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The Institutional Status of Military Jinshi in the Qing Dynasty: A Comparative Study of Civil and Military Examinations

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Abstract. The imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty included two parallel tracks: the civil examination and the military examination. However, their functions and symbolic statuses within the national system were not the same. The obvious difference lies in the way their academic titles were preserved. The official titles of military scholars who passed the imperial examination were mainly preserved through the golden list, the imperial examination record and the court archives, and no corresponding system of inscriptions on steles was formed. This article takes this difference as the entry point to inquire why the Qing Dynasty state adopted different institutional treatments and symbolic recording methods for the civil and military subjects. The article holds that this disparity should not be simply understood as "valuing civil over military affairs", but rather as the different institutional functional positioning made by the state for the two types of talents: civil achievements are embedded in the country's cultural, ceremonial and elite identity system, while military achievements are more often positioned as professional qualifications within the military administrative system. The article reveals the institutional logic behind this difference through a comparison of four dimensions: examination content, career prospects, display of fame and status, and symbolic representation. This study thus contributes to an understanding of how the Qing state classified and governed different categories of elites through institutionalized symbolic distinctions.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty, Military Examination, Military Jinshi, Civil and Military Examinations

1. Introduction

The imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty included two parallel official selection tracks: the civil examination and the military examination. Both were presided over by the state and produced jinshi (a title granted to those who passed the highest level of the imperial examination) through hierarchical examinations, thus having a considerable degree of correspondence in terms of institutional form. However, this parallelism does not imply that the two have exactly the same functions and symbolic status in the national system [1]. One of the most notable differences is the way the titles of both civil and military jinshi are preserved in the national memory. The names,

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native places and rankings of the imperial scholars who passed the imperial examination in the Qing Dynasty were long engraved on the inscriptions of the imperial scholars in the Imperial College in Beijing, forming a permanent and public memorial system [2]. There is also a formal ranking system for military examinations. The ranking list of military jinshi (those who passed the highest level of the military examination) could be publicly displayed outside the Chang'an Gate for a period of time and then returned to the central government for preservation [3]. This indicates that military achievements have not been excluded from official public recognition. Therefore, what is more worthy of investigation is why this recognition has not developed into a long-term and fixed memorial system corresponding to the folk inscriptions of jinshi. This difference is more worthy of study than the simple "public and non-public" distinction. Both the civil and military subjects had systems such as the golden list, the palace examination, and the official appointment of officials. However, in terms of how the state preserved, materialized, and long-term spread their honors and reputations, there were obvious differences between the two. The resulting question is: Does this difference reflect the different institutional positioning of civil and military talents by the Qing state? Why is it that the state was willing to embed the achievements of civil jinshi into the Imperial Academy, a space with strong ritual and cultural symbolic significance, while the achievements of military jinshi were mainly preserved through the golden list, registration records, and court archives? This article does not simply interpret the fact that the military examination has no inscriptions as the state "not attaching importance to the military examination", but raises further questions: How did the Qing state classify and position the two types of talents, civil and military, through different institutional arrangements and symbolic forms?

Research on the civil examination system has formed a relatively mature academic tradition. Ho Pingti discussed the relationship between the imperial examination system and the formation of elites from the perspective of social mobility [4]. Elman further emphasized the connection between the imperial examination system and cultural capital, bureaucratic systems, and the reproduction of the elite [5]. These studies provide a foundation for understanding the significance of the imperial examination system as a national official selection system, although their main focus remained on the imperial examination system and the elite civil officials it produced. The research of military examinations started relatively late and has long lacked a systematic approach. Xu Yougen provides an overview of the historical development of the imperial examination system [6], while Li Lin systematically examines the design, quota, candidate groups, appointment, transfer, and practical operation of the imperial examination system through official history, regulations, local chronicles, and imperial examination archives [7]. However, the relative marginalization of military examination research should not be construed as a complete lack of academic research. Wang Jinlong reconstructed the number of military jinshi based on materials such as *Qing Shilu*, Daily Notes, Xiaojinbang, and "military jinshi registration records", reflecting the difficulties caused by the dispersion of military examination materials [8]. The follow-up research further examined the examinee population, social background, examination results, career trajectories, as well as the relationship between military examinations and the banner system [9-12]. These studies gradually laid a relatively systematic foundation for understanding the operation and social composition of the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty.

