

A Survey of 21st-Century Scholarship on the Late Qing Imperial Examination History in China

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Abstract

In recent years, Chinese scholars have increasingly focused on the Late Qing imperial examination. The growing interest in imperial examination studies has led to the annual publication of numerous books and articles on this subject. A systematic review of studies categorized by period, region, key figures, institutional structures, and source materials reveals that Late Qing imperial examination history research suffers from fragmentation. A thorough reexamination of earlier scholarship is urgently needed to foster new breakthroughs. In light of these limitations, future research should focus on closing gaps in Late Qing imperial examination history studies, undertaking more in-depth analysis of historical sources, and identifying potential areas for innovative contributions.

Keywords

Late Qing, Imperial Examination History, Research Fragmentation, Research Prospects.

1. Introduction

Research on the Late Qing imperial examination history is closely tied to period-specific studies of Qing examination history. As scholarship becomes increasingly detailed and specialized¹, new directions have emerged that have greatly benefited Late Qing imperial examination history studies in China. Notable academic gatherings include the workshop “No Turning Back: Rethinking the Centennial Abolition of the Imperial Examination”² and “The Imperial Examination System and Examination Culture in Modern China,”³ both of which, along with the 23rd Imperial Examination Studies Forum, showcased a wealth of related research and attracted numerous scholars. Although there is already a substantial body of dedicated scholarship on the Late Qing imperial examination history, major studies of the broader Qing examination history—such as *The Comprehensive History of the Chinese Imperial Examination System: Qing Dynasty Volume*, *Research on False Registration in the Qing Imperial Examination*, and *The Qing Educational Administration System and the Imperial Power Structure*—also address the Late Qing era. This overlap makes synthesizing existing research all the more challenging. Nonetheless, the primary goal in reviewing the scholarship on the Late Qing imperial examination history is not to compile an exhaustive list of all existing works, but rather to pinpoint the field’s current challenges and propose potential solutions. Accordingly, this paper focuses on representative scholarship produced since the turn of the century, supplemented by themes from recent conferences involving unpublished research. By consciously avoiding studies that subsume Late Qing examination history research under

¹ Wang Xueshen: *Research Trends and Commentary on the Study of Qing Dynasty Imperial Examination History before 2020*, *Education and Examinations*, No. 2 (2022).

² Department of History, Fudan University, and the Center for Comparative Studies of Modernization, Fudan University: *No Turning Back: Rethinking the Centennial Abolition of the Imperial Examination*, Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2020.

³ Yuan Jinshan: *Summary of the Academic Symposium on “Imperial Examinations and Examination Culture in Modern China”*, *Journal of Imperial Examination*, No. 2 (2021).

general Qing examination scholarship, it seeks to offer more targeted references for those investigating the Late Qing period. Given the scope of this study and the author's own limitations, any omitted research is acknowledged with apologies.

2. Current Research Status of Late Qing Imperial Examination History Studies

Thanks to the growing interest in imperial examination studies, scholars in China publish annual review articles on the subject. However, these articles often organize their findings into more than a dozen scattered categories. This paper classifies Late Qing imperial examination history research by returning to fundamental historical review methods, arranging the discussion by the most critical elements: chronology, region, key figures, institutions, and source materials. Of course, scholarship in each category frequently intersects. To maintain clarity, the paper will not repeat overlapping findings.

2.1. Research Organized by Chronology

Because time is central to historical inquiry, chronologically oriented research on the Late Qing imperial examination history typically falls into three categories. The first explores major imperial-examination events at key historical moments. The second traces the complex course of examination reforms and abolitions in the Late Qing era. The third examines the aftermath of the imperial examination's abolition during the final years of the Qing dynasty. In the first category, individual imperial examination incidents function as pivotal nodes that shape chronologically arranged studies of the Late Qing imperial examination history, focusing mainly on particular exams and examination-related legal cases. Not every imperial exam has piqued scholarly interest. Today's research instead tends to focus on those with unique characteristics—for example, exams relocated or merged due to wartime disruptions⁴ or those shaped by significant Late Qing events⁵. Legal disputes tied to the imperial examinations—where examination history meets legal history—have garnered more scholarly attention⁶. For instance, specialized works on the legal facets of Qing imperial examinations, such as *Research on False Registration in the Qing Imperial Examination*⁷, explore some Late Qing examination cases. At present, the 1858 Shuntian provincial examination case stands out for its extensive research coverage⁸, prompting Xing Yuanyuan to label it a politically and culturally

