

Revisiting the Civil Examinations in the Qing Dynasty: Popularization and Social Transitions

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Abstract: Recent literature has pointed out the increased stratification and narrowing of the social ladder embedded in the Qing-era civil examinations. This essay sees a clear-cut division between the diminishing opportunity for high-level degrees (above *juren* 舉人) and the rising exam fever in competing for the licentiate degree (*shengyuan* 生員) at the grassroots level. This study focuses on the popularization of civil exams in the Qing era from three perspectives: the inflation of the licentiate degree, the surging exam population across society, and the unintended by-product of expanded access to widespread education and literacy culture. Thus, this essay argues that the popularization of civil exams had far-reaching impacts on socioeconomic transitions in Qing China. In addition to the “gatekeeper” function of the civil examinations for selecting officials, the Qing exams triggered new occupations for licentiates and helped initiate self-employment orientations that contributed to accommodating the tremendous surplus population.

Keywords: civil examinations, popularization, social transitions, Qing dynasty

Introduction: The Narrowing Social Ladder and the Concept of “Popularization”

The civil examination system is widely known as a key institution combining cultural, educational, political, and social functions in imperial China. The civil exams were a vital tool of political meritocracy in premodern China that served to select government bureaucrats and provided a social ladder for commoners to ascend to the ruling class. The exam system served a connective and mediating function in the social structure by linking official governance and scholarship at the upper levels of society with scholars “plowing and studying” (*gengdu* 耕讀) at the bottom (Luo 2017).

The odds of examination success and of gaining administrative positions declined substantially during the Qing due to the severe demographic crisis starting in the mid-Qing period. China’s population recorded an unprecedented increase from 160 million in the early Kangxi 康熙 period (1679) to over 400 million before the Taiping Rebellion in 1851 (Cao 2001: 832). Nonetheless, the number of administrative units remained unchanged throughout premodern Chinese history, with near-identical numbers of government officials (Elman 2013: 99). Thus, this demographic pressure brought about a rising administrative burden for

the Qing bureaucracies and governance, leading to a significant transformation of the social structure.

The population crisis had a narrowing impact on civil examinations in the Qing dynasty. Despite the Qing rulers opening the exams to qualifying examinees from almost all socioeconomic backgrounds, the odds of passing exams at all levels had dropped dramatically in comparison with previous dynasties. The Qing intellectuals' vision of climbing the social ladder by passing all levels of the civil exams became increasingly unrealistic. In the Ming and Qing systems, candidates needed to pass the youth exams (*tongshi* 童試) and earn the title of licentiate (*shengyuan* 生員), which marked the formal beginning of a scholar's career. Despite geographic variation in the quotas for qualifications, the overall passing rate of youth exams was merely 1–2 percent (Chang 1955: 9–12; Elman 1991; Wang Ligang 2014). Thereafter, the large number of licentiates would have to face challenges in their exam career, as the Qing government adopted fixed quotas in the following provincial (*xiangshi* 鄉試) and metropolitan exams (*huishi* 會試). The triennial provincial examinations appear to have been the most difficult and competitive round. The qualification rate for provincial degrees (*juren* 舉人) remained at a mere 5 percent on average, regardless of provincial variations (Elman 1991: 14).

A large number of studies have pointed out the narrowing social ladder embedded within the exam system (Naquin and Rawski 1987; Elman 1991, 2000, 2013; He 1998; Man-Cheong 2004; Wang Rui 2013; Kurahashi 2011). Social history scholars have also investigated the composition of degree holders in late imperial China. Ho Ping-ti (1976: 105–26) proposed a two-level analysis in which the low-level licentiate degree holders had a vast social basis, while the social ladders for *juren* and higher degrees had narrowed significantly. He investigated family backgrounds of *jinshi* 進士 (Presented Scholar, the highest exam) holders in Ming and Qing and found that in 1371, 75 percent of them were commoners whose families during the three preceding generations did not include a single exam degree holder. However, this percentage dropped to 29.7 percent in 1661 and further to a mere 10.3 percent in 1890. More recent studies have further argued that Ho's statistics focused only on lineal blood relatives, neglecting those commoners who had officials as relatives from collateral lines. Thus, the likelihood of pure commoners with no literary ties or family connections pursuing academic and exam careers was even narrower (Hymes 1987; Elman 1991: 7–28, 2013: 133).

In imperial China, earning the *juren* status was vital for a scholarly career, as it marked the entry into upper-level scholarly status and was the lowest rank of titles that qualified for opportunities of being awarded local government posts. According to Shi Jin's field research based on the Tongxiang 桐鄉 county gazetteers, more than 83 percent of newly awarded *juren* lived in rural areas (rather than in cities or towns) in the early Ming; but the ratio dropped to 18 percent in the early Qing, and further to merely 1 percent in the late nineteenth century. The conventional pattern of “plowing and studying” became increasingly elusive for those who aimed at higher academic degrees and official positions, given the huge gap in economic and educational resources between urban and rural areas

(Shi 1990: 47–92). Likewise, Timothy Brook highlighted the aristogenic character of the Chinese gentry and the strong pattern of family continuity for reproducing local civil exam elite groups in the Qing. After examining forty-eight local gentry lineages in Yin County in Ningbo 寧波, he found that these families achieved great exam success by mobilizing various financial, human, and educational resources. In this regard, the transformation of local gentry hegemony was initiated in the Qing period, so that these local families could preserve their exam success and social status from generation to generation (Brook 1990: 27–51).