Therefore, the research gap is no longer simply that military examinations have not received sufficient academic attention. On the contrary, existing academic research mainly focuses on institutional structure, examination procedures, candidate groups and professional achievements, while relatively less attention is paid to how military achievements are commemorated, preserved and incorporated into the symbolic and ritual order of the state. This distinction is particularly

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important for current research as it shifts the focus from how military examinations operate to how states represent and remember those who succeed in military examinations. In particular, the relationship between the civil official jinshi stele and other forms of records, such as the military examination ranking table and the military jinshi record, as a matter of institutional and symbolic distinction, has not been fully studied. Therefore, this article takes "military jinshi did not have a corresponding inscriptions system for civil jinshi" as the entry point. Based on the existing research on the history of the imperial examination system, it proposes a comparative perspective on how the Qing state recognized, recorded, and preserved the achievements of different types of official candidates. The core issue of this article is: Why did the Qing Dynasty state develop different institutional treatments and symbolic record-keeping methods in the civil and military imperial examinations? What kind of national talent value ranking and governance logic does this difference reflect? This article adopts a method that combines the comparative analysis of systems with the analysis of historical documents, taking the civil examination as a reference, to analyze the characteristics of the military examination in different dimensions. The analysis did not simply take the civil examination as the criterion for measuring the military examination. On the contrary, comparison was used to identify the different institutional functions assigned by the Qing government to civil and military candidates. The primary historical materials mainly include *the Great Qing Code*, the great and small Jinbangs of the military examination, the records of military jinshi's admission to the imperial examinations, and related archival materials of the Qing Dynasty. These written materials are supplemented by the existing inscriptions of jinshi in the Imperial College of Beijing, providing a material basis for the study of different ways of preserving and publicly displaying civil and military achievements. The secondary literature includes the research of Ho Pingti, Elman, Li Lin, Wang Jinlong and others.

The significance of this study lies in expanding the research on the examination history of the Qing Dynasty from examination procedures and enrollment mechanisms to issues of institutional memory and symbolic representation. Rather than simply understanding the military examination as a secondary version of the civil examination, this article attempts to illustrate that the military imperial examination system had an independent institutional function, and its distinction from the civil examination system revealed how the Qing Dynasty classified and governed different types of elites. By examining institutional arrangements and symbolic forms of commemoration, this study attempts to explain how states endow civil and military achievements with different forms of visibility, persistence and political significance.

2. Characteristics of the military examination in the Qing Dynasty

The military examination in the Qing Dynasty was an important system for the state to select and recruit military talents through examinations. Together with the civil examination (wenke), they formed the two main paths for selecting officials based on the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty. The structure of the basic institutions is relatively simple. The levels of the military examination system were wutongshi (military prefectural examinations), wuxiangshi (military provincial examinations), wuhuishi (military metropolitan examinations), and wudianshi (military palace examinations). Those who passed the above examinations were eventually appointed to the position of wujinshi (military jinshi). Based on the above, the system of military examinations was not irregular or unofficial in the selection of talented individuals for the army; rather, it was an officially organized system by the government that had clearly defined examination levels, qualification procedures and entry paths. However, the fact that the military examination system had a full institutional system does not mean that its institutional functions were the same as those of the

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civil examination in the political order of the Qing Dynasty. Therefore, when studying the features of the military examinations in the Qing Dynasty, attention should also be paid to other aspects. What kind of talents will be selected by this system? How will these talents be integrated into the bureaucratic system? And how will their achievements be later documented and showcased by the state? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to clarify the historical position of the military examination within the Qing state.

The imperial examination system of the Qing Dynasty did not appear out of nowhere. It continued to select military talents by means of examinations, as before. However, the Qing Dynasty did not simply follow the practices of the previous dynasty. It incorporated the military examination system into its military framework—a structure where the Eight Banners and the Green Camp coexisted. Therefore, the operation and purpose of the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty were influenced by the tradition of the imperial examinations of previous dynasties, but at the same time, they were also shaped by the political structure and military requirements of the Qing Dynasty. The military examination system of the Qing Dynasty should not be viewed only in light of the general history of ancient Chinese military examinations, but rather within the context of the military and political system of the Qing Dynasty. In terms of the history of the imperial examination system itself, the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty was a continuation of the imperial examination system, especially the selection of talents with military skills through hierarchical examinations. However, from the perspective of military governance in the Qing Dynasty, the role of military examinations was more constrained by the existing military system of the Qing Dynasty and the division of labor among various military groups. That is to say, the imperial examination system was not only a general mode of cultivating military talents but also an institution for selecting certain kinds of military candidates for the administration of the Qing Dynasty. This will contribute to learning more about the institutional conditions for the military imperial examination system. Its historical continuity explains why the military examination system of the Qing Dynasty still had a recognizable examination structure. It was added to the military system of the Qing Dynasty and had different functions and restrictions than those under previous dynasties. Therefore, the following discussion will explore how the Qing government organized the military examination, how military jinshi were incorporated into the bureaucracy, and how their qualifications and achievements were recorded and promoted later on.

