"Who wants to be a bureaucrat?" : the performative dimensions of civil examinations in late imperial China

Autor(en): **Magone, Rui**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **58 (2004)**

Heft 3: **Performing cultures in East Asia : China, Korea, Japan**

PDF erstellt am: **26.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147641

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.
Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.
Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Ein Dienst der *ETH-Bibliothek*
ETH Zürich, Rämistrasse 101, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz, www.library.ethz.ch

http://www.e-periodica.ch

"WHO WANTS TO BE A BUREAUCRAT?" THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF CIVIL EXAMINATIONS IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

Rui Magone, Freie Universität Berlin*

Abstract

This article consists of two parts. The first part gives a description of the traditional Chinese civil examination system, specifically the location where exams actually took place. Concurrently, the description tries to approach the examination situation from the viewpoint of "performance" and "performativity." The second part raises the question as to the extent to which "theories of the performative" can and should be applied to the civil examination system as an object of academic research. While serving as an efficient counterbalance to previous historiographic paradigms of civil examinations in late imperial China, specifically those focused on the so-called "modernization narrative," "theories of the performative" tend by default to oscillate between drama theory ("theatrum mundi") and linguistic pragmatics ("pattern/performance"). As far as the "theatrum mundi" is concerned, it is an occidental concept that is at the same time very closely related to the mimetic dimension of Western drama art. As such, it doesn't quite fit into the Chinese context, although the concept itself can help historians grasp and understand the traditional examination situation in more holistic terms. The "pattern/performance" opposition, on the other hand, is very useful since it allows the researcher to shift attention from long-term narratives to single events. The article ends on a polemical note by asking the question to what degree theory can be applied to areas of research where philological groundwork should be the actual priority, at least for the time being.

* I would like to thank Prof. Stanca Scholz-Cionca for including me among the participants at the symposium "Performing Cultures in the Far East: China, Korea, Japan. Trier, June 19–21, 2003." I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Robert Borgen whose many comments and suggestions helped me improve the style and content of this paper. The present article is the written version of my oral contribution at that symposium. My main focus while composing this paper was to understand to what extent the "theories of the performative" were of any relevance to my current topic of research. My approach generated a rather polemical performance and discussion at the Trier symposium. While revising my paper for publication, I realized that the original text was rough, preliminary, sketchy, clumsy and above all contradictory. Since all these attributes belong to that unfathomable "performative" my paper and the symposium participants were trying to grasp as if it were a Snark, I decided to leave the main text as untouched as possible. Take it as my little personal homage to the "performative," or rather my performative way of coping with submission deadlines for papers dealing with the performative.

Examination and Performance

Essentially, late imperial China was held together by its bureaucracy. The high amount of political, social and financial capital attached to official positions turned the bureaucratic career into the most important professional path available in late imperial China. The civil service examinations (*keju*) served as the main device to recruit the human resources needed to fill up the ranks of the bureaucracy. With some minor exceptions, these examinations were widely accessible to the entire male population throughout the empire. The system – which was introduced during the Tang (618–907), amplified in the Song (960–1279) and brought to perfection in the late imperial period, i.e., from the 1370s to 1905 – allowed successful candidates to move from the periphery to the center of the Chinese sphere.[1]

The spatial approach to the center was monitored by several examinations. Candidates had first to qualify at the local level. After obtaining the first degree (*shengyuan*), examinees could move on to their provinces' capital where they would take part in the provincial examination. Successful candidates at this stage were awarded the second examination degree (*juren*) and could proceed to the capital where they sat for the metropolitan and one month later the palace examination, which was the final qualifying round within the system. Successful candidates at this tier were awarded the top degree (*jinshi*).[2]

Figures dating from the 19th century allow us to better visualize the actual scope of the system within the empire as well as its high degree of competitiveness. According to these figures, about two million candidates participated in the local level examination. Out of these, only 30,000 were awarded the *shengyuan* degree. From these 30,000, just 1,500 successfully obtained the *juren* degree at the provincial level. Finally, of the 1,500 provincial degree holders, only about 300 candidates made it to the very top of the

1 Benjamin A. Elman. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) is the first attempt in a western language to trace the long history of the examination system, even though Elman's focus, due to his training, is clearly the Ming-Qing period.

