

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The longer abolition of the Chinese imperial examination system (1900s–1910s)

Shiuon Chu

Academia Sinica, Taiwan

**Author for correspondence:** Shiuon Chu, E-mail: [shiuonchu@gate.sinica.edu.tw](mailto:shiuonchu@gate.sinica.edu.tw)

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## Abstract

By connecting seemingly scattered reforms and debates over the 1900s and 1910s, this paper outlines a longer process that eroded the institutional and ideological foundations of the imperial examination system (*keju*) that did not vanish immediately after the 1905 abolition. Under the title incentive program introduced in 1904, *keju* titles had been awarded to graduates of modern schools until the very end of the Qing dynasty. As the number of modern schools surged over the 1900s, the program led to an over-expansion of title holders, and ironically enhanced the scholar-official identity that was at odds with the discipline at the modern schools. To lobby for the abolition of the program, non-official reformers of education formulated a moralized critique against the *keju* titles, but no substantial reform had been undertaken before the 1911 Revolution ended the Qing dynasty. In the 1910s the same network of late Qing reformers launched an ideological war against traditional values that they saw as the ideological foundation of the *keju*. They constructed new concepts of education and vocation that spread through a powerful network connecting education, industry, and media. This “longer abolition” of the *keju* produced a prolonged effect on the visions of social order in twentieth century China.

**Key words:** 1905 abolition of *keju*; education reformers; imperial examination system (*keju*); Late Qing New Policy Reform; modern schooling; publishers; title incentive (*jiangli chushen*)

## Introduction

The 1905 abolition of the imperial examination system (*keju* 科舉) is often regarded as the watershed moment of the Chinese intellectual and political life. Throughout the late imperial period, official titles (*gongming* 功名, conventionally translated as “degree”) earned from different levels of the *keju* had been the key indicator of scholar-officials (*shidafu* 士大夫) identity. These titles, especially the higher ones of *jinshi* 進士 and *juren* 舉人, implied that the holders of titles were qualified for offices in the government. In practice, there was a significant gap between title and office holding, especially when the *keju* passer outnumbered the regular office available. In late nineteenth century, for example, the average waiting period between earning a higher title and holding actual office was around 10 years.<sup>1</sup> Yet at least in theory, these traditional titles embodied a logic of “one who excels in learning should then devote himself to official service” (*xue er you ze shi* 學而優則仕).

The 1905-as-watershed perspective, however, ignores the fact that titles of the *keju* were awarded until 1911, when the Revolution brought to the end of the Qing dynasty.<sup>2</sup> It also obscures the place

<sup>1</sup>Mao 2009, p. 554.

<sup>2</sup>A vast literature has been focused on the responses to the 1905 abolition. For example: Harrison 2005; Luo 2014. Looking into the historical contingencies in 1904 and 1905, Guan Xiaohong challenges the conventional account that has assumed the Abolition as a natural outcome of the Qing state’s attempt for modernization. Guan 2017. Yet she has paid little attention to the institutional development derived from the *keju* after 1905.

of the 1905 abolition among the late Qing reforms (*xinzheng* 新政, 1901–1911), which envisaged the transformation of the Qing empire into a constitutional monarchy based on a modern-educated elite.<sup>3</sup> Under the “title incentive” program (*jiangli chushen* 獎勵出身), which was institutionalized in 1904 to attract application to the fledgling modern schools, graduates could be granted titles equivalent to those earned from the *keju*. Along with the ad-hoc examinations proliferated after the termination of regular examinations, the title incentive program generated a huge pool of title holders who were qualified for official appointment.<sup>4</sup> Somewhat ironically, despite the 1905 abolition of regular examinations, the reforms in 1900s in fact strengthened the connection between education and officialdom, creating enormous pressure on the Qing state and advocates of modern education to tackle the desire for office in government.<sup>5</sup> From 1905 to 1911 a consensus to abolish the title incentive program gradually took shape among officials of the Qing state and the non-official education reformers, but no significant reform was undertaken until the very end of the Qing dynasty. In this sense, the *keju*, or the system of *keju* titles at least, had never been formally abolished in the imperial period of China. With a strong feeling that the *keju* had not been decisively terminated, the late Qing reformers embarked on an ideological war against the foundations of the *keju* in the first decade of the Republic of China.

By bridging the 1900s policy debate over the *keju*-title system and the construction of the modern educated individual in the 1910s, this paper retrieves a longer process that eroded the institutional and ideological foundations of the *keju*. My discussion is divided into three sections. The first discusses the political and administrative problems generated by the title incentive program, which was initially introduced to attract enrollments in modern schools by granting *keju* titles to graduates.<sup>6</sup> The second deals with the arguments against the title incentive program, which were articulated by a powerful network of non-official education reformers, instead of coming top down from the Ministry of Education. In the latter half of the 1900s these arguments gained currency, but failed to bring down the system of *keju* titles. At the 1911 Central Conference of Education held shortly before the downfall of the Qing dynasty, the proposal for the abolition of titles was watered down into a piecemeal reform. The third section explores how the late Qing anti-title arguments evolved into a new discourse about the place of the educated individual in the Republican period. Departing from the unfinished reform against the *keju* title, the same network of late Qing reformers targeted at the traditional values that they saw as the ideological foundation of the *keju*. Through the powerful network connecting education, industry, and media, a new concept of education and vocation gained currency over the 1910s, replacing the traditional identity of scholar official.<sup>7</sup> This “longer abolition” of the *keju*, as pointed out in the conclusion, produced a prolonged effect on the vision of social order and political participation in twentieth-century China.

### The rise and fall of the title incentive program (*Jiangli chushen* 獎勵出身)

Codified in the 1904 Education Charter (*Zouding xuetaang zhangcheng* 奏定學堂章程), the title incentive program was a piece in the Qing empire’s project to modernize education.<sup>8</sup> After the defeat in the

<sup>3</sup>For an overview of the education reform during the period, see Wang 1987, pp. 245–70.

<sup>4</sup>After the 1905 abolition of *keju*, the Qing Government introduced various irregular compensatory examinations (such as the *suike* 歲科 and 1908 *bagong* 拔貢). Zhang 2019, pp. 63–81.

<sup>5</sup>Liu Hengwen is among the few scholars who noticed such impact of the 1900 reforms. See Liu 2010, pp. 135–70.

<sup>6</sup>Hayakawa 2003, pp. 407–38; Zuo 2008, pp. 45–57. While providing detailed account of the introduction of the system, Zuo and Hayakawa pay little attention to the conflicts between the *keju* titles and the modernizing education system.