⁴ Yang Qifu, *Imperial Examinations during Wartime: The 9th Year of Xianfeng Reign (1859) Jiangsu and Anhui Provincial Examinations Held in Zhejiang*, presented at the “Imperial Examination System and Examination Culture in Modern China” Academic Conference, 2021. Zhang Huateng and Fan Ke: *A Study of the Joint Shaanxi-Shanxi Provincial Exams in the Renyin and Guimao Years at the Close of the Qing Dynasty*, *Journal of Shanxi University*, No. 4 (2017).

⁵ An Dongqiang: *Rounds of Late Qing Imperial Examinations and Their Role in Selecting Talent*, *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University*, No. 5 (2013). Han Ce: *The Aftermath of Southeast Mutual Defense: Debates Between Court Officials and Provincial Authorities on Postponing the Xinchou Provincial Examinations*, *Modern Chinese History Studies* No. 2 (2017). Wang Jing: *Were the Imperial Examinations Terminated Early?—Suspensions under the Boxer Protocol and Responses from Officials and Scholars*, *Modern Chinese History Studies* No. 6 (2024). Peng Jing: *Changes and Consequences of the Jiangnan Examination Hall before and after the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom*, presented at the 23rd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies, 2024.

⁶ Zhang Liang: *Restoring Order and Security in Late Qing Sichuan's Children's Exams: The “Lu Wendou Incident” and the Suppression of Gun-Rack and Laowan Banditry*, presented at the conference “The Imperial Examination System and Examination Culture in Modern China.” Qiu Yanfang: *Power Imbalance between Provincial Governors-General and Education Commissioners in the Late Qing: An Analysis Centered on the Examination Riot during the Guangxu 8th Year (1882) Sichuan Provincial Exams*, *Journal of Heihe University* No. 6 (2022). Wang Jing: *Scholar Protests, Restoration and Revocation of Degrees, and the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Examinations in the Late Qing: A Case Study of the Wenzhou Prefectural Exam Incident*, *History Research and Teaching*, No. 1 (2024).

⁷ Liu Xiwei: *A Study of False Residency Claims in Qing Dynasty Imperial Examinations*, Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2012.

⁸ Li Guorong, *A Brief Account of the Examination Scandal during the Shuntian Provincial Exams of Xianfeng 8 (1858)*, *Historical Archives*, No. 4 (1986). Jia Shucun: *An Inquiry into the Wuwu (1858) Examination Scandal*, *Journal of Anhui University*, No. 2 (2006). Han Junqiang: *Revisiting Examination Scandals in the Qing Dynasty: A Focus on the Wuwu (1858) Case*, *Journal of Kangding Nationality Teachers College*, No. 5 (2008). Xing Yuanyuan: *Late Qing Social Mindsets as Reflected in Varied*