Without denying the prevailing arguments concerning declining social mobility, this essay sees a clear-cut division between the diminishing opportunities for high-level degrees (above *juren*) and the rising exam fever in competition for a licentiate degree at the grassroots level. During the Qing period, the licentiate degree appears to have been the ceiling for the academic rise of commoners with no official ties and limited educational resources. Nonetheless, the dwindling opportunities for academic success did not discourage exam participants at the grassroots level. Indeed, the number of exam takers surged remarkably and reached a new peak in the Qing, and exam-taking became widespread throughout society, leading to a proliferation of low-level licentiate degrees. Behind the exam fever was the key concept and factor addressed in this essay—the popularization of civil examinations.

This research defines the “popularization” of civil exams in three respects. First, the number of licentiate degrees rose exponentially and became “overstocked,” meaning the majority of exam candidates began to hold nonofficial goals and turned their attention to socioeconomic prestige and new career opportunities. Second, the number of exam participants surged to record highs in the Qing dynasty, despite the dwindling statistical chances for academic success. This indicates a large “exam population” that spent a tremendous amount of time on examination preparation but was unable to earn even low-level academic degrees. We examine the social consequences of exam fanaticism at the grassroots level and identify a mechanism for self-employment that likely helped ease the demographic crisis in Qing China. Finally, this study considers the cultural and educational dimensions of civil exams during the Qing dynasty. A nationwide fever for exam enrollment led to a thriving publishing industry and the expansion of basic widespread education, which can be considered unintended by-products of exam popularity.

This article makes use of primary sources from Qing intellectuals and earlier research and consists of three parts. The first part delineates the transition of licentiates and examines their degree of inflation. The second part examines the overall exam population at the grassroots level and explores consequent socioeconomic transitions. The last section examines how increasingly popular civil exams contributed to an educational and cultural boom in late imperial China.

Popularization of Licentiates and Status Transformation

Inflation of Licentiate Degrees

In the Ming and Qing, the creation of the licentiate degree was a key element in institutional reforms of the civil examinations, as it marked the entrance to the *shi*

Table 1. Qing Quota for Youth Exams (Kangxi–Xianfeng Reign)

Provinces	Quota	Provinces	Quota
Eight Banner (八旗)	150	Shanxi (山西)	1,546
Fengtian Eight Banner (奉天八旗)	30	Shaanxi (陝西)	1,147
Zhili (直隸)	2,560	Hubei (湖北)	1,137
Jiangsu (江蘇)	1,343	Hunan (湖南)	1,262
Anhui (安徽)	1,267	Gansu (甘肅)	864
Zhejiang (浙江)	1,783	Sichuan (四川)	1,479
Jiangxi (江西)	1,360	Guangdong (廣東)	1,339
Fujian (福建)	1,104	Guangxi (廣西)	1,070
Henan (河南)	1,629	Yunnan (雲南)	1,367
Shandong (山東)	1,857	Guizhou (貴州)	797
Taiwan (台灣)	132	Commercial Household Registration (商籍)	89
Total Count: 25,312			

Source: *Qinding xuezheng quanshu*, vols. 42–63, 791–1264. Estimated quota added for each county in each province.

士 scholar-bureaucrat class. Qing rulers adopted a fixed quota of licentiates in each of the counties and prefectures and manipulated the qualification quota of examinations at each level carefully and delicately. On the one hand, there had been constant calls to lower the quotas of licentiates to ensure better educational quality throughout the Qing (Elman 1991). Unlimited growth in licentiates could pose a severe financial burden to the state bureaucracy, given that the *shi* class received about 24 percent of the national income (Chang 1962; Bai and Jia 2016). On the other hand, the Qing court clearly understood that as the distribution of the exam qualification quotas was closely connected to the political legitimacy of the Qing court, shrinking the quota might trigger widespread dissent.

Together with the explosion of the population in Qing, there was a similar upsurge in the number of licentiates. In the seventeenth century, early Qing scholar Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) estimated the number of licentiates to be “over 500 thousand.”¹ Early Qing rulers formulated a general guideline on the academic quota for youth exams, where “big,” “middle,” and “small” counties would recruit twenty, fifteen, and seven or eight licentiates, respectively. The total number of qualified licentiates per youth exam was approximately twenty-five thousand (see table 1). On such a numerical basis, recent scholarship has assumed that a Qing literatus who earned the licentiate degree in his early twenties and had an average life expectancy of approximately sixty years would have had an average career as a Qing licentiate lasting for approximately thirty- to thirty-five years. Given that the Qing local government held the qualifying exams (*yuanshi* 院試) twice every three years, the number of qualified licentiate degree holders at any given time would amount to approximately five hundred thousand (Xu and van Leeuwen 2013; Wang Yuesheng 1989b).

The market for degrees expanded during the late Qing era. After the Taiping Rebellion, Emperor Xianfeng 咸丰 announced a permanent increase in the youth exam quota (*yongguang xue* 永廣學額), saying that “each county can be awarded one additional licentiate seat if it collects donations of 10,000 tael silver. The increased quota is up to 10 seats.”² By the time this policy was abolished in the 1870s, more than 4,700 additional licentiate quotas had been created (Hu and Li 2017: 59).