2 The best description of the myriads of examinations that candidates had to take in late imperial China (and one of the best books on the civil service examination system for that matter) is Etienne Zi. *Pratique des Examens Littéraires en Chine* (The Chinese literary examinations in practice) (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1894).

examination ladder.[3] To these statistics we should add the information that failed candidates were allowed to sit for the examination as often as they wished, or rather as they could afford. This means, for example, that each metropolitan examination accommodated not only candidates who had just obtained their *juren* degree but also all those, or at least a great percentage of those, who had already participated and failed in previous metropolitan examinations. In fact, this seems to have been the rule rather than the exception. Most candidates would obtain an intermediate degree at the age of 20, for instance, and participate at the next level for at least a decade before meeting with success. Han Dingsheng, a candidate from the seventeenth century whose examination papers I had the chance to take a closer look at, became *shengyuan* at the age of 15 or 16. At the age of 21, he was awarded the *juren* degree. Yet it was only two decades later, at the age of 43, that Han was able to meet with final success and became a *jinshi*. One reason for these long time spans in the allocation of success was also related to the fact that examinations took place only every three years. In other words, competing at three consecutive metropolitan exams was tantamount to almost 10 years of a candidate's lifetime. As it happens, Han Dingsheng participated in the metropolitan examinations of 1664, 1667, 1670, 1673, 1676, 1679, 1682, and 1685. It was only after 8 tries that he became a metropolitan finalist.[4]

Perhaps not surprisingly, one can describe the Ming-Qing civil service examination system in performative terms. The system's main stage was located in the western part of Beijing and carried the name "Shuntian tribute halls" (*Shuntian gongyuan*), "Shuntian" being the late imperial name for Beijing and its surrounding area.[5] These halls were part of the civil service examination

3 See Frederic Wakeman. *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York: Free Press, 1975), pp. 21–23.

4 *Kangxi ershi si nian yichou ke huishi yibai wushi ming jinshi sandai lüli bianlan* (Three-generational curricula vitae of the 150 metropolitan finalists of 1685 for ready reference) (ca. 1685 edition), p. 11a.

5 The halls were razed in 1913, the first intention being to erect parliament buildings on the site. This was never carried out. Rather, the site was used as rubbish dump. See L.C. Arlington and William Lewisohn. *In Search of Old Peking* (Peking: Henri Veitch, 1935), p. 155. Even though the examination halls disappeared from the earth's surface almost a century ago, it is still possible to locate their precise site in present-day Beijing, since it corresponds, also surface-wise, to the precincts of the modern Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which is situated at walking distance from Jianguomen subway station. It should be noted that despite its importance the Shuntian examination compound was inferior in size to the Jiangnan examination halls, which were located in Nanjing. Parts of this exam site

system, which had a total of at first fifteen and later on seventeen major examination compounds distributed throughout the empire.[6] By default, these examination compounds were located in provincial capitals. Unlike the other compounds, which hosted only provincial examinations, the Beijing grounds accommodated both provincial and metropolitan candidates. In fact, this was the only site in the vast empire of Ming-Qing times where the provincial and metropolitan tiers of the examination system coalesced spatially.[7] Accordingly, the Shuntian examination compound was the most prominent and best monitored "stage" within the highly performative examination system.[8]

The Shuntian examination halls were built in the Ming dynasty. Starting from the seventeenth century, the area surrounding the examination halls became a quiet residential neighborhood, populated for most part by Manchu officials and other dignitaries.[9] Every three years, however, the examination system

---

have been preserved, serving as the main attraction to a small-scale theme park dedicated to the cultural history of the imperial civil service examinations.

6 Besides Shuntian there were compounds in (province/city): Jiangnan/Jiangning; Jiangxi/ Nanchang; Zhejiang/Hangzhou; Fujian/Fuzhou; Huguang/Wuchang; Henan/Kaifeng; Shandong/Ji'nan; Shanxi/Taiyuan; Shaanxi/Xi'an; Sichuan/Chengdu; Guangdong/Guangzhou; Guangxi/Guilin; Yunnan/Yunnan; Guizhou/Guiyang. To this list two new compounds were added in the eighteenth (Hunan/Changsha) and nineteenth (Gansu/Lanzhou) centuries. See *Gongju kaolüe* (Summary of Qing civil examinations). Compiled by Huang Chonglan (Jingyi: Shuanggui zhai 1844), j. 1: pp. 22b–23b.