representative episode of the Late Qing⁹. Second, the chief focus of chronologically organized research on the Late Qing imperial examination history revolves around reforms and the eventual abolition of the system. Because imperial examination reforms and abolition marked pivotal moments in examination history, numerous studies explore this topic¹⁰. Notable contributions include Guan Xiaohong's *The Suspension and Abolition of the Imperial Examination and Political Conditions in the Late Qing*¹¹ and *Revision of Examination Regulations and Abolition of the Imperial Examination in the Late Qing*¹², along with Yang Guoqiang's "When the World Is in Turmoil, Official Rank Has Many Paths": *The Constrained Opportunities of Late Qing Examination Candidates*¹³. Notably, scholars have drawn on the wealth of surviving Late Qing materials—such as contemporary newspapers, novels, and personal memoirs—to examine public opinion concerning the reform and abolition of the imperial examination¹⁴. This approach highlights one fruitful pathway for analyzing how and why the Late Qing exam system was transformed. Lastly, although the imperial examination was officially abolished, scholarly inquiry into its history continued. One traditional line of research analyzes the wide-ranging impact of abolition on Late Qing society, exemplified by Luo Zhitian's influential study *The Social Consequences of the Abolition of the Imperial Examination in the Countryside*¹⁵ among others¹⁶. In recent years, though, scholars such as Zhang Zhongmin and Guan Xiaohong have reexamined the post-abolition era, revealing that the imperial examination did not completely vanish in 1905. This "abolished yet still lingering" system has since become a noteworthy topic in Late Qing examination studies¹⁷.

Interpretations of the Wuwu Examination Scandal, Journal of Soochow University, No. 4 (2020).

⁹ Xing Yuanyuan: *Late Qing Social Attitudes Reflected in Varied Understandings of the Wuwu (1858) Examination Scandal, Journal of Soochow University*, No. 4 (2020).

¹⁰ Li Qi: *Local Governors-General and the Reform of the Late Qing Imperial Examination System, Journal of Yangzhou College of Education*, No. 2 (1999). Liu Shaohun: *Reforming and Abolishing the Imperial Examination System in the Late Qing, Social Sciences Journal* No. 5 (2001); and *A Probe into Late Qing Imperial Examination Reforms, in Collected Essays Commemorating the 20th Anniversary of Educational History Research*, published by the Chinese Local Educational History Society and the *Education History Research* editorial board, 2009. Li Chao: *The Abolition of the Late Qing Military Examination and Its Connection to Local Governors-General, Journal of Taiyuan Normal University*, No. 4 (2011). Zhang Xianzhong, *The Crisis of Mainstream Ideology and the Rupture of the Traditional Moral Order in the Late Qing: A Case Study of the Abolition of the Imperial Examination, Hebei Academic Journal* No. 6 (2014). Gu Dan, *A Study of the Abolition of the Imperial Examination in the Late Qing*, Master's Thesis, Liaoning Normal University, 2011.

¹¹ Guan Xiaohong: *The Suspension and Abolition of the Imperial Examination and Political Conditions in the Late Qing, Social Sciences in China*, No. 3 (2004).

¹² Guan Xiaohong: *Revision of Examination Regulations and Abolition of the Imperial Examination in the Late Qing*, No. 1 (2013).

¹³ Yang Guoqiang: "When the World Is in Turmoil, Official Rank Has Many Paths": *The Constrained Opportunities of Late Qing Examination Candidates, Journal of Qing History*, No. 2 (2021).

¹⁴ In recent years, these topics have been significant themes in domestic master's theses, for instance: Shi Shanqing: *Social Opinion and the Abolition of the Imperial Examination*, Master's Thesis, Fujian Normal University, 2008; Lyu Yanting: *A Study on Shenbao's Perspectives Regarding the Abolition of the Imperial Examination in the Late Qing (1901–1905)*, Master's Thesis, Jiangxi Normal University, 2014; Wang Haiqing: *A Tangle of Resentment and Admiration: Understanding the Voices Surrounding the Abolition of the Imperial Examination*, Master's Thesis, East China Normal University, 2015; Shen Shuoyao: *Modern Imperial Examination Reforms in Public Opinion: A Note-Based Inquiry*, Master's Thesis, Huaibei Normal University, 2018; Wu Xueli: *Portrayals of Imperial Examination Reform in Late Qing Novels*, Master's Thesis, Henan University, 2022.

¹⁵ Luo Zhitian: *Rural Social Consequences Following the Abolition of the Imperial Examination, Social Sciences in China* No. 1 (2006).