In addition, the inflation of licentiates in the Qing dynasty arose not only from the rising numbers of exam participants in the youth exams but also from the prevailing practice of donations for academic degrees. Qing rulers allowed the purchase of imperial studentships (*jiansheng* 監生), which was one of the various subcategories of licentiate.³ Regarding one example in Suzhou Prefecture 蘇州府 in the early Qing, it is stated that “since the seventeenth year of the Kangxi reign, those who had participated in exams for more than four times and donated 120 taels of silver could be awarded the licentiate degree; the price for purchasing a martial licentiate degree was half that; and no limitations were set in the prefecture- and county-level examinations” (Shang 1958: 17). Qing rulers allowed for the selling of *juren* degrees and even official posts. In this regard, the purchase of *jiansheng* degrees became a shortcut for those with favorable economic backgrounds to bypass the youth exams, so that they could prepare for the next level of provincial exams directly. For instance, one historical record shows that there were 29 purchases of government official posts, 375 purchases of symbolic official titles, and 649 purchases of *jiansheng* degrees in Huizhou Prefecture 徽州府 in one year.⁴ The purchase of the licentiate degree or even local administrative official positions reached a peak during the Taiping Rebellion, as the Qing government was confronted with severe financial constraints (Guan 2006). As a result, as much as 36 percent of licentiates earned their degrees via donations or other nonexam means in the mid-nineteenth century (Chang 1955: 137–38).

Thus, the number of licentiates in Qing China grew linearly and reached approximately 1 million prior to the Taiping Rebellion and peaked at 1.44 million after the 1850s, counting both those who had passed the formal exams and those who had purchased a degree through donations (Chang 1955: 139–61). A horizontal comparison shows that in the sixteenth-century Ming, there were merely 30,000 licentiates out of the overall population of 85 million, making for a ratio of one licentiate per 2,800 people; in the early Qing, the ratio rose to one licentiate per 540 people (Elman 2000: 140–42, 2013: 106); in the early nineteenth century, the number of licentiates, regardless of whether the degrees had been earned via exams or purchased via donation, amounted to one licentiate per 400 people.

This numerical estimate aligns with historical documents recorded by Qing officials and scholars. Chen Li 陳澧 (1810–1882), a prominent Confucian scholar in the late Qing, wrote that “there are more than ten thousand licentiates participating in exams nowadays. The examiners could not have time to read all of the test papers carefully before giving grades. Thus, among the three

rounds of exams, the exam officials merely took a look at the first while ignoring the remaining two.”⁵ Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850), a high-ranking provincial governor-general in the late Qing, also complained about the excessive number of licentiates when he supervised the provincial exams in the southern part of China. Later, he wrote in his report to the emperor that “areas south of the lower reaches of the Yangzi River have a solid scholarly atmosphere. The qualified licentiates who participated in the provincial exams reached as many as fourteen or fifteen thousand. Due to the underestimates of the number of examinees, one cannot guarantee zero cheating.”⁶ It can be seen that inflation in the licentiate degree also caused serious technical complexities in the operations of local examinations.

*Vanishing Status, Shifting Career Expectations,
and Downward Social Mobility*

In traditional Chinese society, the civil examination system served primarily as a tool for elite education and official selection. Those who qualified for the exams would earn the social status of scholars, who made up a small proportion of the population and constituted the ruling class of imperial politics and social relations. By contrast, Qing’s exam systems created an expanded licentiate class, which led to a crisis of mobility between lower- and upper-level *shi*, given the extremely high competition in provincial exams.

As a result, the “overstock” of licentiates led to two socioeconomic transitions among the licentiate groups. First, the popularization of the civil examination took the form of the deteriorating economic condition of the licentiates, while huge internal gaps arose in economic, political, and social status between the lower- and upper-level scholars. Holding the licentiate degree could no longer guarantee significant improvements in economic livelihood, as the Qing court faced increasing difficulties in raising finances and supporting the increasing numbers of licentiates. According to Qing academic policy, licentiates were divided into varying levels based on their academic performance. Government-funded schools in each county and prefecture had a fixed 1:1 ratio between stipend degree (*linsheng* 廩生) and additional degree (*zengsheng* 增生) holders. It was only the former group—with the best academic performances—that could enjoy salaries and subsidies from the government. In the early nineteenth century, one document shows that a prefectural school in Jiangsu Province “offered government stipends to twenty stipend degree holders and a certain amount of school-owned scholarships to another seventy to eighty licentiates. Thus, a total number of one hundred licentiates could receive living subsidies and support. However, the total number of licentiates in that prefecture is over one thousand.”⁷

Not all licentiates could obtain stable salaries and subsidies, and the internal competition among licentiates for the scholarship stipends was also fierce. Local licentiates without strong financial backgrounds or government- or school-sponsored scholarships had few fiscal guarantees for investing in higher-level education. For these reasons, low-level scholars in late imperial China appear to have been trapped in poverty.

