

Family Backgrounds of Officials in the Late Qing (1830-1911) and Beiyang (1911-1924) in China

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Introduction

To assess whether the abolition of imperial exams in China in 1905 and the fall of the Qing in 1911 and its replacement by the Beiyang (北洋) government led to changes in the social origins of the officials who constituted the ruling elite in late 19th and early 20th century China, we use a newly constructed dataset based on *Tongguanlu* (同官錄) rosters of local officials that their resumes and information about their kin to compare the family backgrounds of civil officials who served in the late Qing (1830-1911) and early Beiyang (1911-1924) governments.

This analysis will consider the family backgrounds of a much wider range of officials than are being examined in other studies. In contrast with the Classmates Books (*Tongnian Chilü* 同年齒錄 and *Mingjing Tongpu* 明經通譜) that only record Metropolitan (*Jinshi* 進士), Provincial (*Juren* 舉人) and Tribute (*Gongsheng* 貢生) exam degree holders and which recently have been used in other studies of the family backgrounds of officials, *Tongguanlu* include holders of purchased *Jiansheng* (監生) and Tribute degrees (異徒貢生), as well as the lowest-level degrees *Shengyuan* (生員). Our expectation is that the holders of lower exam degrees and less reputable purchase degrees will have less prestigious family backgrounds than holders of higher-level Metropolitan, Provincial and Tribute degrees in the sense that they will have fewer ancestors or other kin who themselves held degrees.

This will contribute to two literatures. First, it will contribute to a small but growing literature on the implications of political and economic transformations for the social origins of economic, political, and social elites. For China, there have been several studies of long-term change in the composition of elites, including studies of changes after the founding of

the People's Republic in 1949 (Walder and Hu 2009), the implications of class labels on attainment in later generations (Treiman and Walder 2019), and long-term continuity in the status of local elites from the Qing to the late 20th century in northeast China (Campbell and Lee 2011). This is also an area of interest for other societies. One recent relevant example in another setting is the study by Matsumoto and Okazaki (2023) of the changes in the composition of Japanese elites after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which reported an increase in upward social mobility from non-elite families immediately after the Reform, but a subsequent decline.

Background

In the late Qing, at least before 1905, civil officials mostly came from a pool of families with a history of success on exams that accounted for only a small percentage of the population. During this period, most of the holders of examination degrees, were from families with a history of holding degrees, whether purchased or acquired through examination: two-thirds to four-fifths of men with Metropolitan (*jinshi* 進士) or provincial (*xiangshi* 鄉試) examination degrees had a father, grandfather, or great-grandfather who held some kind of degree (Ho 1962). This reflected that only a small fraction of families had the financial means to educate their sons up to the level required to have a hope of succeeding on the exams (Elman 2013).

In 1905, six years before the fall of the Qing, the situation changed dramatically, at least in principle, because the imperial examinations were abolished. Candidates with other educational qualifications could be appointed as officials. Even though that should have opened access to office to men from other backgrounds, between 1905 and the fall of the Qing in 1911, holders of degrees appointed before 1905 continued to be appointed at the same rate as before (Campbell 2020). After the fall of the Qing in 1911 and the establishment of the Beiyang government, new criteria for appointments were introduced that should have further reduced the importance of a family history of success on the examinations.

Whether the social origins of political elites who staffed the bureaucracy changed after 1905 or 1911 is less clear. There are no systematic studies of the qualifications or family backgrounds of officials appointed in the new government that was formed after 1911, or indeed during the period between 1905 and 1911. Popular literature is replete with stories of men who had been preparing for the examinations before 1905 with a classical education whose hopes of obtaining a degree and an appointment were dashed by the abolition of the examinations, but it is difficult to know what to make of such accounts. While some accounts of the collapse of the Qing in 1911 conclude that men preparing for

the exams who were upset by their abolition played an important role in uprisings that led to the collapse (Bai and Jia 2016), there is ample reason to think that between 1905 and 1911, such men still had opportunities. While there has not been a systematic study of their family backgrounds, there is little reason to think they would differ from the men appointed before 1905. As noted above, after the examination system was abolished in 1905, men who already had degrees were still appointed. For men who were studying for the exams but who had not yet obtained a degree, pathways were created that would qualify them for an appointment.

