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## Review of The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China

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*The Class of 1761. Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China* by Iona D. Man-Cheong. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. 312 pp. \$60 (cloth). ISBN 0-8047-4146-8.

“A gentleman (*shih*) should be able to distinguish between the examinations and education,” the father of Neo-Confucian thought Zhu Xi (1130-1200), is reported to have pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Without doubt, Iona Man-Cheong makes this distinction, but reveals at the same time how tightly the Chinese examination system was connected to education in a broad sense: the examination system formed and disciplined those who were later to become loyal government officials. However, this relationship between emperor, administration, and would-be officials was by no means static and fixed, as Man-Cheong tries to show. Rather, the space where these actors met was to some extent negotiable and dynamic, despite the obvious asymmetry of power at work.

In her first two chapters, Man-Cheong emphasizes this claim of an enacted dynamics from a more theoretical perspective. For scholars of comparative education, it is instructive to learn not only how a recruitment system based on hierarchically arranged examinations worked, but also how this system both legitimized the emperor's rule and generated the elite's access to political power. For those interested in how ideology is enacted in practice, Man-Cheong's analysis of the examination system provides important historical background information. Likewise, her study feeds the Foucauldian concept of disciplinary power and practices with empirical historical data. The way in which Man-Cheong frames the functions and semantics of the Chinese examination system makes the system much more meaningful to the reader than mere descriptions of the different

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Thomas H. C. 1989. "Sung Schools and Education Before Chu Hsi." In: de Bary, Wm. Theodore and John W. Chaffee (eds), *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. Pp. 105-136, here p. 126.

hierarchical levels of exams and recruitment could ever achieve. Thus, both chapters can also serve as class reading in comparative education, since they link education, ways of recruiting loyal servants to government, and ideology/discipline in productive and stimulating ways, even if sometimes a bit repetitively.

Iona Man-Cheong's special approach, however, unfolds in chapters three to five. Here, she looks closely at the 217 candidates who came from all over the country to take part in the palace examination in 1761 – "the class of 1761." By outlining a collective biography of this cohort as well as by analyzing the examination discourse of the top three candidates, Man-Cheong combines a prosopographical approach with discourse analysis – a methodological approach that proves most fruitful to make the strategies, emotions, and vicissitudes come to life again that were connected to the practices of the examination system. Man-Cheong succeeds in demonstrating that the space constituted – and continuously reproduced – by the examination discourses and practices was not just a preset routine of questions and answers. Rather, the actors involved made use of the space that was available to them to put forward their own agendas – albeit with caution and along the rules as they were defined and sanctioned, ultimately, by the emperor. Chapter five in particular reveals how the purported meritocracy of the Chinese examination system in reality yielded a complex interaction between emperor, officials, and candidates, in which each party tried to gain as much as possible in the examination game, often through strategically established and carefully nourished networks.

Despite this creative approach toward the topic, there are some flaws. First, Man-Cheong argues that the "examination system structurally elaborated a collective identity, one that would eventually become the nation-state for the modern intelligentsia, and

arguably in the process would make a material contribution to modern Chinese nationalism” (2). While Man-Cheong does devote some pages to outlining this argument of a “proto-nation space” (147), both from a more theoretical view point and with regard to the actors' discourse, the connection between *guojia* ('homeland', 'our country-family', later on 'nation state') and the modern nation state as it began to be conceptualized towards the end of the imperial era remains rather unclear. Given the fact that her assumption of a "proto-nation space" constitutes a great part of her book's main argument (2), Man-Cheong does little to convince us that *guojia*, in mid-eighteenth century, anticipated or even pre-shaped the modern Chinese notion of the nation, which was triggered both by the intrusion of the Western powers and Western social-Darwinist ideas, and by anti-Qing sentiment. It might have been more productive to unveil just to the contrary how *guojia* differed from later, Western-inspired concepts of the nation state.

Second, it is difficult to say whom the book was written for. While Man-Cheong tries to do justice both to the non-specialist and to the expert, some chapters might be slightly disappointing to both target groups. For example, the third chapter, where the examination discourse of the three top candidates is analyzed, abounds in details and references to the Chinese classics that to the non-specialist can be tiresome sometimes. For the sinologist, on the other hand, many of the references could be more contextualized and less repetitive: while the details of the candidates' answers are highly informative, Man-Cheong categorizes them, in almost stereotype manner, into Song, Han, and Evidential learning by the end of each section. Also, the character list at the end of the book is far from complete. Here, it might have been wiser to decide beforehand if the book was meant for a wider audience or for the specialized expert – or even to make

two books out of one, since surely much of the material investigated could not be included into the present book.

Despite these drawbacks, Man-Cheong's study presents an innovative contribution to the existing research on the Chinese examination system. Both through its theoretical framework and its richness in historical material, the book conveys to the reader how real and how meaningful this system was for the aspiring elites of eighteenth-century China, and how the system not only disciplined these elites, but also how in turn the elites, to a certain extent, succeeded – or failed – in manipulating and shaping the system.

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