7 Beijing was both an imperial and a provincial capital. Shuntian prefecture was part of Zhili Province. Accordingly, Zhili candidates gathered in the capital to participate in the provincial competition, which took place in the same examination halls as the metropolitan exam. For the amalgamation process that the Shuntian provincial and the metropolitan examination went through starting from the late eighteenth century, making them almost indistinguishable from each other, see Rui Magone. "Once Every Three Years: People and Papers at the Metropolitan Examination of 1685" (Ph.D. thesis, Ostasiatisches Seminar der Freien Universität Berlin, 2001), pp. 88–90.

8 The prominence of the Shuntian examination halls in our sources is also related to the fact that in comparison with examination grounds at the provincial level, the metropolitan compound was monitored by a relatively high number of censors and overseers. The censor and overseers' main function consisted, on the one hand, of uncovering frauds and misdemeanours and, on the other, of reporting logistical irregularities and suggesting improvements. Not surprisingly, a considerable amount of the extant red tape focuses on the examination situation in the capital. See ibd., pp. 127–28.

9 In Ming-Qing times, Beijing was a city encircled by walls that together formed a distinct outline resembling two rectangles superimposed over each other. The top, or northern, rectangle was smaller and tended actually more towards the shape of a square. The rectangle at the bottom, i.e., more to the south, was wider than its top counterpart so that it appeared

brought to this area a burst of new life. The epicenter of this regular yet short-lived activity was the Shuntian examination compound. Arguably, this building complex might be compared to a theatrical stage. Like a stage, the halls' only *raison-d'être* was the performance itself. When no performance was scheduled, the halls were dormant buildings exposed to the elements, so much so that it usually would take some weeks, occasionally even months, to clean them up and do repairs before they could be used for the examination performance. In other words, despite their vast dimensions and central location within the capital, the halls were completely ignored and void of people in times of non-performance. In fact, the buildings tended to be so neglected that they became a perfect hiding spot for fugitives and other clandestine populations.[10] Every three years, however, the lights went on, at least in a metaphorical, pre-Edison sense.[11]

When the "show" was on, the space in and around the halls became extremely noisy and crowded. For example, we know that in the 19th century there were approximately 14,000 candidates sitting for the Shuntian provincial exam. The personnel involved, from officials to menials, comprised a total of about 2,000 to 3,000 people. Add to these the lineage members, servants, and friends coming along with the candidates, as well as the many spectators, who out of curiosity made their way to the halls, and the different vendors, who catered food, examination aids and other paraphernalia to the examinees. In

---

to be serving as foundation for the smaller rectangle. The top rectangle was commonly referred to as "Inner City" (*neicheng*) whereas the bottom rectangle carried the name "Outer City" (*waicheng*). Both "cities" were separated from each other through a thick straight wall, running from east to west. Communication between the top and bottom rectangles was only possible through three gates dispersed along this wall. When the Manchus took over Beijing in the 1640s, they made the Inner City their residential area. As a consequence, the Chinese population was both banned from the Inner City and confined to the Outer City. It was in fact only during the exams that the spatial-*cum*-ethnic barriers between these two cities were somehow loosened. For a map of Beijing in the late Qing (including the location of the examination halls), see Susan Naquin. *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), p. 356.

10 See Magone, "Once every three years," pp. 79–81.

11 It seems important to point out that the examination performance was for most part a daylight "show." Candidates loathed the night in the examination compound since they had to write their essays by the weak light of one or two candles. From the monitoring personnel's perspective, on the other hand, the darkness of night was the best cover for fraudulent activities. See for instance the documents in *Qinding kechang tiaoli* (KCTL) (Imperially prescribed Guidelines for the civil examination grounds) (1887 edition), j. 29: "Guanfang: Changgui (Quarantining: Compound regulations)," pp. 6b–7a; and j. 37: "Wailian suoguan: Shoujuan suo (Outer Curtain officials: Collecting Office)," p. 5b.

other words, almost literally overnight, the usually dormant compound area became crammed with from 50,000 to 100,000 people.[12] The show simultaneously mesmerized and paralyzed the capital as if it were a monumental drama, or rather a major sporting competition.