Data

For the comparison of the family origins of civil officials in the late Qing, we make use of a new dataset constructed by transcription of surviving editions of *Tongguanlu* (同官录) that were compiled in the late Qing and Beiyang periods. *Tongguanlu* were rosters of officials serving in a specific administrative unit at a particular point in time, typically a county or prefecture, that included information about their ancestors and other kin. They were sometimes compiled by local governments themselves, and in other groups, by organizations of officials. For officials serving in the year in which the *Tongguanlu* was compiled, they include the names, kin place of origin, birthdates, family background, and resumes including qualifications and previous posts. Their format and scope varied. Some covered entire provinces, while others covered prefectures and counties, and others covered officials who came from the same hometown.

The *Tongguanlu* differs in ways from other sources for which we have constructed datasets that make them unique. They record local officials who may not have been listed in the *Jinshenlu* 缙绅录 because they were appointed in an acting, temporary, or expectant capacity, or otherwise did not have a formal appointment. They recorded family background information for officials who had degrees other than the Metropolitan, Provincial and Tribute exam degree holders for whom we already have information from and which has been transcribed into the China Government Employee Dataset-Qing (CGED-Q) Examination Records (ER). Importantly, they include information about holders of purchased *Jiansheng* and *Gongsheng* degrees, and low-level examination degrees *Shengyuan*. Finally, they included information about the role of purchase or recommendation in appointments and promotion. Though it is widely imagined that the Qing bureaucracy was meritocratic, as Zhang (2022) showed, purchase and recommendation played an important role in appointment and promotion.

As of March 1, 2025, we have coded 16 editions of the *Tongguanlu*, including 5 editions of *Enci Yinsheng*, 1 of Jifu (capital), 4 of Zhejiang, 3 of Anhui, 1 of Henan, 1 of Dianqian

(Yunnan and Guizhou), and 1 of Guangdong. The earliest edition available for coding is from 1832, and the last available edition is 1924. In the database, the earliest edition is from 1832, and the latest edition is from 1911. As of March 1, 2025, the *Tongguanlu* dataset includes 8712 unique officials. For 5224 of these officials, kin were listed. A total of 37771 kin were recorded for these officials. The dataset has also recorded examination or purchased degrees for 4697 officials, for whom 32361 kin are listed. We expect that in the coming months, we will finish coding the remaining 10000 officials recorded in 42 other editions, ranging from 1875 to 1924.

Holders of the most prestigious examination degrees recorded the most kin. Table 1 presents basic information about the numbers of kin recorded for the degree holders in the *Tongguanlu*, based on the 4697 officials for whom degrees are recorded. For the most part, variation in the number of kin recorded according to type of degree is limited. On average, holders of the Metropolitan degree listed 12.4 kin. Holders of purchased *Jiansheng* and Tribute degrees recorded the fewest kin: 8.9 on average for *Jiansheng*, and 9.1 for purchased Tribute. Unexpected, holders of the lowest-level degree, *Shengyuan*, recorded almost as many kin as the holders of Provincial exam degrees.

Table 1 Summary Statistics for Kin Recorded for Degree-Holders in *Tongguanlu*

	Shengyuan	Jiansheng	Purchased Tribute	Exam Tribute	Provincial	Metropolitan
Mean	10.8	8.9	9.1	9.5	11	12.4
Std. Dev.	4.4	4.9	4.4	4.1	5	4.9
Median	11	10	10	10	11	12
Maximum	24	28	20	19	35	37
Percent Female	35.5	28.5	30.8	32	34.9	37.7
N	288	2531	514	281	602	481

Direct ancestors were the most frequently recorded kin. Table 2 presents the top 60 most common recorded relationships for the 4697 officials who had degrees recorded, and for whom kin were listed. Great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, and mothers cumulatively accounted for 49.1 percent of the recorded kin. Paternal grandmothers accounted for another 6.1 percent, paternal great-grandmothers accounted for another 6.1 percent, and wives accounted for another 6.1 percent. The remaining kin were a mixture of sons, siblings, uncles, cousins, and nephews.