2.1. The historical evolution of the military examination system in Qing Dynasty

During the Jiaqing period, the cultural examination was changed from a policy essay to a dictation of *the Military Classic*. This shift reflected a broader change in how the state understood military selection. Emperor Jiaqing emphasized that the selection of scholars in the military examination should be based on the skills of horseback riding and archery. He also believed that dictation of military classics could preserve the basic cultural requirements and reduce the drawbacks such as ghostwriting. Some officials, however, advocated for the restoration of policy essays. They argued that cultural competence still helped to discern the wisdom and moral principles of military officers.

The change from policy essays to dictation of *the Military Classic* should not be simply understood as the state's denial of cultural ability. It was, more precisely, a reordering of the types of talents that the military examination should select. Compared with the civil examination, the military examination was positioned more clearly as a channel for selecting officials centered on military skills and practical abilities. This does not mean that cultural ability lost all value. It means that the state, when forced to choose what mattered most in a military officer, placed martial skill above literary competence.

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2.2. Regional and ethnic dimensions

The Eight Banners system was a type of institution in the Qing Dynasty that differed from those in previous dynasties regarding the military examination system. The Manchu and Mongolian Eight Banners were gradually integrated into the military examination system to perform the function of selecting military officers, and at the same time, the tradition of horseback archery, the community identity of the Eight Banners, and the construction of military power were also incorporated [13]. Therefore, the military examination system of the Qing Dynasty was not merely an application of the civil service examination system; rather, it served as an institutional mechanism for selecting officials among the various ethnic groups and soldiers in the Qing Empire. Therefore, the talents chosen by the military examination system had a different institutional status than those of the civil examination scholars. The military examination system in the Qing Dynasty was characterized by academic marginality, differentiation from previous generations, regional and ethnic differences, and institutional evolution. The above features show that the system of military examinations was not merely an application of the system for civil service examinations, but rather a system with its own functions. It provides the foundation for the following analysis of the institution's status from a comparative perspective.

3. Differences in institutional status between the civil and military examinations in the Qing Dynasty

It is worth noting that the institutional status mentioned does not equate to a simple distinction of high or low, noble or humble. Instead, it refers to the institutional functions and symbolic meanings that the state bestows upon different types of talents through mechanisms such as examination rules, official appointment systems, symbolic ceremonies, and methods of recording achievements and titles.

3.1. Manifestation of the difference

The four attributes of the differences in institutional status between the military examination system and the civil examination system in the Qing Dynasty are examined here: examination contents, career paths, public display of achievements and symbolic representation. The four attributes are in the sequence of occurrences: first, what is to be evaluated; second, what official title will be awarded upon successful completion of the test; third, how this title will be formally documented; and finally, what distinctions can be drawn at the level of symbols. The four dimensions are not independent but rather different expressions of the same institutional logic at different stages. Table 1 is a summary of the main differences, and the following text provides more details.

Table 1. The main differences in institutional status

Dimension	Civil examination	Military examination	Nature of difference
Examination content	Classical texts, policy essays, poetry	Archery and horsemanship (primary); military classics (secondary)	Cultural competence vs. martial skill

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Table 1. (continued)

Career paths	From the Hanlin Academy to the central civil bureaucracy	From imperial guards and garrison offices to military administration (Eight Banners, Green Standard)	Cultural-administrative vs. military-administrative
Public display of achievements	Golden list; permanent, publicly displayed steles at Guozijian	Golden list; registration records; periodic, official archives	Permanent memorial vs. administrative preservation
Symbolic representation	Embedded in the state's cultural, ritual, and elite identity system	Embedded in the military administrative and officer supply system	State-defining vs. state-serving

3.1.1 Differences in examination content

The State's definition of "military examination talent" can be seen more clearly in the changes to the examination content. The military examinations of the Qing Dynasty did not always focus on archery and horsemanship. During the reigns of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, the imperial examinations were still required for entry into the military, and thus both literacy and martial prowess were expected of the officers. By the Jiaqing period, however, the policy essays had been changed to dictation of *the Military Classic*. This change in the culture of examination shows that the state has begun to use it more obviously to select individuals with military skills and practical abilities. After the Jiaqing reign, the selection criteria for the military examination gradually shifted toward emphasizing martial skills, and this change also affected the subsequent career paths of military examination candidates [14]. The significance of this shift lies in the fact that it shows the state was not simply lowering the cultural requirements of the military examination, but was redefining what kind of person was most suitable to enter the national bureaucratic system through the military examination. Unlike the civil examination, which shapes the cultural capital of Confucianism through means such as classics and strategic essays, the military examination has gradually placed greater emphasis on horseback riding, archery, skills and military knowledge [15]. As a result, the civil and military subjects not only formed different groups of jinshi in terms of examination results, but also constructed two different types of talents at the institutional level.