<sup>7</sup>What deserves particular attention of is the new genre of “education journal” published mainly by education reformers and textbook publishers. Recent research has shown how the Commercial Press’s use of its own *The Chinese Educational Review* 教育雜誌 to promote its less popular publications. Culp 2019, pp. 43, 101.

<sup>8</sup>The translation of the 1902 *Qinding xuetaang zhangcheng* and 1904 *Zouding xuetaang zhangcheng* has not been standardized, not least because of the lack of in-depth discussion over the institutional context of the documents. Here I list a few of various translations: “Regulations of Modern Schools” (Reynolds 1993, p. 140); “Memorials on Determining School Regulations” (Tillman 2012, p. 35); “Imperial Charter on School Education” (Zheng 2009, pp. 313–43); “Authorized

1895 Sino–Japanese war, education reforms were initiated by provincial governors like Zhang Zhidong (Hubei), Tao Mo (Guangdong and Guangxi), and Yuan Shikai (Shandong) along with other projects of modernization. Education reformists, especially those supported by these powerful provincial governors, established new schools (*xuetang* 學堂) that differed from traditional academies not only in curriculum, but also in their models of management and funding. Emerging from the provincial experiences, the new model of school became the foundation of a national reform launched after the devastating defeat in the 1900 Eight-Nation Expedition into Beijing – later known as a part of the New Policy Reform (*qingmo xinzheng* 清末新政). One of the major moves in the early phase of the Reform was the summoning of Zhang Zhidong to the court in 1904 to mediate the controversies over the previous 1902 Education Charter (*Qinding xuetang zhangcheng* 欽定學堂章程) and eventually produced the 1904 Education Charter, which institutionalized not only the status of modern schools, but also a title incentive program advocated by Zhang Zhidong and other reformist governors.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their different views on the pace and degree of reform, Zhang, Tao, and Yuan agreed that the modern schooling system was competing with the traditional examination system for participation of students. In the turn of the twentieth century, modern schools were not particularly appealing not only because of the adherence to traditional authority of classical knowledge, but also the lack of clear prospect after graduation. It was also worsened by the introduction of tuition in modern schools – in contrast to the conventional practice that the academy paid scholars' stipends – to cover part of the cost of its expensive infrastructures.<sup>10</sup>

To enhance enrollments in the modern school, the reformers proposed to grant its graduates official titles equivalent to those awarded by the *keju* examination. Such consensus was institutionalized in the 1903 Charter for Title Incentive for Modern Schools (*Zouding xuetang jiangli zhangcheng* 奏定學堂獎勵章程), which was later incorporated into the 1904 Education Charter (*Zouding xuetang zhangcheng* 奏定學堂獎勵章程). Zhang Zhidong saw the Charter as a step toward the gradual abolition of the *keju* – once the modern school became the mainstream toward official titles and actual offices, the quotas of titles granted by the *keju* could be reduced year by year.<sup>11</sup> Zhang eventually shift from this gradualist plan to the immediate abolition of the *keju* in 1905.<sup>12</sup>

The title incentive program met a skyrocket rise in the number of modern schools. Under the 1902 draft of Education Charter, all existing academies were to be reorganized, at least nominally, into modern schools. In 1903, 769 modern schools were registered – many of them were originally traditional academies. Spurred by the title incentive program, the number rose to 4,476 in 1904 and 8,277 in 1905. The number leaped to 23,862 in 1906, as the title incentive program had now become the major route to earn official titles after the 1905 abolition of the *keju*.<sup>13</sup> The shocking expansion of the number of modern schools alerted the Qing officials in the 1900s. In the 1907 *Statistics of Education* – the first compiled by the Qing state – the skyrocket increase in number of school students was represented by a line chart, which in the time was a novel instrument of visualizing number (see Fig. 1).

Shocked by the rapid increase in the number of modern schools and students, late Qing reformers doubted the sustainability of the title incentive program, convicting that the program would burden

Charter of School Management” (Chen 2021a, p. 28). Among the translations I choose “charter” to highlight the lineage between the new school system and the model of *zhangcheng* in traditional academies since the eighteenth century. In this model of academies, the term *zhangcheng* actually implied certain degree of independence as the term “charter” implies – after the initial official investment, the Qing academies were supposed to sustain themselves by the interest and rent derived from its properties. For a preliminary discussion on the term *zhangcheng* in context of the high-Qing system of academies, see Li 2005, pp. 51–52; Chu 2018, pp. 17–20.

<sup>9</sup>For Zhang Zhidong's role in the late Qing educational reform, see Murata 1993, pp. 53–61; Su 1976.

<sup>10</sup>Li 2005, pp. 274–83. Zhang 1998, vol. 2, p. 1291.

<sup>11</sup>Guan 2017, pp. 68–72; Zhang 2008, vol. 4, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup>Zhang's sharp turn, as Guan Xiaohong convincingly argues, was triggered by the proposal to rebuild the Beijing Examination Hall – an expensive project which would suck up the government funding to modern schools. Guan 2017, pp. 135–62.

<sup>13</sup>Wang 1987, p. 245.

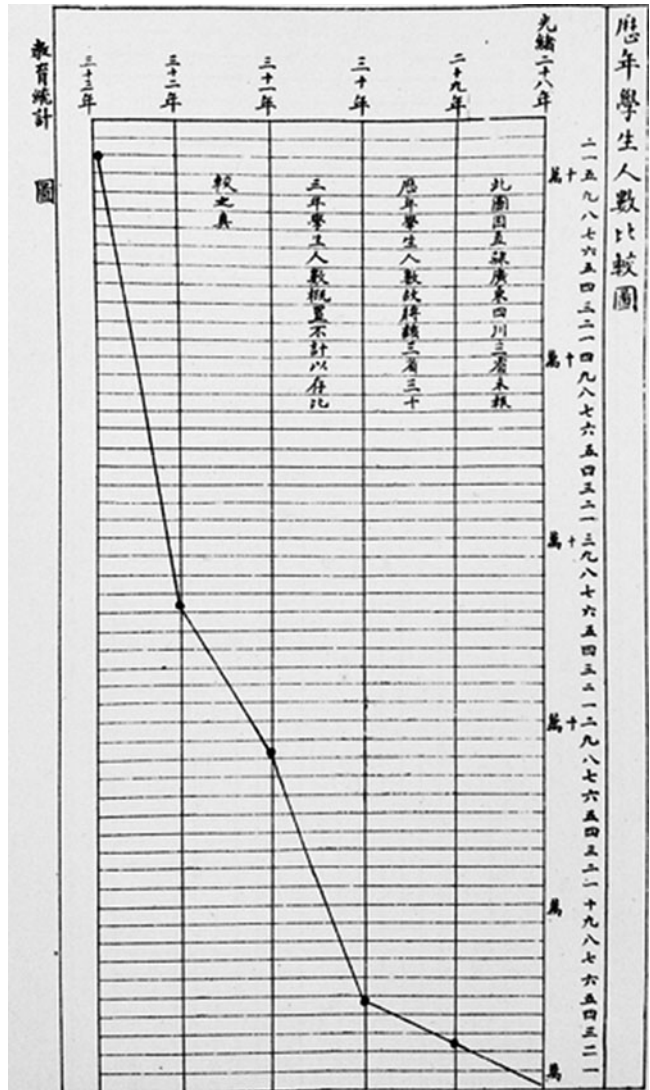


Fig. 1. Number of Students from 1902 to 1907, from The First Educational Statistics Compiled by the Ministry of Education. Xuebu (1973 [1907])