Table 2 Number and Cumulative Percentage of 60 Most Commonly Recorded Kin Relationships

Relation	N	Cum. %	Relation	N	Cum. %	Relation	N	Cum. %
1 曾祖	4540	14.1	21 繼娶	154	90.3	41 繼妻	39	95.1
2 祖	4538	28.2	22 庶母	128	90.7	42 曾祖考	37	95.2

3 父	4525	42.3	23 嫡堂兄	118	91.1	43 堂姪	35	95.3
4 母	2196	49.1	24 胞伯叔	116	91.5	44 祖考	35	95.4
5 祖母	1954	55.2	25 本生曾祖	109	91.8	45 堂兄	34	95.5
6 曾祖母	1951	61.3	26 妾	108	92.1	46 孫女	34	95.6
7 妻	1920	67.3	27 娶	106	92.4	47 長女	34	95.7
8 子	1823	73.0	28 本生祖母	100	92.7	48 高祖	34	95.8
9 胞弟	1020	76.2	29 嫡堂弟	98	93	49 次女	33	95.9
10 胞兄	787	78.6	30 嫡堂兄弟	79	93.2	50 生祖母	31	96.0
11 女	748	80.9	31 嫡堂叔	78	93.4	51 元配	30	96.1
12 胞叔	577	82.7	32 嫡堂伯	73	93.6	52 堂兄弟	30	96.2
13 本生父	431	84.0	33 胞叔祖	62	93.8	53 繼祖母	30	96.3
14 胞伯	427	85.3	34 庶祖母	53	94.0	54 胞姊	29	96.4
15 本生母	349	86.4	35 胞妹	51	94.2	55 嫡堂姪	26	96.5
16 孫	315	87.4	36 嫡堂伯叔	50	94.4	56 堂弟	25	96.6
17 本生祖父	233	88.1	37 繼配	50	94.6	57 繼室	25	96.7
18 繼母	207	88.7	38 本生曾祖母	49	94.8	58 高祖妣	23	96.8
19 胞姪	181	89.3	39 妻原配	44	94.9	59 堂叔	21	96.9
20 胞兄弟	156	89.8	40 胞伯祖	42	95.0	60 本生曾祖父	21	97.0

Nearly all of the officials with degrees for whom kin were recorded had their father and patrilineal grandfather and great-grandfather listed. Table 3 presents the percentages of officials for whom the major categories of kin are listed, for those who have kin in a category listed, the mean number of those kin recorded. Shengyuan and Metropolitan degree holders were the most likely to record female kin, including wives, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. They were also the most likely to recorded other senior male kin such as uncles.

Table 3. Recording of Specific Categories of Kin for Degree-Holders

	Shengyuan			Jiansheng			Purchased Tribute		
	%	Mean	Max	%	Mean	Max	%	Mean	Max
<i>Core</i>									
Father	98.9	1	1	99.4	1	1	99.6	1	1
Grandfather	97.5	1	1	99.5	1	2	99.2	1	2
Great-grandfather	97.5	1	1	99.6	1	2	99.4	1	2
Mother	63.3	1	2	36.3	1	2	41.9	1	1
Grandmother	60.1	1	2	34.5	1	2	39.9	1	1
Great-grandmother	60.4	1	2	34.7	1	1	39.9	1	1
<i>Close</i>									
Wife	48.6	1	1	34.1	1	1	39.1	1	1
Son	43.5	1	1	29.5	1	1	37	1	1