Second, and more important, there was a clear transformation in the purpose of participating in the exams. Local literati who had limited family or educational resources were confronted with insurmountable hurdles in passing the provincial exams. As a result, the majority of the exam population showed lowered ambition for and diminished expectations of academic careers; instead, they merely aspired to local economic privileges and social prestige rather than unrealistic government administrative positions (Naquin and Rawski 1987: 126; Guan 2006). In the early Qing, the Confucian scholar Gu Yanwu pointed out the moral decadence of the licentiates:

Why would people exhaust their lives until their last breath to obtain the licentiate degree? Once a man holds the degree, he is exempt from labor services. He can dress in a scholar's gown and be treated courteously and does not have to be humiliated and lashed by the government clerks. Thus, persons desire to become licentiates not for the honor of the degree, but rather for better protection and treatment of their families. . . . Among all licentiates, those who hold this thought now probably make up at least 7 out of 10. . . . The licentiates provide no contributions to their countrymen. Quite the contrary, they have become a huge burden on society.⁸

Gu Yanwu's description here of the situation in the early Qing predates the demographic crisis. In the mid- to late Qing, more scholars complained about the utilitarian pursuits of the licentiates, stating that "they did not aspire for learning from virtuous and sage figures; they aimed for wealth but held no ambition to serve the emperor or protect the people."⁹ Wu Ting 吳鈺 (1799–1832), a licentiate in the early nineteenth century, complained that "the scholar class has been outnumbered and depreciated. They were thought to be respectable, but have now fallen into vagrancy."¹⁰

Degree inflation forced a vast number of licentiates to seek new occupations. These new career opportunities included working in the secretariats of officials; teaching in private schools; private tutoring; book editing, writing, and publishing; as well as wider involvement in local infrastructure and legal litigation (Macauley 1998: 145; Chow 2004: 97; Elman 2014: 204; Wang Yuesheng 1988, 1989a). In the southern part of China with its solid scholarly atmosphere, even the local literati who failed to earn any academic degree had been given many opportunities in local administration and welfare since the early eighteenth century (Kurahashi 2011). The annual income of licentiates could vary from 100 to several hundred silver taels, depending on their distinct career positions and regions. On average, private school teachers could earn approximately 120 silver taels per year, and licentiates working on local infrastructure projects and other welfare-related affairs could earn an annual income of approximately 100 silver taels (Chang 1962: 43–75). In general, Qing licentiates did not enjoy high economic status, and the division between low-level licentiate degrees and higher-level degrees deepened.

Thus, in this section, we have endeavored to identify a form of "downward social mobility" embedded in the Qing licentiates. Despite Qing rulers opening the exams to participants of all socioeconomic backgrounds (excepting the

descendants of jailers, prostitutes, or slaves), officialdom became the prerogative of a slim minority of Qing licentiates. As a result, a large number of Qing literati with limited family connections sought exam careers for nonofficial purposes. Those who barely succeeded in sitting for their provincial exams began to seek a better living by moving downward rather than upward.

Wild Expansion of Examinees and Popularization of Exam Participation

An Estimate of the Surging Exam Population

Despite the narrowing social ladder and thus fewer opportunities for academic success, there appears to have been rising exam fanaticism at the grassroots level. An unprecedentedly large part of the population had chosen the path of literatus learning and an exam career. In this section, we can gain a broader sense of the literati who sought to participate in the exams and pursue a degree.

According to the Qing system, the youth exams consisted of three steps. Student candidates needed to pass the county exams (*xianshi* 縣試) and earn the title of apprentice (*tongsheng* 童生); candidates then took prefectural exams (*fushi* 府試) and qualifying exams (*yuanshi* 院試), and those who passed all three would be granted licentiate status. In the Shunzhi 順治 period, the Qing government stipulated that qualified candidates for county exams must be less than half of that county's quota of licentiates.¹¹ However, as the number of examinees rose rapidly, Qing rulers during the Kangxi period abandoned the quota for county exams, considering that such quotas for beginner-level exams would demoralize the literati's passion for an exam career. For this reason, unlike the licentiates, for whom there was a fixed quota recorded by Qing primary sources, which allows their numbers to be estimated accurately, there is a dearth of data needed to analyze the overall number of exam participants. As a result, we have endeavored to find relevant supporting documents for reference, and the estimate can be supported by Qing scholars' diaries and officials' memorials to the emperor.

Participation in youth exams showed significant regional variation. Thus, our estimate of the exam population size is limited to a certain range. Typically, larger counties with higher populations and the Yangtze River delta areas, which had a solid academic atmosphere, demonstrated more enthusiasm toward exam participation. In 1744, the Ministry of Rites (Libu 禮部) initially planned to adopt new nationwide academic policies to fix the quota of county- and prefecture-level exams, saying that "for each licentiate seat, the prefecture exams (*fushi* 府試) can select thirty qualified examinees, and county exams 60."¹² However, the new regulation was quickly refuted by Gao Bin 高斌 (1683–1755), the governor of Zhili 直隸 Province. He reported to the emperor that "according to the new policy, big counties with a quota of 25 qualified licentiates would select 1,500 candidates from the country competing at the county exams. In some northern provinces, one single county did not have such a number of examinees, whilst in southern provinces such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Fujian, the number of county exam examinees could be at least several thousand."¹³ Finally, Emperor Qianlong rejected the policy proposal and retained the flexibility and openness of the youth exams.