the state by expanding the already large population of title holders seeking office. The view is represented by Chen Zengyou’s widely circulated memorial in 1905, and shared in historical scholarship on the late Qing education reform.<sup>14</sup>

The argument about the over-population students, albeit powerful in rhetorical terms, did not reflect the actual problem of the title incentive program. On the one hand, the critics adopted such argument overestimated the number and pace of candidates qualified for official titles – it took years for the students to advance in the school system before being eligible to apply for title incentives. These critics had also underestimated the capacity of the Qing state to absorb the large population of

<sup>14</sup>Based on the records in *Gazette of the Ministry of Education* (Xuebu guanbao 學部官報), *Gazette on Politics* (Zhengzhi guanbao 政治官報), and *Gazette of the Cabinet* (Neige guanbao 內閣官報) between 1906 and 1911, Hajikawa Atsushi calculated that the reward system totally generated 52 jinshi 進士, 1,573 juren 舉人, 4,425 gongsheng 貢生, 4,434 shengyuan 生員, and 2,680 actual office holders (including those who held offices before graduation and the school teachers recognized as officials). Zhang Yaquin’s investigation of the *Gazette on Politics* and *The Gazette of the Cabinet* shows that 56 jinshi and 1,882 juren were awarded. Hayakawa 2003, pp. 407–38; Zhang 2005, pp. 181–82.

un-assigned title holders. From the late eighteenth century onward, candidates for offices had been consistently channeled to irregular appointments in government services, which had been proliferating amid historical developments from the seventeenth century onward – population expansion, reconstruction after the 1850s Taiping Rebellion, and westernization projects after the Opium War. Therefore, the new pool of title holders added by the title incentive program did not necessarily produce immediate threat to the Qing state, as the late Qing reformers and historians have assumed.<sup>15</sup> To account for the program's eventual demise in 1911, below I provide two other challenges it generated to the new education system in the last years of the Qing dynasty.

### *Negotiating local titles and foreign credentials*

First, the title incentive program exposed the Qing state to the pressure of recognizing foreign credentials. The question about issuing of official titles to graduates from foreign institution first emerged in 1901, when Zhang launched a *keju* title incentive program for Hubei students to study in Japan – one of the precedents of the 1903 incentive program for modern schools. In the scheme, students returning from Japan would be awarded *keju* titles after meeting further requirements set by the Qing government.

While studying abroad could compliment the fledging modern education system in China, using official titles as incentive was a risky move for Zhang, as it committed to offer the graduates tracks toward government positions. Such commitment meant unconditional acceptance of Japan-trained graduates into the Chinese officialdom and would expand Japanese influence over China. Noticing the stake of the policy of credentials, in 1903 Uchida Kosai 内田康哉, the Japanese Ambassador in China, urged the Qing court to specify the levels of titles to be awarded by the program, as a condition for accepting Chinese students.<sup>16</sup> Under the time pressure to promulgate the studying abroad program, Zhang agreed the demand with the condition that the Japanese government would expatriate “misbehaving” Chinese students par request of the Qing state.<sup>17</sup>

This pressure to recognize foreign credentials intensified after the abolition of *keju* in 1905, as the title incentive program for modern school graduates had become the major way to earn official titles, which was much less competitive than the compensatory examinations introduced between 1905 and 1911. On the one hand, the number of students studying in Japan – who were eligible to apply for official titles upon graduation – rapidly increased.<sup>18</sup> On the other, the proliferating missionary schools demanded equivalent titles for their graduates, as exemplified in the petitions from English missionaries in 1906 and German educators in Jiaozhou in 1909.<sup>19</sup> Based on the diplomatic treaties with these Western countries, in many of which missionaries were granted the right to establish schools in China, the Qing court had no legal ground to refuse such demand, nor to impose direct restrictions on missionary.<sup>20</sup>

The pressure urged policy makers to consider fundamental reforms of the title incentive program, and even its abolition. In 1906, the most comprehensive policy prescription came from Ministry of

<sup>15</sup>It is also noteworthy that critics of the title incentive program often exaggerated the number of potential title holders. This is exemplified in a 1910 article by Gao Mengdan (高夢旦, penname: Chong You 崇有), a former supervisor of Hubei students studying in Japan and a senior editor in the Commercial Press's textbook division. Without accurate statistics, Gao employed an astonishing method to estimate the number of graduates and potential office seekers. Given that the proportion of the Japanese and Chinese populations was approximately 1:10 (40 million to 400 million), Gao multiplied the total number of graduates of Japanese schools by 10 to produce a number of Chinese graduates when modern education was fully developed. Comparing this number to the number of state offices available at the time (taken from data in 1904 and 1907), Gao asserted that the title reward system would produce excessive office seekers. Gao 1910, pp. 1–5.

<sup>16</sup>Zhang 1998, vol. 12, p. 10315.

<sup>17</sup>Zhang 2008, vol. 4, p. 162–65.

<sup>18</sup>Li 2007.

<sup>19</sup>Zhang 1986, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup>Zhang 1986, p. 128. For instance, the 1860 Convention of Peking stated the right of French missionaries to purchase or rent lands to build schools.