What was the examination performance about? In three sessions, each lasting about 36 hours, candidates had to write essays on different topics. The main source of these topics was the Confucian canon (*shisan jing*), specifically the *Four Books* (*Sishu*). Each topic was a passage taken directly from these books, and candidates were expected to elucidate the given passage, taking into account the work done by the most prominent exegetes. The performance, however, was not a simple feat of memory. Rather, candidates had to write their essays in a specific rhetorical grid, namely the infamous eight-legged style (*baguwen*), which, to put it in very simple terms, was centered on the composition of sophisticated parallelisms. This meant that examinees had to know the canon and its main commentaries by heart and at the same time show sophisticated skills in the arts of rhetoric and argumentation.[13]

The composition of eight-legged and other essays was not the only performance that took place during the exams. In fact, the essays, after being turned in, were made anonymous and then recopied, one by one, by thousands of scribes. The copies were then forwarded to the examiners, who were at all times denied access to the original essays. The logic behind this procedure – which seriously retarded the examination logistics and could lead to severe conflicts with the candidates if the scribes happened to be careless – was to prevent examiners from falling prey to bad essays written in excellent calligraphy. Additionally, erasing all traces of the candidates' original calligraphy helped ensure anonymity, since "the way of the brush" could give away to the examiners the identity of individual examinees.[14]

12 For this statistics – which are only approximate since no substantial research has been done yet on the demographics of examination personnel and para-examinational populations – see Zi. *Pratique des examens littéraires*, pp. 134–135.

13 Perhaps the best article on the eight-legged essay and the canonical requirements of the examination curriculum is Pierre-Henri Durand. "L'homme bon et la montagne. Petite contribution en trois temps à l'étude de la prose moderne" (The good man and the mountain. Small three-part contribution to the study of modern prose). *Etudes chinoises* XVIII.1–2 (printemps-automne 1999), pp. 223–288.

14 On the logistics of blinding and recopying the original examination essays see Magone. "Once every three years," Chapter 4.

To some extent, the examination situation had indeed a dramatic structure. Everybody involved in this drama had to perform under time pressure, also because the different sub-performances (composing, copying, evaluating etc.) were all dependent on each other for the main performance to unfold successfully. At the same time, the different actors were under the constant surveillance of censors and military personnel, whose main function was to guarantee absolute fairness during the examination. As it happens, the main performance was constantly threatened by counter-performances of cheating, bribing, impersonating, and mass rioting.[15]

In fact, sitting for the exams was like being confined in a prison. Each candidate was assigned a tiny cell where he would write his essays. In addition, examinees were not allowed to interact with other candidates. To enforce this regulation, the cell lanes were patrolled by soldiers, whose main task was to detect any fraudulent activities that might be going on within the cells. Also, to keep counter-performances from tainting the main "show," the halls were sealed before each examination round. Nobody was allowed to enter or exit the compound. After each round, the seal was removed again.[16]

Rather than being entirely self-contained, the examinations were performed before an audience. Outside, before the gates, there was always a huge crowd of people watching and scrutinizing the examination grounds, even during the time when the compound was completely sealed. During each round the crowd was denied any view of the performance, and it was perhaps mainly out of boredom that at times these spectators' behavior tended to become quite erratic and

15 For examples of irregularities during the provincial and metropolitan examinations, see Elman, *Cultural History*, pp. 195–205. The two last chapters of Shang Yanliu *Qingdai keju zhidu shulu* (Summary of civil examinations during the Qing period) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1958) contain the best overview of unusual and scandalous events that occurred in the history of the civil examinations in late imperial China.

16 The most readable book on the "penitentiary" dimension of the examination situation is Miyazaki Ichisada. *China's Examination Hell*. Translated by Conrad Shirokauer (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1976). For photographs of the examination cells and lanes, see W.A.P. Martin. *The Lore of Cathay: or, The Intellect of China* (New York and Chicago: H. Revell, 1901). During the metropolitan examination of 1463, fire broke out in the Shuntian examination halls. Fearful of imperial repercussions, the President of that examination refused to break the seal, urging his staff to fight the flames in order for the examination to be continued. The fire, however, got completely out of control, and ninety examinees perished in the flames. See *Huang Ming gongjukao* (Survey of Ming civil examinations). Compiled by Zhang Chaorui. *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1996), Vol. *shi* – 269, p. 595.

aggressive. At the metropolitan examination of 1880, for example, the following incident happened:

> When, at this year's metropolitan exam, the hall gates opened after the first round, there were among those waiting outside the enclosure [before the gates] some who dared to tear down the wooden fence [surrounding the enceinte]. After picking up stones, they stepped on the enceinte's wall and started throwing these stones towards the brick walls [inside the enceinte]. The soldiers standing there had to dodge or go under cover. The situation was so tumultuous that it became uncontrollable. The following day, 600 additional soldiers were mobilized from different yamen of the metropolitan gendarmerie in order to put down the riot. In the second and third rounds, the situation was calm and quiet.[17]