In Qing China, large counties in economically developed provinces normally had a large pool of exam participants, ranging from one to several thousand. For instance, local gazetteers from Changshu County 常熟縣 showed that, in the Kangxi period, “several thousand candidates sat in youth exams every time.”¹⁴ Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838–1894), a late Qing scholar and reformist, recorded in his diary that “in Wuxi 無錫 County and Jinkui 金匱 County, one thousand and several hundred examinees participated in qualifying exams.”¹⁵ It has to be noted that Xue Fucheng’s diary merely covered the number of examinees for the qualifying exams. Thus, we can estimate that there were at least three thousand candidates for beginner-level county exams in Wuxi and Jinkui. Another case is Tongcheng 桐城 County in Anhui 安徽 Province, which was well known for its solid literacy tradition. According to local gazetteers, Tongcheng County had approximately three to four thousand examinees per youth exam.¹⁶

In addition, a memoir from the chief administrator of studies (*xuezheng* 學政) in Jiangsu Province provides more convincing evidence of how large apprentice groups were: “Since the Qianlong and Jiaqing 嘉慶 reigns, Haimen 海門 County had 600–700 apprentices registering for qualifying exams each time. The county has a quota of only four licentiates, including two stipend degrees (*linsheng* 廩生) and two additional degrees (*zengsheng* 增生). There are many examinees who have spent half of their lives in the exams and could not earn licentiate status. It is extremely competitive and difficult to feed these 600–700 apprentices with such limited licentiate seats.”¹⁷ Given that the memoir merely reported the number of examinees for qualifying exams, the number of county exam participants may have been fifteen hundred to two thousand.

In addition to the coastal provinces and the lower Yangtze River region, exam participants in other provinces could also reach a considerably high level. Wang Ligang (2014) investigated the historical gazetteers of northern provinces (Shaanxi 陝西 and Henan 河南), central regions (Hunan 湖南 and Hubei 湖北), southern provinces (Guangdong 廣東), as well as the remote provinces in the Northwest and Southwest. He concluded that in the Qing’s populous regions (coastal provinces, middle and lower Yangtze areas, and central plain areas), each local county had approximately two thousand participants in the youth exam. In other less-populous and less-developed provinces, the number could range from one to two thousand. Finally, in remote border provinces with lower population densities, the number could drop to several hundred.

In this regard, the exam populations in the Qing appear to have been extremely large. Early studies of civil examinations yielded an estimate of 1.5–2 million candidates registering for county-level exams each time (Wakeman 1977: 21–22; Miyazaki 1981: 121–22). However, this estimate might be low. In Zhang Jie’s (2003: 219) recent monograph on the Qing exam clans, he presented an estimate of 2.25 million examinees sitting for entry-level youth exams each time, assuming an overall number of 1,500 local administrative units in the Qing and that each local county had an average of 1,500 exam participants. Considering that youth exams were held twice every three years, the exam population at the grassroots level increased to approximately 4.5 million within a three-year cycle.

Exam Fever at the Grassroots Level and Emerging Self-Employment Mechanisms

In addition to the overproduction of licentiates, a broad class of literati also participated in the exams, leading to exam fever at the grassroots level. In each of the local youth exams, more than half of the participants came from ordinary peasant families (Wang Yuesheng 1989b).

Recent studies of economic history have estimated the annual income of Qing landholding peasants and artisans. According to Dai Yi (1999: 286–300), the average agricultural productivity for a middle-income peasant family in the lower Yangtze delta region, including both plowing and cloth weaving, could reach approximately thirty-two *shi* (石; a *shi* was 100 liters and is presumed to have weighed 65 kg) in the eighteenth century. In the early and mid-Qianlong periods, the rice price was about 1.5 silver taels per *shi* (Luo and Yang 2020), and the price rose to 2.7–3.5 silver taels per *shi* in the late eighteenth century.¹⁸ In other words, the income of a middle-income peasant family could have been around forty-five to fifty silver taels in the early eighteenth century, and could reach to as high as eighty silver taels in the lower Yangtze delta region in the late eighteenth century. Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 (1746–1809), a prominent scholar in the Qianlong period, wrote that “a family could be free from hunger with an agricultural output of 4 *shi*.”¹⁹ For skilled craftsmen and artisans, annual wages amounted to approximately 20 silver taels in the mid- and late eighteenth century (Allen et al. 2011).

On the other hand, the financial expense of attending a youth exam (including county, prefecture, and qualifying exams) in the Qing dynasty was less than ten silver taels, including transportation, accommodation, exam registration fees, and other necessary expenses (Wang Ligang 2017; Hu 2020). Although the exam cost was never low, it remained affordable for middle-income or rich Qing peasant families who aimed at exam-based career success, given that educated sons from ordinary peasant families did not necessarily engage in full-time school studies and could be engaged in studies and other jobs simultaneously. From the mid-Qing era, the population explosion created a great labor surplus, such that common families could purposely arrange a division of labor among their sons and send them to various occupations, such as farming, business, crafts, and academic study. The intelligent son who was sent to an exam career would be expected to pursue higher academic degrees and earn a respected social status for his clan.