Education official Zhang Yuanji 張元濟, who was also one of the founders of modern Chinese publishing business. By the time he drafted his proposals for reform of the incentive program, Zhang had already accumulated significant fame and influence as both a gentry and an official. As a *jinshi* from the 1892 class, his official career was suspended because of his involvement in the aborted Hundred Day Reform in 1898. Since 1901, he became a major shareholder of the Commercial Press, the pioneer in textbook business which eventually became a giant in modern publishing. Because of his increasing fame as a publisher and educator, in 1906 he was recalled by the Qing government as a member of the Ministry of Education, a newly established government department overseeing the fledgling modern education system.<sup>21</sup>

Zhang proposed two policies to tackle the problems from Japanese and missionary education. For the immediate pressure of overpopulation of foreign-educated students seeking office, Zhang suggested putting graduates from modern schools on a “fast track” to officialdom – the Ministry of Education could invite local graduates to examinations with lowered requirements, and reduce the pool of candidates by shortened application periods. With access to these less competitive examinations designed for local graduates, Zhang argued, the number of Chinese students studying abroad would decrease as local schools would become more appealing.<sup>22</sup>

For a more fundamental solution, Zhang proposed a new system of credentials detached from official status embodied in the *keju* titles. Under Zhang’s system, all graduates from local, missionary, and overseas education would be named as “graduates from specific institutions” rather than titles equivalent to the *keju* passers in the past. Special credentials of “*xueshi* 學士” (originated from the title given to officials appointed to the royal academies, such as the Hanlin Academy, later used as the present translation of bachelor) and “*boshi* 博士” (originated from the title of court historians and classical scholars in Qin and Han China, later used in the present translation of doctoral degree) would be given only to graduates from the imperial “*daxuetang*” (universities, or literally translated as “grand college”).<sup>23</sup> These special credentials of *xueshi* and *boshi*, regardless of their linguistic affinity to the archaic official titles, were no more be related to official assignment, which would thereafter be decided in a new civil service examination independent from the school system.<sup>24</sup> Detaching credential of education from office holding, this policy could create a buffer between foreign education and the Chinese officialdom.

Zhang’s solutions were not immediately adopted because of the institutional weaknesses of the Ministry of Education, a newly founded modern government department that did not fit well into the existing system of the imperial state. For the first solution – to create a fast track to official advancement for local graduates – the Ministry of Education would have to coordinate with the Board of Appointments (*libu* 吏部) as well as the Board of Rites (*libu* 禮部), with which it was often in a tense relationship because of the blur institutional boundary between their jurisdictions.<sup>25</sup> The second solution – the new system of educational credential, if introduced – would not be able to attract enrollments to modern schools as it was disconnected not only from prospect in the officialdom, but also the traditional titles that had long been valued by the society. With his policy prescriptions discarded, in 1906 Zhang left the Ministry for a research trip in Japan, and did not return to officialdom before the fall of Qing in 1911. His idea to detach education credentials from official titles, however, gradually gained currency among official and non-official reformers over the final years of the Qing empire, as we will see below.

<sup>21</sup>Zhang’s official title was *canshiting xingzou* 參事廳行走, literally translated as “member of the administrative hall.” Zhang and Liu 2011, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup>Zhang 1986, p. 136.

<sup>23</sup>Zhang 1986, p. 138–39.

<sup>24</sup>Zhang 1986, p. 129.

<sup>25</sup>Guan 2000a, pp. 231–54.

### The conflicts between title incentive program and discipline in modern schools

Another major problem of the title incentive program was its disruption of the discipline introduced at modern schools. In contrast to the modern year-grade system introduced in 1902, the official titles embodied the then conventional regime of education which lacked clearly defined schedule. Regardless of age, scholars kept preparing for *keju* examinations until they passed and earned official titles. Yearly-study plans did exist in the Confucian didactical literature. For example, the *Dushufennian richeng* 讀書分年日程 written in the fourteenth century had been adopted occasionally in traditional academies over the late imperial period. Yet this kind of schedule had rarely been institutionalized in the statutes and regulations over academies in the Qing. Nor did the traditional study plans regulate students with a uniform schedule toward graduation, like the new found modern schools did in the 1900s.<sup>26</sup>

Since the early eighteenth century, Qing academies had measured attendances by participation in essay competitions for *keju* preparation rather than regular and physical presence. In 1727, the Yongzheng Emperor issued a new decree stating that all registered scholars in official academies were required to take the monthly and seasonal essay tests to maintain their status.<sup>27</sup> Six years later in 1733, following the imperial initiation to construct academies in provincial capitals, the monthly stipend for scholars in academies, known as *gaohuo* 膏火, were standardized and stated in the charters of academies.<sup>28</sup> By the nineteenth century, these two systems of test-taking as attendance and stipend to scholars became the convention in both official and private academies.<sup>29</sup> Under such a loose system of attendance, scholars moved almost freely among different academies, as well as other ventures outside academies. Managers of the Qing academies had no particular reason to keep scholars inside the academies, as long as they could maintain their prospect to pass the *keju* or earn reputation by literary and scholarly activities, which could enhance the fame of the academies.

The modern schooling system under the 1904 Education Charter, however, followed a contrasting logic of discipline. Not only was a standardized year grade system with attendance requirement introduced.<sup>30</sup> Without a clear definition of success in the mid of the educational reform, number of graduates had been a crucial indicator for the effectiveness of modern schools. Managers of modern schools thus took harsh measures against outward transferring of students, as it meant losing quantitative indicators of effectiveness that was essential to maintain support from the central government and various public funds.<sup>31</sup> For example, to punish drop outs from schools, some modern schools introduced a system of deposit – upon enrolment, students had to pay a fee that they could get back only by graduation.<sup>32</sup>

Under the title incentive program, however, students in the 1900s often moved from schools to schools – and between the school system and the imperial examination system as well – to search for the quickest path toward the title reward.<sup>33</sup> A secondary school student in 1909, for instance, quickened his application for title by transferring to a normal school. By such practice that critics of the title incentive program called “grade-leaping” (*liedeng* 躐等), students could shorten the time to graduate, and thus, became eligible for title incentive application.<sup>34</sup> Despite the Ministry of Education’s attempt to regulate such transference by requirement for formal applications in a 1909 Ordinance on Transfers, transferring for quicker route to official title remained

<sup>26</sup>Lee 2012, pp. 642–43.

<sup>27</sup>Kun 1897, p. 5.39–2.

<sup>28</sup>Deng 2011, pp. 1259, 1269.

<sup>29</sup>Such as the regulation of the Yuhuan shuyuan 玉環書院 (est. 1849) in Sichuan. Deng 2011, p. 1567.

<sup>30</sup>Tillman 2012, pp. 32–60.

<sup>31</sup>For the use of number of modern schools as the indicator of local administrative performance during the 1900s, see Guan 2014, p. 374.

<sup>32</sup>For example, Zhang Zhidong introduced a contract system in the Jiangnan chucai xuetao. Zhang 1897, pp. 7–10; Lu 1897, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup>In 1904, a report from Shuntian Prefecture (Beijing) indicated the problem caused by frequent transfers among modern schools. Shi 1964, p. 531.96b. For the compensatory examinations, see Guan 2017, pp. 178–88; Zhang 2019, pp. 63–81.