The performance's main audience, however, was the emperor himself, although he observed it indirectly. Sitting in the Forbidden City, he would be informed about the exam's final outcome by special couriers shuttling between the examination halls and the imperial precincts. Moreover, if any fraudulent activities became known to him – typically by way of the telltale censors – both examination candidates and personnel, no matter how high-ranking they happened to be, ran the risk of incurring imperial wrath and heavy punishment upon themselves.[18]

To sum up, in order to fulfill its main purpose, i.e., to detect in a fair and anonymous way the most talented men in the empire, the examination system became a huge performance machine, ever growing and improving over the centuries, at least once every three years.

17 KCTL 14: "Xiang hui shi zhishi guanyuan: Huishi zhishi guanyuan" (Executive officials at metropolitan and provincial examinations: Executive officials at metropolitan exams), pp. 14b–15a.

18 The gruesome fate encountered by the 1858 Shuntian examination personnel, some of whom were decapitated, is perhaps the most famous case of imperial wrath vis-à-vis irregularities during the provincial and metropolitan examinations. See Luca Gabbiani. "Corruption and Its 'Enemies': The Political Implications of Corruption in 19th century China." Paper presented at the AAS Annual Meeting, March 27–30, 2003, New York City. The fear of imperial wrath and its implications for one's own career was the reason why examination officials tended to suppress any information about negative occurrences during the exams. This phenomenon and its impact on our extant sources makes it difficult to reconstruct how things actually were inside the examination halls. On this problem, see Rui Magone. "The Corruption That Wasn't There: Fraud Prevention and Its Limits in Qing Civil Examinations." Paper presented at the AAS Annual Meeting, March 27–30, 2003, New York City.

Examination and Theory

Drawing analogies, as I have done above, between "examination," on the one hand, and "drama" and "performance," on the other, is a useful approach. But it is not what I would necessarily call a theoretical, but rather a metaphorical, outlook.[19] In the main context of this contribution, the question is, however, whether "theories of the performative" can be more than just a rhetorical *exercise de style* when we try to apply them to the civil service examination system.

From a purely historiographic point of view, it seems to me that these theories could in fact become of substantial importance to the development of our field of studies. For the last hundred years, research on the examination system has been trapped in the so-called "modernization narrative," whose main strategy is to look at the Chinese past from the perspective of "science-and-progress." Starting in the late nineteenth century, the examination system became a negative target for both reformers and revolutionaries. According to them, the civil examinations, with their literary curriculum, prevented the advancement of specialization and training in science, freezing progress while draining the male population of its intellectual potential. The examination system became a metaphor for China's backwardness and also an incentive for radical change.[20] This negative attitude has been perpetuated by Western scholars, who were also influenced by Max Weber's seminal work on Confucianism.[21]

19 As a matter of fact, the late imperial examination situation has lent itself to various similes and comparisons, such as "prison" (Elman), "hell and purgatory" (Miyazaki), "lunatic asylum" (Chen Duxiu) etc. I assume that for staunch supporters of the "theories of the performative" these manifold analogies come down to the same since all social constellations (i.e., drama, prison, purgatory, madhouse) are under the spell of the performative.

20 The *locus classicus* for this negative attitude towards the examination system among Chinese intellectuals of the beginning of the 20th century is Hu Shi. *The Chinese Renaissance: The Haskell Lectures 1933* (New York: Paragon Book, 1963).

21 Max Weber. *Gesamtausgabe. Abteilung I: Schriften und Reden. Band 19: Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften 1915–20. Herausgegeben von Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer in Zusammenarbeit mit Petra Kolonko*. (Complete Works. Division 1: Writings and speeches. Vol. 19: Economic ethics of the world religions Confucianism and Taoism. Writings 1915–20. Edited by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer in cooperation with Petra Kolonko) (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989). Weber's main source of information on the civil service examinations was Etienne Zi (see footnote 2 above). Despite the fact that his views had a direct impact on Levenson, Bourdieu, Elman

One of the most significant proponents of this dominant view among American historians of China was Joseph Levenson. According to him, science was slighted, progress denied, and business disparaged in the Ming and early Qing; learning was amateurish and decidedly anti-vocational; and artistic style and a cultivated knowledge of the approved canon were the tools of intellectual expression and the keys to social power. This static society, epitomized by the examination system and its curriculum, would have remained intact for ages if the West had not forced modernity upon China.[22]

