examination system resulted in the disenfranchisement of a significant portion of Chinese society – a portion that was well educated and well poised to conspire against the government – and that that portion of the Chinese population played a key role in the revolution.

To prove this, I looked at the immediate effects of the abolition, which included measures that spread anti-Qing sentiment through new schools and study abroad. I also looked at some of the more long-term consequences of the abolition, key among them being the infiltration of the New Army by former literati charged with anti-Qing intentions and the victory of many former literati in elections for the provincial assembly. Both the New Army and the provincial assemblies played key roles in the revolution; their influence would have been much diminished had the court not abolished the system.

There is still a lot of information missing on the composition of New Army units, on the profile of many members of the provincial assemblies, on the implementation of Xinzheng reforms by the governors of most provinces, and on the identity of members of the Revolutionary

Alliance. A revised version of this paper would benefit from having this information; nonetheless, this is an important first step toward understanding more fully the early history of Republican China.

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