<sup>34</sup>Zhuang Yu 1909, p. 175.

as the convention.<sup>35</sup> In this way the title incentive program destabilized the number of enrollments, and became increasingly a burden for managers of modern schools.

### The 1911 Central Conference for Education and the unfinished reform against the title incentive program

Given the problems the title incentive program created, its abolition gradually became a consensus between Qing officials and non-official educators. After years of persuasion and lobbying, a reform toward the abolition of titles had eventually been launched in 1911 at the Central Conference for Education (Zhongyang Jiaoyuhui 中央教育會). Summoned by the order of the Ministry of Education, the Conference was participated by both officials and non-official educators, who were mostly representative of educational associations across the country. These non-official participants, who were the majority at the Conference, were labeled as “gentry” (*shen* 紳), following the practice at the consultative council established in the late Qing Constitutional reform.<sup>36</sup>

The Conference seemed like an ad-hoc advisory body without real executive power. According to the written regulations, the Minister of Education was not obligated to follow the bills at the Conference. But the Conference itself in fact testified the dependence of the Qing state on the non-official actors in the national reform of education. As a fledging government department established in 1906, the Ministry’s national influence actually fell short of the network non-official educational associations, which had been ascending since the introduction of school system in early 1900s. Before this 1911 Central Conference, the non-official educators from twelve provinces had already organized a Conference of Provincial Educational Societies (*gesheng jiaoyuzonghui lianhe huiyi* 各省教育總會聯合會) in April and May 1911 in Shanghai. The state’s reliance on the non-official educators was demonstrated in the organization of the 1911 Central Conference. The Conference was not chaired by officials from the Ministry, but instead by Zhang Jian 張謇, the iconic entrepreneur and chairman of the Jiangsu Educational Association; and the vice-president was Zhang Yuanji mentioned above – general manager of the Commercial Press who also represented the Jiangsu Educational Association.<sup>37</sup>

As the leaders of the power Jiangsu circle of educators, Zhang Jian and Zhang Yuanji had been the major proponents for the abolition of the title incentive program.<sup>38</sup> Since the mid-1900s, as discussed above, Zhang Yuanji had diagnosed that the title incentive program generated irreconcilable conflicts with the modern, and internationalizing, system of credential. Sharing Zhang Yuanji’s understanding of the incentive program, Zhang Jian moved further to argue that the *keju* title embodied an ignoble ideology that should be eliminated in modern education. Zhang commented that,

If the old titles were maintained, the *keju* will be permanently memorized, and the ignoble ideology (*bu gaoshan zhi sixiang* 不高尚之思想) from the *keju* era will also persist. [Such ideology] thwarts the development of education.<sup>39</sup> [In contrast to the] enterprise (*shiye* 實業) that emphasizes practice (*shijian* 實踐), *shengyuan* 生員 and *gongju* 貢舉 (both entry level titles) were only “superfluous fame.” In regard of governance, countries [around the world] require a six-year probation period for graduates who entered the officialdom. Actual appointments are never given immediately after graduation.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Xuebu 1909, pp. 53–54.

<sup>36</sup>Xuebu 1911, pp. 12–13.

<sup>37</sup>Guan 2000b, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup>As a powerful non-official actor in national politics in the late Qing and early Republican period, Jiangsu Provincial Association for Education played a particularly noteworthy role. Takada Yukio has conducted extensive research on the Associations’ social background: Takada 1998, pp. 1–30; 2001, pp. 37–62. For more recent scholarship, see Chen 2011; Gu 2009, pp. 58–67.

<sup>39</sup>In the next sentence, which says students in other countries graduated from *kexue* 科學. Therefore, in context of this proposal, the term *kexue*, which is now the conventional Chinese translation of “science,” indeed meant “education.”

<sup>40</sup>Zhang Jian 1965, p. 3.7a.



Zhang provided few factual evidences for his argument – for example, no specific information showed that the so-called 6-year probation was a the “global” convention at the time. Yet Zhang’s moralized claim against the incentive program was nevertheless powerful, as least in rhetorical terms. According to Zhang, *keju* titles not only polluted students with the greed for quick advancement in officialdom; they also generated superfluous fame that distracted the energy of production and innovation, and thus hampered development of modern enterprises. The abolition of *keju* titles, therefore, was a necessary step toward the modernization of the Chinese mind.

The power of Zhang’s claim came also from his credential and experience, which made him a perfect model of success outside the conventional route of the *keju*. Although Zhang ranked first at the 1894 metropolitan exam, he soon left officialdom after the aborted 1898 Hundred Day Reform as he supported reformists’ agenda. He later became a pioneer of the modern industry of China, taking a leading role in the business of cotton. In the late 1900s, he returned to politics – without taking formal position in the officialdom – as a gentry leader of the constitutional movement.

By 1911, Zhang Jian’s view against the *keju* title became the official position taken by the Jiangsu Education Association, as shown in the Association’s proposal for the abolition of the title incentive program. Pan Ren 潘任, one of the contributors of the proposal, further elaborated Zhang Jian’s dichotomy of practical need and superfluous fame against the identity of the Confucian scholar. He wrote, “As most of the students will take parts in businesses after graduation. If they were given the titles (such as *shengyuan* and *xiucaai*)... they would certainly identify themselves as Confucian scholars (*ziming weiru* 自命為儒) and look down on practical enterprises.”<sup>41</sup> Along with Zhang Jian’s criticism of the incentive program, Pan Ren’s argument against the Confucian identity was included into the Jiangsu Association’s proposal, which was passed first in the General Conference of the Provincial Associations of Education in 1911 spring, and discussed in the Central Conference for Education in July and August.<sup>42</sup>

At the Conference, the anti-title argument did not meet significant challenge, but the termination of the title incentive program was eventually proponed for pragmatic concerns. Participants from the government pleaded for an extension of the program as this had been an important source of income for the Ministry – since 1908 the Ministry collected a license fee for modern school graduate who applied for equivalent *keju* titles.<sup>43</sup> The extension was also supported by the non-official participants who benefited from the program. Several members of the provincial education associations demanded postponing the abolition until 1913, so that their family members at modern schools could catch up with the last tier of application for *keju* titles.<sup>44</sup> At the end, the reform of title incentive program was reduced to the abolition of awarding actual offices to graduates, and the *keju* titles were maintained as incentives for education. The watered-down reform bill was passed getting 80 votes from the 138 participants.<sup>45</sup>

### Reforming against the ideological foundation of the *keju* in the 1910s

In the fall of 1911, an abrupt wave of evolution swept across China, brought the end to the Qing dynasty and the more than two millennium-long imperial period. With the end of monarchy, the *keju*-title system was finally suspended – after it had survived first the 1905 abolition of regular *keju* examinations, and the 1911 reform enacted at the Central Conference for Education. From the hindsight, the 1911 Revolution has irreversibly undermined the institutional ground on which the *keju* examinations and the title system could revive. But for contemporaries, the Revolution was too abrupt to be conclusive. On the one hand, the Revolution put an end to the *keju* titles; on the other, however, it prevented

<sup>41</sup>Jiaoyu falingsuo 1910, pp. 18–19.