The popularization of exam participation had multiple impacts on traditional Qing society. A new social group comprising the exam population took shape that was “employed” in civil exam careers. Even in the Qing period, many scholars and officials had noted this nascent social phenomenon and complained that “the literati showed no interest in national affairs and had degenerated into professional exam takers.”²⁰ The civil exam became a near-profession that absorbed a large amount of the population into exam careers, leading in two ways to the emergence of the exam profession and a self-employment mechanism.

First, the time necessary for exam success was significantly prolonged in the Qing dynasty. Qing rulers had intentionally lengthened the process of the exams by creating various academic degrees while maintaining fixed recruitment

quotas in different areas. Against this backdrop, for those who were determined to choose the exam career, the civil exams in the Qing became a lifelong occupation from childhood to death. The average age at which the licentiate and provincial degrees were obtained in the Qing was around twenty-four and thirty-one years, respectively (Chang 1955; He 1998). That is to say, one child student needed to spend nearly twenty years to become a licentiate after starting school at the age of six (He 1998: 317). Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), a famous novelist of the early Qing period, spent fifty-three years in repeated trials but failed to pass the provincial examinations (Barr 1986). Other studies also indicate that the average time spent obtaining the *jinsi* degree was over thirty years. Even for those who were capable and lucky enough to pass the highest metropolitan exams, the time taken to qualify consumed the most active years of their lives, and by the time they had passed all levels of exams and were awarded a government appointment, they were already dead or close to it (Man-Cheong 2004: 197). In the Qing, it was not rare for intellectuals to take the exam over ten times throughout their lives.

Second, recent studies have pointed out the formation of professional “civil exam clans” in each province and prefecture—clans that specialized in academic studies and civil exams. These clans normally had promising social status or economic wealth, so they could not only support their family members to prepare for the civil exams as a full-time occupation for generations but also actively gave donations for academic degrees. These clans acted as exam experts and could produce over 20 percent of the overall licentiates in one local county (Zhang 2003: 52).

In most cases, the academic goal of these “civil exam clans” was to pass the provincial or higher-level exams. To do this, nearly all male family members were involved in some sort of exam-related career, generation after generation. Once a certain family member earned a *juren* title, a virtuous circle could form, such that other family members and descendants could enjoy greater academic resources and connections. Even those who passed the youth exams and became licentiates would be considered as having achieved a certain degree of academic success; these licentiates could then elevate their clan’s social status and take the lead in local affairs (Zhang 2003). For instance, *Unofficial History of the Scholars* (Rulin waishi 儒林外史), a well-known satirical novel of the Qing, depicted an extreme scenario of a great “civil exam clan” where one character “has 60–70 brothers in his family. Only two came out to take care of guests and visitors, and all others were locked in their rooms preparing for the incoming provincial examinations.”²¹ Kurahashi’s (2011) statistical analyses delivered similar views on the monopoly of academic degrees by civil exam clans in local areas. Her statistical analysis covered the civil exam clans in Changzhou 常州, and her quantitative findings suggested the difficulty of exam success for commoners whose families during the two preceding generations did not include a single licentiate degree holder. Unlike those who undertook self-study or received primary education in local private academies or with private tutors, the solid family learning, together with the sharing of “cultural capital” and “social capital,” were the key factors that could contribute to the academic success of descendants in civil exam clans (20).

In this regard, the exam system helped disseminate exam fever at the grass-roots level and created a near-professional exam population that engaged in exams with full enthusiasm but barely moved up the examinations ladder during the course of their lives. Many Qing literati became “exam machines” who wasted a variety of socioeconomic resources on the civil exams. This study advances an analytical perspective, viewing the increasing popularization of the civil exams as having made it possible to endow the exploding surplus population with new occupations, so that they did not fall into vagrancy in local areas and pose local security problems. In other words, the exams provided a self-employment mechanism for part of the surplus population, who could thereby remain rooted in their homelands and not fall into economic hardship.

Thus, in the sociopolitical landscape, the popularization of the civil examination also appears to have helped alleviate various social crises. Throughout the Qing dynasty, there were no major rebellions led by the scholars. Even in the case of the Taiping Rebellion—the largest uprising in Chinese history—rebellion held little attraction for scholars or intellectuals. Recent literature has also pointed to a series of unexpected and irreversible consequences of the abolition of the civil examinations in 1905. Bai and Jia (2016) presented quantitative evidence that the regions with better examination performance and higher exam quotas were more likely to turn to revolution after 1905.

Popularization of Civil Exams and the Educational and Cultural Boom

Expansion of Widespread Education and School Systems

Together with the surging exam population, the popularization of civil exams in the Qing led to the “unintended consequence” of fostering classically literate men who used these linguistic and writing skills for nonofficial purposes (Elman 2014: 215). Scholars have identified two categories of education during the Qing: elite education aiming at exam success and official careers and widespread education that delivered basic reading/writing skills so that educated men could be well prepared for various commercial, business, craft, and clerical jobs (Li 2004). The Qing local education system was composed of two parts: the government-funded county- and prefecture-level public schools, and private charitable schools funded by the local families or communities (*yixue* 義學).

As for elite education, the Qing government established fully bureaucratic prefectural schools (*fuxue* 府學) and county schools (*xianxue* 縣學). According to the records in the *Authorized Examination Principles of the Qing Dynasty*, the Qing established a total of 1,805 government-funded schools, a substantial increase over the 1,471 schools during the Ming dynasty (table 2).

