



Household Register Fraud and Institutional Reform: The Contest between Examination Equity and Regional Equity in Qing Imperial Examinations

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Abstract

This study investigates Household Register Fraud in Imperial Examinations (HRFIE) and its institutional mechanisms within the Qing examination system, building upon Liu Xiwei's foundational research. The analysis reveals how the Quota-Allocation-by-Region system and Native-Place Testing Principle, while designed to balance educational opportunities and maintain stability, paradoxically stimulated HRFIE through regional quota disparities, population mobility, and stringent registration constraints. The research identifies three primary HRFIE modalities: Cross-Regional Fraud (exploiting inter-provincial quota variations), Status Fraud (misrepresenting privileged household classifications), and Migrant Fraud (circumventing residential requirements). These practices stemmed from structural vulnerabilities, socioeconomic incentives, and mobility demands. Despite implementing candidate verification processes, examiner recusal systems, and progressive policy modifications, the persistence of HRFIE necessitated ongoing systemic negotiations between Examination Equity (meritocratic ideals) and Regional Equity (geographical representation), culminating in adaptive measures like the Non-Native Testing Policy.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

Chinese History, Qing Dynasty, Academic

1. Institutional Background and Problem Orientation of PTIEFHR in Qing Dynasty

For a state to govern and administer effectively, capable talents are indispensable. Throughout history, political thinkers and statesmen have tirelessly explored how to select virtuous and talented individuals, proposing various theories and attempting to establish diverse systems. In traditional thinking, the core of the imperial examination system lies in selecting individuals of genuine virtue and talent, with the sole standard being the qualification in terms of talent and morality—no additional conditions should apply. This is the fundamental guarantee of fairness and justice in selection [1].

However, under this principle of “virtue and talent as the sole standard,” certain factors appear incompatible. What is being discussed here is the “Quota-Allocation-by-Region” in the imperial examinations. This policy refers to the distribution of examination quotas and admission quotas according to administrative divisions, number of examinees, and literary tradition. The provincial examination was conducted with fixed admission quotas per province; the metropolitan examination evolved from segmented examination volumes into provincial quotas. Examinees were required to take the exam in their place of origin; cross-regional participation required legal registration in another region or PTIEFHR. Under this principle, scholars from provinces with a strong examination culture found it more difficult to succeed compared to those from provinces with a weaker tradition. Although seemingly unfair, from a macro perspective, this policy aimed to encourage scholars in underdeveloped areas to pursue education, thereby increasing educational penetration and consolidating the foundation of state rule and stability. The dilemma between “examination equity” and “regional equity” [2] led many scholars to feel unjustly treated, while opportunists began probing the examination system to identify loopholes for personal gain.

From the system itself, we observe that the imperial examination system, as a continuation and development of the method of “local recommendation,” became closely tied to the household register. Quota-Allocation-by-Region and the Native-Place Testing Principle were two essential components—one cannot exist without the other. Without the latter, the former becomes meaningless, leading inevitably to unregulated cross-regional participation and undermining the objective of balanced selection across regions. According to the Native-Place Testing Principle, candidates were typically required to take exams in their registered place of residence. The migrant population had to sit for exams in the host region first to obtain legal household registration there. Given the stark regional differences in examination competition and increasingly common population mobility, coupled with strict requirements for registration transfers, some scholars neither chose to take exams in their place of origin nor sought legal registration elsewhere. Instead, they illegally forged registration to take exams in regions with higher admission rates—this is known as PTIEFHR.

The phenomenon of PTIEFHR (Phenomenon of Taking the Imperial Exami-

nations by Forging Household Register) was widely criticized by society, particularly by the literati class. For instance, on October 13, 1729 (Yongzheng 7th Year), Yin Jishan, then Governor of Jiangsu, submitted a memorial to Emperor Yongzheng, stating.

“Those who engage in PTIEFHR are shameless, and those who dare not confess their wrongdoing are audacious. Even if they possess administrative competence, they remain individuals of petty talent and deficient virtue. How can such people be worthy of discussion or sympathy? Fan Shiyi has also reported similar cases.” [3]

Under such societal pressure against PTIEFHR, reputation-conscious scholars actively avoided any association with the practice. Some even voluntarily relinquished their official status if accused of PTIEFHR. As recorded:

“When rumors of PTIEFHR arose, Gui Zhi resigned from his post and left. Hai Ke, who highly valued his integrity, invited him to stay. Yin Jishan also sent his son, Yin Can, to study under Gui. At that time, Deng Sima Gu Tun, renowned for his discernment of character, met him once and...” [4]

However, despite these criticisms, the substantial benefits associated with PTIEFHR continued to drive numerous scholars to perpetrate the act.