3.1.2 Differences in career paths

The institutional differences among civil and military jinshi were also reflected in the paths to entering public service. Civil jinshi, especially the first-class jinshi, usually had a system channel to enter the Hanlin system, enabling them to further participate in national documents, academic and political affairs. The military scholars who passed the imperial examination mainly entered the military official system of the Qing Dynasty. Some entered the court guard system, while others entered the military administrative systems such as the Eight Banners or the Green Camp. Although there were adjustments in the official conferment system at different historical stages of the Qing

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Dynasty, on the whole, military honors were more directly linked to the supply system of military officials [16]. Therefore, the two cannot be simply compared as central politics and local military camps. A more accurate statement would be that the civil jinshi were more often incorporated into the civil service system centered on Confucianism, official documents and administrative governance. The military examination jinshi were mainly incorporated into the military officer system centered on military capabilities, guards and military administration. Most of those who originated from the military examination eventually held positions at the grassroots military officer level below the fifth grade, while the proportion of those promoted to higher grades was relatively low. This phenomenon indicates that the military examination system had a clear national function, but the bureaucratic system through which it led to fame and fortune was different from that of the civil jinshi. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the military examination system performed different national functions rather than the civil examination: the civil examination mainly provided cultural and administrative elites for the country, while the military examination provided officials with technical and courageous qualifications for military governance.

3.1.3 Differences in public display of achievements

In terms of form, both the civil and military examinations had the nationally recognized golden list system. The Qing examination results list was called the Golden List, which was divided into the Large Golden List and the Small Golden List. Both the civil and military examinations had their corresponding golden lists. The Large Golden List was used for public display, while the Small Golden List was used for the emperor's inspection and for announcing rankings at ceremonies. The military Golden List was hung at the right gate of Chang'an and was taken back to the cabinet for preservation three days later. These arrangements indicate that military examination results were also publicly displayed and formally recognized by the state. For this reason, the disparity between the civil and military examinations cannot be summarized as the claim that the civil examination was made public while the military examination was not. The military examination also enjoyed formal and public national honors. What is truly worth noting is that the long-term memory mechanisms formed after the two were publicly displayed were different. The titles of successful civil candidates were further fixed on the steles at the Imperial College, providing a permanent material carrier for their names, native places, and rankings, and placing them in one of the highest educational and ritual spaces in the country. This system of steles transformed the one-time success of the imperial examination into a long-standing national historical record. In contrast, although the military examination had various forms of records—the large and small golden lists, the military jinshi registration records—no systematic and permanent tradition of inscriptions corresponding to the civil jinshi steles has been discovered so far. This has produced two different pathways of national memory. For the civil examination, the process moved from the palace examination to the golden list, then to the stele inscription, and finally to a long-term and fixed public memorial. For the military examination, the process moved from the palace examination to the golden list, then to the registration records and archival preservation, and finally to a public but relatively periodic form of commemoration. This distinction does not imply that military honors are "not recognized", but rather indicates that the state has adopted different forms of preservation and symbolic resource allocation methods for the two types of honors.

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3.1.4 Differences in symbolic representation

Looking at the examination system, career prospects and records of fame and fortune together, the differences between the civil and military subjects are not mutually isolated, but rather manifestations of the same institutional logic at different stages. The scholars who passed the imperial examination in the civil examination were incorporated into the Guozijian, a space for Confucian education and national ritual, and were commemorated for a long time through inscriptions on steles. Their official careers were closely linked to the Hanlin Academy, the civil service system and cultural governance. These institutional arrangements jointly strengthen the connection between culture and the cultural orthodoxy of the state [17]. The military examination was different. It also had formal palace examinations, golden lists and official appointment systems, indicating that the military examination was not a marginal system outside the national system. However, its examination content, career prospects and ways of preserving fame and fortune all revolve around military functions. Military achievements can be publicly announced, but they do not receive the same form of permanent inscriptions as those in the civil examination. The real difference between the civil and military examinations does not lie in whether the state recognizes military achievements and honors, but in the form in which the state recognizes them and how long such recognition is designed to last. The recognition of the civil examination was engraved in stone and placed in the permanent space of ritual; military examination results were written on paper and kept in the administrative archives. One is built for public memory, and the other is designed for official records. This contrast reflects two different logics of national talent classification. The civil examination system is more deeply embedded in the country's culture, ritual and elite identity system. The military examination system is more deeply embedded in military governance and the supply system of military officials. This is not a simple binary opposition between "important" and "unimportant", but rather an institutionalized distinction between two functions and two symbolic values.