More important, the popularization of civil exams created a large pool of surplus literati and an increasing market for widespread education. Together with the booming population and rising exam fever in local areas, government-funded schools could no longer accommodate the market demand for basic education of the local population. Thus, the needs of common families and the increasing

Table 2. Number of Government-Funded Schools in the Qing (Guangxu Period)

Provinces	No.	Provinces	No.
Fengtian (奉天)	37	Shaanxi (陝西)	96
Zhili (直隸)	166	Hubei (湖北)	79
Jiangsu (江蘇)	77	Hunan (湖南)	85
Anhui (安徽)	70	Gansu (甘肅)	78
Zhejiang (浙江)	89	Sichuan (四川)	155
Jiangxi (江西)	92	Guangdong (廣東)	101
Fujian (福建)	68	Guangxi (廣西)	79
Henan (河南)	118	Yunnan (雲南)	101
Shandong (山東)	119	Guizhou (貴州)	69
Taiwan (台灣)	13	Shanxi (山西)	113
Total Count: 1,805			

Source: “Libu-xuexiao-yongguang-xueetongli” 禮部·學校·學額 [Ministry of Rites-school-quotas], in *Guangxu Qinding daqing huidian shili*, vols. 370–81. Estimated quota added for each county in each province.

interest of the local community triggered the rapid development of various formats of widespread education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including local charitable schools and private lineage schools. In particular, this solid literacy culture flourished in the lower Yangtze regions, as local families were eager to provide high-quality elementary education to their youth (Leung 1994: 400–403). Even in some remote border provinces such as Yunnan 雲南, the number of public and private schools showed linear growth in the eighteenth century, coinciding with the Qing’s abolition of the local headman system (Rowe 1994: 425–26).

In this regard, the exam fever catalyzed a thriving educational industry across the whole of society. There was an interactive circulation of educational resources, as the Qing literati could take success in the exams as their ultimate career goal while finding employment as schoolteachers and private tutors to support themselves financially. Despite the pay not being high in most instances, the availability of teaching positions was vital to the livelihoods of the exam population, as such opportunities served as backup options for those born into commoner families who had failed to attain provincial degrees.

The literacy rate constitutes a key reference for understanding the size of the exam population and the rapid growth in widespread education. Rawski (1979: 22–23) selected Guangdong Province as a case study and then extended her analysis to the national level in Qing China. She identified two levels: “functional literacy” and “full literacy.” The former entails solid learning based on the Confucian classics, and the latter indicates a master’s degree in approximately two thousand frequently used characters in daily life and business affairs. She further estimated that 30–45 percent of males and 2–10 percent of females possessed basic reading and writing skills and that the overall literacy rate was approximately 20 percent in

late imperial China. Notwithstanding criticism of Rawski's research for overestimating the Qing literacy rate (Woodside 1983), recent studies have also presented that the literacy rate in the Qing appeared to be far higher than that during the Ming period and even after the founding of the Republic of China. For instance, Xu and van Leeuwen (2013) estimated that the male literacy rate in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was 40 percent in economically developed regions (southern China and lower Yangtze areas) and 1 percent in the underdeveloped Guangxi 廣西 Province. On average, the male and overall literacy rates were 27 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

A Thriving Publishing Industry as a By-Product

The thriving publishing industry in the Qing dynasty can be seen as another “unintended” by-product of the popularized civil exams. Previous studies pointed out that the development of commercial printing in the late Ming and early Qing created a vast supply-demand relationship and redirected a large number of literati from solely enrolling in exams to working as professional writers who actively engaged in the printing business and helped readers succeed at exams (Chow 1996, 2004).

Three factors help explain the boom in the commercial publishing industry during the Qing dynasty: the development of printing technology, relatively low book prices associated with population growth and low labor costs, and the greater market demand triggered by exam fever and widespread basic education (Brokaw 2005a: 8–11). There seems to have been an interactive relationship between the popularization of civil exams and the proliferation of the publishing industry, in that the surging exam population created an abundant supply of literati labor that could find additional careers in the publishing business, while the abundance of book supplies also contributed to lowering the threshold for academic learning. Moreover, the proliferation of publishing also exacerbated exam competition, given that easier access to academic textbooks lowered the barrier to exam preparation (Chow 2004: 98–100).

A wide range of books was published in the Qing dynasty, including not only Confucian classics and popular fiction but also exam-related paratexts and guidebooks. Some bestsellers for Qing literati were exam-aid materials and models for the writing of eight-legged essays (*baguwen* 八股文). These exam-aid textbooks could help provide test-taking skills and shortcuts to exam success so that examinees could reduce their burden of reciting the full texts of Confucian classics. The Qing government prohibited private publishing and circulation of these exam-aid books until Emperor Qianlong lifted the ban in 1736.²² This open attitude also facilitated the boom in exam-related publishing and led to the popularity of exam-aid printings, as publishers always tried to accommodate market demand and supply the books that buyers wanted (Shen 2012; Brokaw 2005b: 187). For instance, Han Guojun 韓國鈞 (1857–1942), a late-Qing official and politician in the following Republic of China period, wrote in his memoir that he was “poor at the eight-legged essay and failed the youth exam at the age of eighteen. After reading the popular exam-aid textbook *Essays of the Seller* (Shouzhe zhi wen 售者之文), he finally passed the youth exam at the age of twenty-one.”²³

Conclusion

This study has examined an important transition in civil examinations during the Qing period. Abundant research has highlighted the declining social mobility embedded in the Qing civil exams owing to an increasingly competitive qualification rate. This study has extended the existing literature and presented an alternative perspective on the popularization of civil exams. It has highlighted popularization as a key aspect of the institutional transition in civil examinations that took the form of the depreciation of the licentiate degree and the creation of a tremendous exam population, along with—as two by-products—subsequent educational and cultural booms. We noted a rising pattern of “downward mobility” embedded in the pattern of popularization, as the licentiates had to shift their career expectations from acquiring higher degrees to pragmatic gains, better job opportunities, and deeper engagement in self-governance of rural affairs.