Daughter	24.1	1	1	9.9	1	1	15.8	1	1
Grandson	6.1	1	1	4.5	1	1	5.9	1	1
Brother	43.9	1.2	2	24.8	1.2	2	30.4	1.2	2
<i>Distant</i>									
First cousin	9.4	1.2	2	7.7	1.1	2	5.7	1	1
Male, senior gen.	41	2.3	9	24.9	1.8	12	26.7	1.6	12
Female, senior gen.	0.7	1	1	0.3	1.1	2	0	0	0
Male, same gen.	1.8	1.2	2	1.2	1.1	2	0.8	1	1
Male, junior gen.	6.5	1.2	2	3.5	1.4	6	2.4	1.4	3
	Exam Tribute			Provincial			Metropolitan		
	%	Mean	Max	%	Mean	Max	%	Mean	Max
<i>Core</i>									
Father	99.2	1	1	99.3	1	1	97.9	1	1
Grandfather	98.9	1	1	99	1	2	98.3	1	2
Great-grandfather	99.2	1	1	98.8	1	2	98.1	1	2
Mother	49.4	1	2	64.1	1	2	83.5	1	2
Grandmother	41.4	1	1	52.8	1	1	66.6	1	1
Great-grandmother	41.1	1	1	52.6	1	1	66.2	1	1
<i>Close</i>									
Wife	45.2	1	1	59.7	1	1	59.8	1	1
Son	44.5	1	1	59	1	1	69.6	1	1
Daughter	23.2	1	1	23.2	1	1	34.2	1	1
Grandson	8.7	1	1	14	1	1	11.2	1	1
Brother	38.8	1.2	2	51.3	1.3	2	69.6	1.2	2
<i>Distant</i>									
First cousin	4.6	1	1	8.5	1.1	2	10.8	1.1	2
Male, senior gen.	25.9	1.8	5	36.6	2.1	21	46.9	2.4	20
Female, senior gen.	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.5	1.2	2
Male, same gen.	1.5	1	1	1.9	1.1	2	4	1.1	2
Male, junior gen.	4.9	1.1	2	6.2	1.3	4	14.8	1.4	4

Methods

For our analysis, we will compare of the family backgrounds of officials according to the era in which they served and according to the type of degree they held, emphasizing comparisons between the period before the abolition of the exams in 1905, the period between the abolition and the fall of the Qing in 1911 during which other channels for

appointment were available, and the period after 1911. We will compare percentages of officials according to the numbers of ancestors including father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who held degrees or office, as well as the numbers who had other kin such as uncles, brothers and cousins who held office. The most important question will be whether officials appointed between 1905 and 1911 and after 1911 had fundamentally different social origins from officials appointed before 1905, which would indicate a transformation that resulted from the abolition of the exams, or the fall of the Qing and the establishment of a new civil service. We will also examine correlations in the numbers of kin with degrees across generations, to look at group-level persistence in status.

Results

Holders of purchased degrees were the most likely to come from undistinguished backgrounds, and holders of the highest exam degree, the Metropolitan, were the least likely to come from an undistinguished background. Three-quarters of *Jiansheng* holders who had kin recorded did not have a father or patrilineal grandfather or great-grandfather with degrees, as did 69.5 percent of holders of purchased Tribute degrees. For examination degree holders, holders of the highest degree, the Metropolitan, were the least likely to come from undistinguished backgrounds. Whereas 60.9 percent of *Shengyuan* and 61.2 percent of holders of Exam Tribute degrees did not have any patrilineal ancestors in the last three generations who held a degree, only 38.6 percent of Metropolitan degrees had no such ancestors with degrees. Nearly one-quarter of Metropolitan degree holders had a father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who all held degrees, compared with only 8.5 percent of *Jiansheng*. While the Exam Tribute was considered more prestigious than a Provincial Degree, it also had a reputation for being more accessible to men from less distinguished backgrounds, thus the higher share of men from undistinguished backgrounds for Exam Tribute than for Provincial is not a surprise.

Table 4. Number of Direct Patrilineal Ancestors in Last Three Generations With Degrees

	Shengyuan		Jiansheng		Purchased Tribute		Exam Tribute		Provincial		Metropolitan	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0	168	60.9	1858	75.4	342	69.5	161	61.2	310	53.3	182	38.6
1	34	12.3	210	8.5	52	10.6	30	11.4	86	14.8	80	16.9
2	40	14.5	187	7.6	36	7.3	34	12.9	69	11.9	97	20.6
3	34	12.3	209	8.5	61	12.6	38	14.4	117	20.1	113	23.9

To Be Added

- Before/after 1905, 1911 comparisons of the social origins of officials, pending completion of entry of post-1911 data
- Via linkage with the China Government Employee Dataset-Qing Jinshenlu (CGED-Q JSL), assessment of how many post-1911 officials had kin who served in the Qing government
- Examination of correlations in numbers of kin with degrees among listed kin

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