<sup>42</sup>Gesheng jiaoyu zonghui 1911, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup>Guan 2000a, p. 189; Xuebu 1908, p. 4. The license fee contributed a significant portion to the income of the Ministry of Education. Xuebu 1910, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup>Lufei 1911, pp. 71–72.

<sup>45</sup>Huang 2008, p. 7.

the title system from being actually reformed or overthrown. While the narrative against the title incentive gained currency, it had not been translated into an actual reform against the traditional system of credential. In this sense, the *keju*-title system was disrupted only by circumstances, instead of terminated by deliberate decision.

With such sense of inconclusiveness, education reformers, especially those in the circle surrounding Zhang Jian and Zhang Yuanji, continued their campaign against foundations of the *keju*. The reformers did not see the *keju* in pure institutional terms, but as an ideology that valued personal fame and self-interest over usefulness to the Chinese nation. Despite the eventual suspension of the title system by the 1911 Revolution, they asserted, a mindset forged by the *keju* still prevailed amid the educated population. To embark on an ongoing ideological movement against this ignoble mindset, they mobilized their influence over the new printed media. In the booming business of modern textbook, both the publishing giant Commercial Press, presided by Zhang Yuanji, and the up-and-coming Chunghwa Press, founded by Lufei Kui 陸費逵, were connected to circle of centered upon the Zhang Jian, who was himself in control of *Shenbao*, the most influential newspaper based in treaty port Shanghai. As shown in Chen Yiai's recent research, the powerful network led by Zhang Jian – which Chen named as the “Southeastern China bloc” (*dongnan jituan* 東南集團) – exerted enormous influence over industry, education, and politics at least until the 1920s.<sup>46</sup> Before the rise of a new cohort of New Culture intellectuals – such as Hu Shih and Chen Duxiu – in the latter half of the 1910s Zhang Jian's bloc had been the dominating voice in the Republican public discourse.

Over the 1910s, Zhang Jian's anti-title incentive arguments – particularly the dichotomy between usefulness to the nation and personal interest and status – had been further developed along two lines in the discourse of modern social order. First, in contrast to the traditional concept that “nurturing scholars” (*yangshi* 養士) was at once a duty and achievement of the state, it was now assumed the knowledge bearers were responsible for their own livelihood, and thus to become self-made. Second was a moral critique of office seeking in bureaucracy, which they saw as a traditional evil that was still haunting the new Chinese society. Although the qualities of self-made and autonomy from the bureaucracy have already drawn attention of historians working on modern education and citizenship, their specific context remains under-explored.<sup>47</sup> With samples of publication from the Commercial Press, the Chunghwa Press, and the *Shenbao*, below I will demonstrate how ideas from the anti-title incentive discourse, especially those of Zhang Jian's, had been employed in an on-going campaign against the ideological foundation of *keju* in the 1910s, and how such campaign had overshadowed the construction of the modern educated individual in the 1910s.

### *Employment as responsibility of the educated individual*

While concepts surrounding the self-made man had started to prevail since the late nineteenth century, from the 1900s onward arguments against the title incentive program had significantly enriched, and intensified, the discourse of individual responsibility.<sup>48</sup> For critics of the *keju* titles, the inability of a knowledge bearer to find a vocation outside of officialdom was not only a personal failure, but also a threat to the social order. This view was most thoroughly articulated by Du Yaquan, who in 1910s headed the editorship of the *Eastern Miscellany*, the flagship magazine of the Commercial Press for a general audience.<sup>49</sup> In a 1910 article, Du compared the danger of office seekers to that of Hong

<sup>46</sup>Chen 2021b.

<sup>47</sup>For a review of the literature on citizenship, see Culp 2007, pp. 1–18; Zarrow 2015, pp. 113–46.

<sup>48</sup>These new ideas of self-responsibility transformed the understanding of poverty. Yang 2004, pp. 26–39; Wang 2007. For the ideological transformation from the imperial state's responsibility of “nourishing the people” to poverty as a social disease diagnosed by modern social scientific knowledge, see Chen 2012, pp. 46–49.

<sup>49</sup>For the intellectual position and significance of Du Yaquan in the 1910s and 1920s, see Xu and Tian 1999. *The Eastern Miscellany*, arguably the most popular comprehensive magazine of the time, had been indispensable for the Chinese reading public to receive information from abroad. For the ideological impact of *The Eastern Miscellany's* coverage on the First World War, see Qiu 2018.

Xiuquan 洪秀全, the leader of the mid-eighteenth-century Taiping Rebellion that devastated Southern China. In contrast to the conventional depiction of Hong as a Christian who challenged the Confucian orthodoxy, Du emphasized Hong's failure in the *keju* examinations that bred bitterness against the Qing court. In an anachronistic manner, Du equated modern school graduates to Hong, arguing that the title incentive program produced revolutionaries and anarchists.<sup>50</sup>

This ideology of occupation spread through the textbooks published by the Commercial Press, which occupied a large, nearly monopolistic, share of the market. The most notable example is the *Text Book for the Subject of Self Cultivation in Secondary Schools* 中等修身教科書 edited by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, which had been republished sixteen times in the 1910s. Cai, the first Minister of Education in the new Republic and probably the most respected leader of education in modern China, had a long-standing friendship with Zhang Yuanji and the Commercial Press. Together with Zhang Yuanji, Cai earned the title of *jinshi* from the 1892 metropolitan examination and joined the prestigious Hanlin Academy. After the aborted 1898 Reform, Cai was forced to leave the Academy and officialdom, and joined the Commercial Press in 1901 as the head of the textbook division. Zhang Yuanji also sponsored Cai to study abroad in Germany in the 1900s, during which he wrote the *Textbook for the Subject of Self Cultivation*.

The *Textbook* placed vocation at the center of a new civic virtue in the modern Chinese society. In the fifth chapter on "vocation" (*zhiye* 職業), Cai wrote that "a human being cannot survive (*zicun* 自存) without a vocation." Anyone who did not acquire talents and skills for employment was "morally speaking" a "vagrant" (*yumin* 遊民), an enemy of the society. It is noteworthy that from Cai's perspective such vagrants were not necessarily poor, as many of them lived on support from their families and clans.<sup>51</sup> As long as they were not employed in a job useful for the society – Cai did not specify the definition of useful jobs, though – they would become a vagrant and disqualified from being a citizen in the modernizing Chinese state.