Even those scholars who tried to save the examination system's face were under the spell of the modernization narrative. Ping-ti Ho, the system's most committed defender, argued, back in 1962, that the meritocracy-ruled examination system in late imperial China allowed for a high degree of social mobility, both upward and downward. Ho's attempt to demonstrate social mobility, however, was heavily influenced by the work of Seymour Lipset and Reinhard Bendix on modern industrial societies. According to these two Berkeley sociologists, a high degree of social mobility was characteristic of industrial societies. Hence, at least according to Ping-ti Ho, the society of late imperial China had to be considered modern and industrial *avant la lettre*.[23]

Ping-ti Ho's model of social mobility, as well as two more recent attempts to defend the system, the "self-reproduction" and "inner reform" paradigm, both devised by the China historian Benjamin Elman, suffer from the drawback that they try to modernize the examination system posthumously.[24] Instead of

---

and other scholars, no substantial research has been done yet on Weber's understanding of the Chinese examination system.

22 Joseph R. Levenson. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate. A Trilogy* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 42–43 and passim.

23 Ping-ti Ho. *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China. Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911* (New York: Science Editions, 1964 [1962]). For Lipset and Bendix' work on social fluidity and stratification in modern societies, see their *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959). On the argumentative fiasco of Ping-ti Ho's paradigm, see footnote 35 below.

24 Elman's self-reproduction paradigm draws its main inspiration from the work done by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron on the sociology of education. See Benjamin A. Elman. "Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 50.1 (Feb. 1991), pp. 7–28. The inner reform paradigm, on the other hand, postulates that starting from the middle of the 17th century a hard-sciences curriculum started subverting the traditional examination system. It was first formulated in Benjamin A. Elman. "Changes in Confucian Civil Service Examinations from the Ming to the Ch'ing-Dynasty." In: B.A. Elman and Alexander Woodside, eds. *Education*

looking at the system as a whole, they tend to select and emphasize those aspects and details that support a "modern" reading. I think the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges offers the best explanation of this strategy in his short essay, "Kafka and His Precursors." According to Borges, there were, well before Kafka, many writers who wrote lines, passages and even whole stories that are more Kafka-esque both in style and content than the writings of Kafka himself. But it is only because of and after Kafka that we can discover his precursors.[25] Accordingly, it is only from a modern viewpoint that we can discover – and sometimes even imagine – the partial modernity of the examination system. Obviously, it is rather unsatisfying, and perhaps even insulting, to focus exclusively on Coleridge's Kafkaesque passages and cast aside the vast bulk of his other writings.

"Theories of the performative" can help us correct – or at least balance out – this one-sided approach provided by the "modernization narrative." Before revealing how this can be achieved, we should, however, turn our attention to a most intriguing question: What exactly are "theories of the performative?" The answer to this question is not simple. Part of the problem is that these theories – perhaps as an overt display of solidarity with their main protagonists "ephemerality" and "extratemporality" – refuse to define themselves. In fact, I could only single out two constants that seem to hold together – but not necessarily define – this theoretical complex.[26] The first constant is the *theatrum mundi* concept that is different from its Baroque predecessor because God does not anymore direct the drama that is the world.[27] The second constant is the opposition "Pattern/Performance," which is focused on the crucial question: how

---

and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 111–149. For a lengthy discussion of these two paradigms see Magone. "Once every three years," pp. 5–31.

25 "Kafka y sus Precursores" (1951) is included in Jorge Luis Borges. *Prosa Completa. Volumen 2* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1979), pp. 226–228.

26 I came to this result after a relatively close reading of the following three volumes: Erika Fischer-Lichte/Doris Kolisch, eds. *Kulturen des Performativen* (Cultures of the Performative). *Paragrana* 7 (1998), 1; Erika Fischer-Lichte/Christoph Wulf, eds. *Theorien des Performativen* (Theories of the Performative). *Paragrana* 10 (2001), 1; Erika Fischer-Lichter et alii, eds. *Performativität und Ereignis* (Performativity and Event) (Tübingen & Basel: A. Francke, 2003). I am well aware of the fact, however, that due to my theoretical myopia I might have overlooked, or even distorted, what is crucial and important about the "theories of the performative."