3.2. Essence of the differences

Why did the Qing Dynasty adopt different institutional arrangements for civil and military jinshi? The key does not lie in the simple valuing civil over military affairs, but in the fact that the Qing state endowed civil and military talents with different institutional functions. The civil examination system is not only a mechanism for selecting officials but also an important component of the national cultural order. The status of jinshi was associated with Confucian knowledge, the status of scholar-officials, and the national ritual system. Therefore, the achievements in the civil examination not only had bureaucratic significance but also played a role in shaping the cultural orthodoxy of the country. The tombstone inscribed with the title of jinshi is located in the Imperial College. Its physical space itself links personal fame and fortune with the country's education, ritual system and cultural memory. The military examination has more explicit military and administrative functions. The examination revolved around horsemanship, archery, martial arts and related military knowledge. Subsequently, the military jinshi entered the military officer systems, such as the guards, the Eight Banners, or the Green Camp. The state recognized these honors, but the recognition mainly served the selection and allocation of military talent. It was not further transformed into a permanent symbol of cultural identity, as in the civil examination.

The key difference, then, is one of form rather than fact. Both tracks were recognized; the question is how that recognition was materialized and how long it was meant to last. Civil recognition was embedded in stone and placed in a permanent ritual space. Military recognition was

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recorded on paper and kept in administrative archives. For this reason, the absence of a stele for military jinshi cannot be directly attributed to a deliberate exclusion policy—there is no material showing the court ever decided against erecting one. A more cautious explanation is that the functional differentiation of the two examinations within the national system produced different degrees and forms of symbolic institutionalization.

The Jiaqing reform supports this reading. The shift from policy essays to dictation of *the Military Classics* did not mean the state abandoned cultural requirements for military officers. It meant the state redefined what kind of ability mattered most in a military officer. That redefinition contrasted with the cultural and ritual functions the civil examination continued to serve.

Taken together, the differences in examination content, career paths, and forms of recognition point in the same direction. The civil and military examinations were not two versions of one institution, but two channels serving different state functions. The civil examination produced cultural and administrative elites whose authority rested on Confucian learning and ritual. The military examination produced officers whose qualifications rested on military skill and administrative competence. Civil achievements were more readily converted into cultural authority and long-term symbolic capital. Military achievements were more readily converted into military qualifications and administrative positions. This does not mean the military examination lacked national value. It means its value was realized mainly through the military administrative system, not through the cultural and ritual system.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the institutional status of the military examination in the Qing Dynasty through a comparison with the civil examination. The Qing state did not simply treat the two tracks according to a "valuing civil over military" principle. It assigned them different institutional functions across four dimensions: examination content, career paths, public display of achievements, and symbolic representation.

The military examination was not always oriented toward martial skill alone; the Jiaqing reform marked a reordering of what the state considered most suitable for a military officer. Civil jinshi entered the civil service system centered on Confucian learning and governance, while military jinshi entered the military officer system through the imperial guards, the Eight Banners, or the Green Standard forces. Both tracks had formal golden lists, but their long-term memory mechanisms differed: civil jinshi were commemorated through permanent steles at the Imperial College, while military jinshi were preserved through registration records and archival documents.

Taken together, these differences reflect the Qing state's differentiated governance of different types of elites. The civil examination was integrated into the state's cultural, ritual, and elite identity systems; the military examination was positioned within the military administrative system. The absence of a stele system for military jinshi should not be read as administrative oversight or as proof that the state "underestimated" the military examination. It is more likely a symbolic outcome of the different functions the two examinations performed within the state's governance system.

This study thus shifts the analytical focus from whether military examination graduates were recognized to why the Qing state recognized civil and military talent in different ways. Its value lies in what it reveals about the institutionalized difference itself: how the Qing state understood the relationship between culture, military, bureaucracy, and the state, and how symbolic distinctions between different categories of talent were built into the structure of governance.

The defect of this paper is that the existing military examination archives are less comprehensive than those of the civil examinations. Therefore, it is still difficult to carry out a full-scale comparison

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of the symbolic dissemination and social acceptance of the military jinshi achievements. In addition, this paper has only used state institutions and official documents; it has not explored in detail how local society views the fame of military examinations. Future research can compare how civil and military achievements were disseminated in different historical periods. It can also draw on local gazetteers, genealogies, epitaphs, and personal collections to examine how the symbolic value of military jinshi achievements was gained or lost in local society.

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