Reflections about livelihood had not been absent in the late imperial Confucian discourse. Since around the seventeenth century, as Yu Yingshi has pointed out, commercialization of society had blurred the traditional division between Confucian scholar-officials (*shi* 士) and merchants (*shang* 商), making profit seeking a crucial issue in the Confucian moral order.<sup>52</sup> Thinkers in this era became increasingly sensitive to the material foundation of virtue and integrity, as exemplified in "On Livelihood as the Fundamental Mission of Scholars (*Xuezhe yi zhisheng weiben lun* 學者以治生為本論)" written by Chen Que 陳確, who lived in seclusion to maintain his loyalty to the Ming dynasty that fell in 1644. For Chen, the ability to maintain livelihood was necessarily for loyalty and filial piety, which were the fundamental moral qualities of Confucianism. Without stable access to material resource, a scholar would not only be forced to serve an illegitimate ruler – the alien Manchu court in Chen's time – and even fail to perform the basic duty of supporting parent's livelihood.

This relationship between livelihood and virtue had been reversed in the turn of the twentieth century, however. In contrast to the seventeenth century Confucian thinkers, Cai Yuanpei regarded vocation as the end rather than the mean. For Cai, one needed a vocation not because it provided the material support for the higher moral goals of loyalty, filial piety, or individual integrity. Vocation was instead an essential quality for any modern man, without which he/she would automatically descend to the status of vagrant, regardless of the moral quality and knowledge he possessed. Cai also situated his vision of vocation in a critique of the traditional social order, elaborated in December 1916 in a speech at the Jiangsu Educational Association.

Among the four classes of occupation of our country – scholar official, farmer-peasant craftsman, and merchant – the scholar official was particularly honored. I have to go against the conventional opinion and blame the ancient sage Confucius [for establishing such hierarchy]. Being

<sup>50</sup>Du 1910, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup>Cai 1984, vol. 2, p. 231.

<sup>52</sup>Yu 2013, pp. 97–104. Some scholars further trace the origin of this discourse to the idea of Xu Heng in the thirteenth century. Fukuda 2000, p. 156.

ambitious in politics, the Confucius persuaded the states of his time to give privilege to the scholar official class at the expense of the classes of peasant, craftsman and merchant.<sup>53</sup>

Cai's anti-Confucian civic virtue of vocation provided the ideological foundation for the National Association of Vocational Education of China, which he founded 1917 in Shanghai with Zhang Jian, Zhang Yuanji, and Huang Yanpei 黃炎培, who was the former head of the Jiangsu Education Bureau – all came from the circle of the Jiangsu Educational Association. In the declaration of the NAVEC, Cai provided a bleak vision of the education sector at the time. Despite the establishment of around 108,000 modern schools since the 1900s, Cai argued, the education reform had not solved the fundamental problem of livelihood in China as it was detached from vocational training. Students from modern schools “lacked ability, but was full of material desire (*pinyu nengli fuyu yuwang* 貧於能力, 富於慾望).” Fortunately, such unsustainable model of education had not yet popularized, otherwise “all the Chinese nationals will become ‘high-class vagrants’ to be eliminated by natural selection,” Cai Yuanpei exclaimed.<sup>54</sup>

The complaint about educated unemployment was shared by Lufei Kui, founder of the Chunghwa Book Company (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局) that rivaled with the Commercial Press in the business of textbooks.<sup>55</sup> Like Cai Yuanpei, in 1910s Lufei embraced the concept of vocational education, and promoted it in *Zhonghua jiaoyujie* 中華教育界, Chunghwa's magazine for education that competed with the Commercial Press's *Chinese Educational Review*.<sup>56</sup> Lufei was echoed by his close ally, former Qing Ministry of Education official Fan Yuanlian 范源濂 who in the 1910s took important positions in both the Beijing Government and the Chunghwa Book Company. In a 1914 speech, Fan the Minister of Education asserted that the proliferation of the “high class vagrants” had been a pressing social problem for the fledging Republic.<sup>57</sup> In the subsequent years, “high class vagrants” – which embodied a moralized judgment against unemployment – became a concept shared by education reformers across the ideological spectrum, including both the advocates of elite and popular approaches toward education.<sup>58</sup>

### *Bureaucrats as consumers of social wealth*

In addition to the ideology of vocation, Zhang Jian's idea of superfluous fame had also fueled narratives against holders of government offices, now labeled by the neologism “bureaucrats” *guanliao* 官僚) borrowed from Japanese translation of the European concept.<sup>59</sup> In an 1910 editorial article in the *Shenbao*, for example, the writer elaborated Zhang's idea into a division of “consumers” (*fenlizhe* 分利者) and “creators” (*shenglizhe* 生利者) of national wealth. The office-holders who possessed “superfluous fame,” the writer argued, did not contributed to the increase in public wealth as the common people did.<sup>60</sup> This perception of government officials persisted after the 1911 Revolution. In his 1915 article “Office Holding and Livelihood (*Zuoguan yu mousheng* 作官與謀生),” Liang Qichao, prominent reformist who was also a member of the NAVEC, reiterated Zhang Jian's producer–consumer division, blaming bureaucrats – and those who aspired to be bureaucrats – for failing to sustain livelihood on their own.<sup>61</sup> For these critics, bureaucrats were not much better than parasites of the society.

<sup>53</sup>Cai 1984, vol. 2, p. 489.

<sup>54</sup>Cai 1984, vol. 3, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup>Lufei's connection to the powerful non-official national network of educators enabled him influence on educational policies. His proposal for reducing the years for primary and secondary education, for instance, laid the foundation of the 1912–1913 New School System issued by the Beijing Republican Government.

<sup>56</sup>Lufei 1914, pp. 1–6.

<sup>57</sup>Fan 2009, p. 85.

<sup>58</sup>Wang 2012, p. 213.

<sup>59</sup>In 1913, Tao Baolin, an editor at Commercial Press, commented on the linguistic origins of the term bureaucracy, as well as its popularization in context of post-1911 Revolution politics. Tao 1913, pp. 63–68.

<sup>60</sup>Shenbao 1910.

<sup>61</sup>Liang 1915, pp. 1–9.