To address this phenomenon, the examination procedures and supervisory mechanisms during the Qing Dynasty became increasingly meticulous and standardized, building upon the systems of the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. From the elementary exam (Tongsheng exam) to the provincial and metropolitan exams, strict qualification reviews were in place. Examiner selection and recusal were also tightly regulated. In this contest where examinees constantly devised new methods for PTIEFHR and the government continually issued new policies to uphold the link between the examination system and household registration, the system itself evolved, giving rise to policies like the Non-Native Testing Policy.

The guarantee system constituted the Qing government’s core mechanism for preventing PTIEFHR, with the “Mutual Guarantee Among Juvenile Candidates” (Tongsheng Hugong) being the most widely implemented and effective measure. In the ninth year of Shunzhi (1652), it was officially established:

The admission of juvenile candidates (tong sheng) marks the initial step toward official advancement, necessitating stringent safeguards. Upon receiving directives from the Education Commissioner, local authorities shall first issue public notices for registration. Candidates must obtain a joint guarantee from twenty neighbors affirming their eligibility—free from criminal records, recent family bereavements, proxy fraud, or other disqualifications—before being permitted to sit for examinations [5].

Although a series of institutional regulations had been established, the Qing government, faced with the persistent issue of false native registrations, chose to eschew brutal punitive measures. Instead, it adopted conciliatory strategies to eradicate the practice. A notable example is the memorial submitted by Huang Tinggui, Governor-General of Gansu, on the 17th day of the 1st month in the 12th year of the Qianlong reign (January 17, 1747), which proposed. A memorial re-

sponding to the prevalence of false native registrations among clerks in various government offices of Gansu Province. It requests setting a one-year deadline allowing those involved to voluntarily report and correct their native registrations. Subsequently, local officials shall be ordered to strictly verify and prohibit fraudulent registrations [6].

2. Scholarly Context of PTIEFHR Research in the Qing Dynasty and the Breakthroughs of This Book

In this book, Liu Xiwei terms the years after the abolition of the imperial examinations in the thirty-first year of Guangxu the “post-Imperial Examination era.” Yet for a considerable span of that “post-Imperial Examination era,” research on the imperial examination system lay largely dormant [7]. During the Republican period, only a handful of scholars offered theoretical overviews—Zhang Zhongru’s Qing Dynasty Examination System, Deng Siyu’s A History of China’s Examination System, and Chen Dongyuan’s Education in China’s Imperial Examination Era, among others—but overall scholarship remained thin. From the founding of the People’s Republic through the end of the Cultural Revolution, mainland research on the examinations was even more neglected: the system was dismissed as a feudal, reactionary method of selecting officials, and its scholarly value was denigrated [8]. It was not until the 1980s that academic discussion began to revive, buoyed by efforts to “rehabilitate” the examination system [9]. In that resurgence appeared landmark studies such as Wang Dezhao’s Study of the Qing Dynasty Imperial Examination System, Xu Shuan’s Overview of Ancient Election and Examination Systems, Sheng Qixiu’s China’s Ancient Examination System, and Xie Xingji’s A Brief Account of Qing Dynasty Examinations. Entering the twenty-first century—amid the flourishing of China’s modern civil-service examinations—“kaojuxue” (the study of the imperial examinations) has increasingly become a recognized field. The 2005 publication of Liu Haifeng’s Introduction to Kaojuxue was hailed as a major milestone in its formation and development [10].

Thus, the evolution of kaojuxue—from obscurity to a marginal interest to a prominent discipline—has closely mirrored contemporary political trends and the development of examination systems.

Against this backdrop—and in light of growing concerns over “gaokao migrants” and the challenges faced by children of internal migrants taking exams outside their home provinces—the study of PTIEFHR has acquired heightened practical significance. Prior to this book’s publication, research on PTIEFHR in the Qing was still sparse. For the Tang, Jin Yingkun’s study “PTIEFHR in the Tang and Five Dynasties’ Examinations—China’s Earliest ‘Gaokao Migrants’” remains a key work; for the Song, Zhu Ruixi and Cheng Minsheng have each produced specialized studies (Zhu Ruixi’s “Tribute-Examination ‘Migration’ in the Song and Government Responses” and Cheng Minsheng’s “On the Household-Register System of the Song Imperial Examinations”). The Yuan has yet to see a dedicated monograph on PTIEFHR. In examining the geographic distribution of Ming-dyn-

asty jinshi, Wu Xuande touched on PTIEFHR but judged a systematic study impossible due to scant biographical details in the sources: “Although the records mention many instances of PTIEFHR, they rarely record the names or origins of the fraudsters, making systematic research on ‘PTIEFHR’ impossible” [11]. Even today, no comprehensive, systematic study of PTIEFHR in the Ming has appeared.