Competition in the civil exams reached its peak in the Qing period. By installing various steps in the degrees, the “corridor” for the academic journey was significantly prolonged in the Qing (He 1998: 367). In reality, the careers of the overwhelming majority of exam participants were stalled before the door of the licentiate. Nonetheless, the closing window for government posts and the waning social ladder did not chill the enthusiasm for the exam career in the Qing. The Qing rulers opened more seats for the low-level licentiate degree via both exams and donations, allowing larger exam populations to be accommodated at the grassroots level. This essay has examined the inflation of licentiates and exam fever at the grassroots level. Earlier studies, as well as a variety of local gazetteers and Qing scholars’ diaries, indicate a booming exam population that pursued the exam career and earned its livelihood through exam-related employment opportunities.

Moreover, the rise of widespread basic education and commercial printing can be seen as two accompanying effects triggered by exam fever at the grassroots level and further provide convincing side evidence of the popularization of civil exams in the Qing era. Qing literati who aimed to become licentiates could remain in their hometowns and study in private academies or with private tutors. The majority of Qing literati—who might not have been able to study in formal government-funded schools—could also enroll in basic education and maintain readiness for the exam career. Moreover, the expansion of literacy culture and the growing demand from the examinee population contributed to the rapid development of the commercial printing and publishing industry in the Qing dynasty.

Social crises in the Qing dynasty were rooted in a rapid increase in population and demographic pressures. For the Qing court, the crisis of rule deepened with the need to create jobs and feed the surplus population. The civil examinations, which could attract a huge exam population, served as a critical “social valve.” This essay finds that the role of the civil exams transitioned to one that functioned as an entry point to a new public profession in the Qing period. Despite its broken ties to social mobility, it contributed to social crisis relief by digesting the surplus population that was absorbed in exams and occupied new professions. In this regard, it is imperative to reexamine the various unintended social

consequences associated with the popularization of the civil examination in Qing and give more weight to its social functions.

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NOTES

1 Gu Yanwu, “Shengyuan lun.”

2 “Libu-xuexiao-yongguang xueetongli” 禮部學校永廣學額通例 [Ministry of Rites, school, rules for permanent quota increase], in *Guangxu Qinding daqing huidian shili*, vol. 370.

3 These varying subcategorized titles included tribute-degree (*gongsheng* 貢生), who were selected and recommended by local schools to study at the imperial college (*guozijian* 國子監); stipend-degree (*linsheng* 廩生), who received government-paid salaries and subsidies; and additional-degree (*zengsheng* 增生) or appended-degree (*fusheng* 附生), extra quota degree holders who did not receive government salaries.

4 Zhang Fei, “Zhangwenyi gong zougao.”

5 Chen Li, “Kechang yi.”

6 Lin Zexu, “Qingding xiangshi jiaoyue zhangcheng bing fang jiaoxi zhubi shu.”

7 Guan Tong, “Shuo shi.”

- 8 Gu Yanwu, “Shengyuan lun.”
- 9 Guan Tong, “Shuo shi.”
- 10 Wu Ting, “Yinshilun lunshi.”
- 11 “Tongshi shili 童試事例” [Cases of youth exams], in *Qinding xuezheng quanshu*, 22: 371.
- 12 Jiachen (甲辰), in *Qinggaozong shilu*, vol. 230, Qianlong 9 (1744).
- 13 Dingsi (丁巳), in *Qinggaozong shilu*, vol. 230, Qianlong 9 (1744).
- 14 “Fengsu.”
- 15 Xue Fucheng, *Yongan Biji*.
- 16 “Xuexiaozi 學校誌 [Schools],” in *Xuxiu tongcheng Xianzhi*, 3: 9–10.
- 17 Huang Tifang, “Qing shangzhuo jia haimen fuxue gee pian.”
- 18 “Jiwen · mijia 舊聞·米價” [Old stories; Rice prices], in Qian Yong, *Lüyuan Conghua*.
- 19 “Shengjipian 生計篇” [Livelihoods], in Hong Liangji, *Juanshige wenji*, vol. 1.
- 20 Chen Li, “Wupin qingxian xingbu zhushi xiangzhou zhengjun zhuan”; Shen Weiqiao, “Minzhong xiaoshilu xu.”
- 21 Wu Jingzi, *Rulin waishi*, 228.
- 22 “Libu-Gongju 禮部·貢舉” [Ministry of Rites-exams], in *Guangxu Qinding daqing huidian shili*, vol. 332.
- 23 Han Guojun, “Zhisou nianpu.”

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