27 Erika Fischer-Lichte. "Auf dem Wege zu einer performativen Kultur" (On to the way to a performative culture). In: Erika Fischer-Lichte/Doris Kolisch, eds. *Kulturen des Performativen* (Cultures of the Performative). *Paragrana* 7 (1998), 1, p. 25.

do performative repetitions of the pattern affect and change the pattern?[28] These two constants – which are derived respectively from drama theory and linguistic pragmatics – seem to reveal the rather eclectic and hybrid character of "theories of the performative." Lack of a better definition, let us apply these two constants to our field of studies.

Basically, the *theatrum mundi* concept – even without divine plan – is an occidental concept closely related to the mimetic dimension of Western drama art. Mimesis facilitates the confusion of stage and reality, and anyone exposed to this theatrical tradition is very much prone, at least occasionally, to have the eerie feeling that life is like a drama.[29] By contrast and despite my performance analogies in the first part of this article, I am not quite sure that examinees, examiners and other people involved in the system had a sense of *theatrum mundi* because this concept was simply not part of the Chinese tradition. By default, classical Chinese drama did not profess any mimetic ambitions.[30] Therefore, the confusion between stage and reality never became as obvious as in the Western context. In addition, it seems that the secularized *theatrum mundi* concept is a reflection of the excessively media-obsessed environment that surrounds "theories of the performative" and all of us. In this environment, substance has become meaningless, performance is what counts.[31] Arguably, it might be wise not to carry this concept into late imperial China unless we want to end up trying to find more of Kafka's precursors.

Despite this obvious anachronism, the concept of theatricality can nevertheless be helpful vis-à-vis the opaqueness of most of our extant sources. Partly, this opaqueness was caused by those responsible for running the examination system. Their historiographic goal was to depict the civil examinations as *système immobile* in which time became frozen. Instead of evolving and progressing, the system followed the model established in ancient times.[32] In fact, in

28 Ulrike Bohle/Ekkehard König. "Zum Begriff des Performativen in der Sprachwissenschaft" (On the concept of the performative in linguistics). In: Erika Fischer-Lichte/Christoph Wulf, eds. *Theorien des Performativen* (Theories of the Performative). *Paragrana* 10 (2001), 1, pp. 7–32.

29 Ernst Robert Curtius. *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (European literature and Latin Middle Ages) (Tübingen & Basel: Francke, 1993 [1948]), pp. 148–154.

30 The best overview article on the poetics and forms of traditional Chinese drama is Stephen H. West. "Drama." In: William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed. *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 13–30.

31 Fischer-Lichte. "Auf dem Wege zu einer performativen Kultur," p. 29.

32 The model the historiographers kept referring to is the one mentioned in the *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou). However, since the *Zhouli* does not yield much information about an examination

this historiographic "back-to-the-past" narrative, each examination was best performed and achieved if and only if it became an exact replica of any previous exam.[33] In this context, the concept of *theatrum mundi* can help the researcher read his sources *contre la lettre*, if I am allowed the neologism, i.e., beyond the contemporaries' horizon of perception. Instead of focusing on or even falling prey to the immutability of these texts and documents, historians should always keep in mind that each examination was unique as a performance: it needed long logistical preparation, it produced anxiety, nervousness, adrenaline, etc, and – despite all the precautions – it could simply go awry.

The second constant, the "pattern/performance" opposition, is a very useful concept that can be applied directly to our field of research. As it happens, until recently we have looked at 500 years of civil examinations mainly from a bird's perspective, i.e., we did not bother to look at the single triennial performances and to ask ourselves what impact these performances had on the many changes that the examination system underwent in the course of half a millenium. Curiously, even though the "pattern/performance" opposition allows us to shift our attention from master narratives to minor events, it does not provide us with a new methodology, at least not as far as the historical research of the examination system is concerned. Rather, some historians of the system – including myself – might feel a certain degree of gratitude towards this opposition for the simple reason that it provides them with a theoretical *carte blanche* for pursuing

system in pre-imperial times, the historiographers constructed a hybrid model consisting of a tapestry of ancient passages dealing with learning and exams. For these passages and other *loci classici* often referred to in the examination discourse of late imperial China, see *Zhongguo kaoshi zhidu shi ziliao xuanbian* (Selected materials relevant to the history of the Chinese examination system). Edited by Yang Xuewei et alii (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1992).

