

The Examination System and the Dissemination of Western Knowledge during the Late Qing

Iwo Amelung (阿梅龍)

Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

摘要

The traditional Chinese examination system was abolished in 1905. This dramatic end of an important and enduring institution of Imperial China, somehow overshadows the fact, that the examination system had been dramatically reformed in 1902, when for the first time questions on “politics, science and technology of all countries of the world” (*geguo zhengzhi yixue* 各國政治藝學) were asked within the framework of the examination system. It is my contention here that these so called “policy questions” (*cewen* 策問) and the resulting essays (*celun* 策論) of the reformed examination system for a brief but quite crucial time served as a very important vehicle for the propagation of Western Knowledge in China. This is especially true since the changes of the system also for the first time forced those examinees, who normally were not interested in this kind of knowledge to acquaint themselves with such knowledge. It is important here to recall that more than 50,000 men of China’s intellectual and future administrative elite took part in the provincial and metropolitan examinations between 1902 and 1904.

In my paper I will look systematically into the questions asked in the provincial and the metropolitan examinations between 1902 and 1904 and will analyze a substantial number of selected examination essays. I will ask and answer the following questions: How did examiners and candidates prepare for the examinations? Did the material used for the preparations constitute “up-to-date” and reliable Western knowledge? Are there indications that the examinees were able to operationalize and apply Western knowledge for projects reaching beyond the examination system? In answering these questions I will also suggest that exposure to Western knowledge within the framework of the examination system for quite a number of candidates was of great importance for preparing them for the role many of them would play once the process of China’s modernization started in earnest.