Assuming officials as consumers of national wealth, critics advocated the downsizing of government. In March 1911, when the provincial educational associations were shaping their proposal for the abolition of titles, Du Yaquan published an article called “Reduction-ism in Politics” (*jianzheng zhuyi* 減政主義) in *Eastern Miscellany*. The New Policy Reform in the 1900s, Du contended, led to an enormous expansion of the bureaucracy. To incorporate modern function of the state, the Six Ministries, which had been a tradition of Chinese politics since the sixth century, were joined by six new ministries. The new departments at both central and local levels not only led to a staggering increase in personnel, but also the proliferation and trivialization of administrative procedures. The Ministry of Education’s title incentive program, Du asserted, exemplified the bureaucratic preoccupation with formality in terms of numbers and paperwork.<sup>62</sup> Du maintained his view after the Revolution. In articles published in *Eastern Miscellany*, he attributed the resiliency of bureaucracy after the Revolution to the populous “high-class vagrants” and warned that the obsession with “superfluous fame” would prevent citizens from becoming self-made.<sup>63</sup> The first mission after the Revolution, therefore, was to “destroy bureaucratic politics.”<sup>64</sup>

This so-called crisis of bureaucratic over-expansion was constructed with thin empirical evidence. The quantitative evidences employed in the crisis narrative were often partial, if not manipulated. When Du Yaquan proposed reduction of personnel in bureaus of provincial governments, for instance, he admitted that he lacked information about the actual number of officials required to maintain the function of each of these bureaus. Yet he nevertheless assumed that only one division head and three to four staffs would be needed in each bureau.<sup>65</sup> Like his Commercial Press colleagues who exaggerated the number of potential official seekers to support the abolition of *keju* titles, Du Yaquan was able to reproduce his evidentially flawed views with his powerful position in the leading publishing house in early twentieth century China.

## Conclusion

By connecting seemingly scattered reforms and debates, this paper outlines a longer process – stretching over the 1900s and 1910s – that eroded institutional and ideological foundations of the *keju*. The process began with the title incentive program, which used *keju* titles to attract enrollment in the fledgling modern schools. As the number of modern schools surged, the burden of the incentive program started to outweigh its benefit. The Qing government officials were under pressure to assign actual offices to the expanding population of title holders, and to negotiate the entrance of foreign-educated graduates into the officialdom. Meanwhile, the *keju*-title system encouraged mobilities and flexibilities – one could transfer between academies, change the pace of study, move back and forth between examination preparation and other ventures – that did not fit with the discipline of the modern school. By 1911, a thorough abolition of *keju* titles had been forcefully argued by Zhang Jian and his circle of reformers. Such reform had not been realized, however, as the Revolution brought an abrupt end to the Qing state.

For the reformers against the *keju* title and the incentive program, therefore, the sudden change of circumstances in 1911 was by no means conclusive. Neither did it officially terminated the *keju*-title system, which survived the 1905 abolition of regular *keju* examinations, nor did it provide an answer about the place of educated individual in the modernizing Chinese society. After 1911, the late Qing reformers – particularly those in the circle of Jiangsu Education Association, the Commercial Press, and the Chunghwa Press – continued to battle against the ideological foundations of the *keju*.<sup>66</sup> As shown in the 1910s writings of Cai Yuanpei, Liang Qichao, Du Yaquan, and Lufei Kui, Zhang

<sup>62</sup>Du 1911, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup>Du 1912, pp. 3–4; 1913, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup>Du 1913, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup>Du 1913, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup>For example, the Chinese Association for Education (*Zhongguo jiaoyuhui* 中國教育會) was formed immediately after the 1911 Central Conference for Education by delegates from provincial education associations. Huang 2008, p. 10.

Jian's moralized critique against the so-called mindset of *keju* had a prolonged influence on the construction of the modern Chinese educated individual. Through the powerful network of education, industry, and media, a new ideal of education – nurturing employees for non-governmental ventures – had been established, and disseminated in textbooks as the new civic virtue.

In about two decades, this “longer abolition” of *keju* had undermined the institutional and ideological foundations of the traditional examination system. In the aftermath of this longer abolition emerged two questions that lingered in twentieth-century Chinese politics. The first was the need for a new agent of politics and public administration to replace the stigmatized “bureaucrat.” Different new labels of state agents, as Julia Strauss has pointed out, competed and negotiated with each other in the revolutionary discourses of first the Nationalist Party, and later, the Communist Party.<sup>67</sup> Some of the most notable new labels were developed from the idea of Sun Yat-sen, the legendary founding father of the Chinese Republic after the 1911 Revolution. For Sun, an ideal member (*dangyuan* 黨員) of his revolutionary party – the Nationalist Party – was someone who became “enlightened” (*juexing* 覺醒) before the general public. As a political leader of the mass, the party member was an antithesis of the bureaucrat, which was corrupted by the lust of power and personal wealth.<sup>68</sup> Yet as the *dangyuan* was constructed as an ideal revolutionary, other labels of public agents, such as public servant (*gongpu* 公僕) and civil servant (*gongwuyuan* 公務員) were coined for state agents after the Nationalists came into power. In Sun's theory, the legitimacy of the new civil servant came from civil service examination – that he articulated as *zhengtū* (正途 orthodoxy way of advancement in officialdom), a concept appropriated from the late imperial *keju* tradition. As I have argued elsewhere, the concept of *zhengtū* civil servants from examination was by no means a mere restoration of the late imperial tradition.<sup>69</sup> With new ideological and administrative components in play, the meaning and practice of civil service examination remained in flux after the Nationalist established the Nanjing Government in 1928.

The second question was the social role of the new class of student. As exemplified in the concept of “high class vagrants” discussed above, students had already been seen as a threat to social stability before the 1919 May Fourth Movement further invigorated student movements. The suspicion of students stemmed not only from the demand to established a new discipline in schools, but also a more fundamental dilemma in the development of modern education. In order to replace the classical education embodied in traditional academies, the late Qing reformist rapidly expanded the number of modern schools, which could only be sustained by large state or public investment and tuition paying students. Yet the proliferating modern schools was not connected to specific social values – unlike the official title holders in the *keju* era, who could shift to non-official or semi-official ventures even without placement in the government. Unable to find an immediate answer to define the social value of education, the education reformists could only explain the disconnection between education and vocation by the students' desire for better position in the society, which was regarded as a residue of the office-seeking mentality from the *keju* era. This moralized perspective, which condemned unemployed students as excessive and detrimental to the society, evolved into radical ideas about macro control of the number of students in the 1920s.

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<sup>67</sup>Strauss 1995. In her recent book, Strauss has further explored the identity of public administrators under the Nationalist and Communist regimes. Strauss 2019, pp. 57–75.

<sup>68</sup>Sun 1981, vol. 3, pp. 346–52.

<sup>69</sup>Chu 2018, pp. 93–99.

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