33 Our main sources on single examinations, i.e. the reports (*timing lu*) and records (*shilu*), are completely under the spell of this "back-to-the-past" historiography. Mainly, these document genres contain five different types of texts: (1) prefaces and afterwords where the examiners first show their gratitude to the emperor, then discharge a panegyric on how smoothly things went in the examination they were in charge of and finally emphasize how much this examination followed the model of the ancients; (2) a roster of all officials involved in the examination; (3) a complete list of the examination topics; (4) a ranking list of all successful candidates with minimal data on their biographical history; and (5) an anthology of the best essays from the examination (one for each given topic). As for problems within the examination situation – such as imbalance in the ration of examination cells versus actual number of examinees, harsh climate, fraudulent activities –, these are never mentioned.

their old methods, which consisted of doing basic philological work, making better and more detailed surveys of our sources and establishing careful connections between different layers of evidence, both on diachronic and synchronic axes.[34]

From the above it becomes clear why "theories of the performative" can be used as an efficient contrast to the approach provided by the "modernization narrative." In the context of the "performative," the researcher can at last focus on the details and proceedings surrounding the logistics, performance, and curricular requirements of civil examinations. There is no pressure to revamp or re-assess the examination system according to modern criteria of rationality and efficiency. Rather, the goal is to unravel, map out and display the complex human dimension hidden between the lines and behind the texts.

Perhaps superfluously, it should be pointed out at the end of this article that the function of theories is not to be perfect and valid for all facts. Rather, the coexistence of different paradigms, especially contradicting ones, enables us to pay attention to different aspects of a complex research object such as the examination system in late imperial China. If not necessarily their main function, specific paradigms can also serve as device to classify information from primary sources. The trouble begins, however, when the urge to apply and prove a theoretical framework becomes the supreme research motivation for historians. Due to this bias in modern academia, research of the civil examinations in late imperial China has been already exposed to some grotesque travesties.[35]

34 There is one area, however, where the linguistic methodology behind the "pattern/performance" opposition could be applied efficiently, namely the evolution of the examination genres, specifically the eight-legged style. In order to succeed, candidates had both to follow the pattern set by previous successful essays and to innovate. In other words, each essay was a performance defying and thus changing the stylistic conventions. The problem is, however, that we still know very little about the aesthetical context ("pattern") necessary to understand the composition and evaluation of eight-legged essays ("performance").

35 Arguably, the most grotesque of all travesties was Ping-ti Ho's social mobility model. According to Ho himself, the ladder-of-success framework is only valid for the first 150 years of late imperial China, i.e., for the early Ming period. From a recondite footnote it becomes apparent that even this phase of social mobility was not related at all to the efficiency of the examination system: "Our data on the social composition of early Ming *chin-shih* [*jinshi*] tell only a partial story. In fact, it is probable that a great amount of mobility was brought about through channels other than the examination system. From the very beginning the Ming founder repeatedly issued orders that men of merit be recommended by central and provincial officials for government service, with almost no

Hopefully, "theories of the performative" will not generate more of this mimicry.

The Polish science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem wrote a story about a scientist who finds his way into a city that is ruled and inhabited by robots. In order not to draw attention to himself, the scientist buys a robot suit and wears it at all times while in "Robot city." At the end of the day, almost suffocating in his metal suit, he walks out of town, into the woods, and takes off his heavy outfit. Looking around him he sees another person who is doing the same. It is from this person that he learns everybody in "Robot city" is actually a human being wearing a robot suit.[36]

To some extent, it seems to me at least, scholars in the humanities have become like these human robots. They wear robot suits, namely theories, and move around history in this heavy armor, even when they are moving in areas of research – such as the examination system in late imperial China – where it might be wiser to wear as little as possible in order to be able to travel long distances and do extensive pedestrian basic work. To be quite frank, even though I might not quite know how to wear it elegantly, I do not mind putting on the robot suit model "Theories of the Performative." Compared to other models, it has light fabric and a rather high degree of mobility. What is more, it is superior in quality to the robot suit model "Modernization Narrative." But when the night grows late, I must confess, but only to myself and other academic human robots who have dared to come out of the closet too, I go into the woods myself, take off the robot suit, read my sources, see connections that might or might not lead to a new paradigm, hang out with my index cards, take it easy, and stop performing.

consideration to be given the social status of the recommended." (Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, p. 216).

36 Stanislaw Lem. *Sterntagebücher* (The Star Diaries). Translated from Polish to German by Caesar Rymarowicz. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp. 53–90.