Although some work on Qing-dynasty PTIEFHR exists, it remains limited in scope and depth, and no single, complete monograph has yet appeared. Li Wenzhi’s master’s thesis research on PTIEFHR in the Ming and Qing analyzes phenomena, causes, prevention measures, and impacts, but—constrained by length—leaves much room for expansion [12]. Qin Yuanhong’s thesis *Household-Register Management and Imperial-Examination Education in Early Qing* focuses on the relationship between early-Qing registration and examinations, but centers on “common household registers” without analyzing different PTIEFHR categories in detail [13].

Thus, Liu Xiwei’s comprehensive focus on “PTIEFHR in the Qing Dynasty” not only fills a major gap in kaojuxue, but also offers reflections on how modern examination systems might better ensure fairness and stability.

3. Research Foundation: Source Materials and Methodology

This book centers on the close tie between the imperial-examination system and household registration. It draws heavily on original examination documents and on scholarship concerning the registration system—especially the implementation of the Principles of Allocating Quota by Regions and Taking “IES” with One’s Domicile Register in the Qing Dynasty’s Imperial Examination System—and makes extensive use of the annotated *Qinding Xuezheng Quanshu* compiled by Sornet and others [14] as well as memorials from Guangxu and earlier reigns. Given the complexity of “register” in PTIEFHR, the author gathered a wealth of registration materials—local gazetteers from various prefectures and counties and numerous PTIEFHR case records—and in Chapter IV analyzed the different PTIEFHR categories using statutes such as Volume 381 of the *Qinding Daqing Huidian Shili* (“Ministry of Rites: School-Register Quotas”) [15]. The book also makes substantial use of quantitative analysis: combining original sources with statistical methods to produce precise, persuasive results. For example, in studying regional disparities in the provincial examination, the author calculates—based on the *Qinding Kechang Tiaoli*—that in Shunzhi 17 (1660) Guizhou’s per-capita pass rate was seventy-eight times that of Jiangnan, ninety-one times in Kangxi 23 (1684), and sixty-seven times in Yongzheng 1 (1723). Similarly, in those three provincial examinations Guizhou’s per-capita pass rates were seventy-two, seventy-two, and forty-five times Zhejiang’s—providing a solid quantitative basis for the argument on competition disparities [16].

4. Highlights of This Book

A major innovation of this book lies in moving beyond the stereotype that

PTIEFHR was merely analogous to modern “gaokao migration”—the practice of “migrating” from a region with a thriving literary culture to one with a weaker tradition. Based on the complex link between the examination and registration systems, the author identifies three PTIEFHR types—“time-difference multi-site testing,” “impersonation of special-category registers,” and “testing by migrant populations”—thus breaking with conventional understanding. More importantly, the book demonstrates that PTIEFHR cannot be fully explained by the Principles of Allocating Quota by Regions alone, but requires an in-depth exploration of the Qing registration system.

5. “Jiji Ying Shi” (Examination by Temporary Registration): A Mediating Approach to the Principle of Fairness and Modern Insights

In the concluding chapter, Liu Xiwei offers a theoretical reflection on PTIEFHR under the imperial examination system. Broadly speaking, most Qing-dynasty PTIEFHR cases were cross-regional. If the state were to abolish regional quotas nationwide and not allocate special quotas for certain candidate groups, the PTIEFHR issue could essentially be resolved. Yet PTIEFHR clearly lacked the force to overturn the Principles of Allocating Quota by Regions and Taking “IES” with One’s Domicile Register in the Qing Dynasty’s Imperial Examination System. What truly shaped Qing examination reform was the conflict Liu Haifeng identified between “Examination Equity” and “Regional Equity”—a dual social-cultural demand for fairness. Under that conflict, “Jiji Ying Shi” emerged as a mediating force: implementing regional quotas, domicile-based testing, and temporary-registration testing together partly addressed the needs of a mobile population. These measures helped maintain regional balance in official selection while still drawing outstanding talent from within each region. In fact, “the ancient form of the imperial examination was the township-and-li recommendation system,” which itself embodied regional balancing. Thus, by allocating quotas at the regional level first, the system prioritized regional equity. As Li Hongqi sharply noted, “To the public, fair testing alone seems sufficient, as it provides equal opportunity. But for the government administering the exams, the system must also meet broader social, geographic, and—above all—moral-justice requirements.” [17] In 1948, He Yonggu observed in China’s Model of Representative Government that “the imperial examination was an ancient Chinese form of representative government,” a remarkably insightful characterization. Hence, the author concludes that absolute examination equity is an ideal; in practice, adhering to the principle of examination equity under the priority of regional equity was both a historical necessity and fundamentally reasonable [7].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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