¹⁶ Research on this theme started relatively early and has spanned a considerable period. Notable contributions include: Wang Yuejin: *The Impact of the Imperial Examination's Abolition on Late Qing Exam-Oriented Literati, Journal of Nanjing University of Chemical Technology*, No. 4 (2001); Two studies by Yang Qifu: *The Abolition of the Imperial Examination and Modern Societal Transformation, Zhongzhou Academic Journal*, No. 4 (2002), and *Cultural Effects of the Late Qing Abolition of the Imperial Examination, Zhongzhou Academic Journal*, No. 2 (2004); Liu Chunhua: *Abolishing the Imperial Examination and Educational Reform in the Late Qing, Theoretical Journal* No. 7 (2006); Li Shiyu, *How the Abolition of the Imperial Examination Contributed to Rural Educational Underdevelopment, Exploration and Free Views*, No. 3 (2008); Miao Yongquan: *The Abolition of the Imperial Examination and the Modern Transformation of Chinese Civilization*, PhD dissertation, Shandong University, 2014; Li Fagen: *The Survival or Abolition of the Imperial Examination and Social Mobility in Late Qing Jiangnan, Modern Chinese History Studies*, No. 4 (2020); Jiang Baolin: *Restructuring the Examination Funding System after the Late Qing Abolition of the Imperial Examination, Modern Chinese History Studies*, No. 1 (2021); Zhang Liang: *Post-Abolition Options for Child-Students (Tongsheng) and Shengyuan: A Case Study of Southern Sichuan, Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, No. 3 (2024).

¹⁷ Particularly influential are a series of works by Zhang Zhongmin: "Exams without Being Exams": *The Preferential Recruitment Exam in Late Qing Zhejiang and Its Institutional Dilemmas, Historical Research*, No. 3 (2019); "No Exam, No Path?" *Late Qing*

2.2. Research Organized by Geography

Earlier research on the regional aspects of Late Qing imperial examination history tended to focus on major provinces and examination hubs like Shuntian and Guangdong¹⁸, thanks to their abundant archival resources and robust local scholarly communities. In recent years, however, lesser-studied provinces with less-developed examination systems have also garnered growing interest. Among these lesser-studied regions, Late Qing Gansu has received especially prominent attention¹⁹, for several notable reasons. First, Gansu experienced a major upheaval in its examination history with the division of the Shaanxi-Gansu examination venues, which drastically reshaped local examination practices during the final three decades of the imperial examination era. This development holds substantial value for scholars examining Late Qing local history. Second, the sustained development of local scholarly circles has given Gansu a solid base for imperial examination history research, paving the way for more in-depth studies. Publications like Chen Shangmin's *Research on Qing-Dynasty Gansu Jinshi*²⁰, have further anchored this foundation, while a strong focus on cultivating future researchers has also played an important role. Overall, the increasingly expansive regional approach to Late Qing examination history studies shows promise of continued development²¹.

2.3. Research Organized by Individuals (Groups)

Person-focused studies of the Late Qing imperial examination history have likewise been highly productive and can be grouped into two main categories: those on single individuals and those on broader social groups. Scholarship on individual Late Qing examination figures typically falls into three subgroups: participants, organizers, and onlookers. Research on participants has centered particularly on the imperial-examination references in *The Diary of Liu Dapeng*²², and has gradually broadened to explore the inner experiences of other examinees preparing for and taking the exams²³. Studies from the organizer viewpoint tend to focus on the roles and actions

Debates Between Court and Society on Whether to Suspend the Jiyou Preferential Exam, *Academic Research*, No. 7 (2019); *The Imperial Examination in Name Only: Late Qing Filial and Upright Recommendations and Their Court Examination*, *Journal of East China Normal University*, No. 5 (2022); *Leftover Echoes of the Imperial Examination: The Final "Miscellaneous Exams" and the "Court Examination" in the Late Qing*, *Historiography Monthly*, No. 7 (2024); along with several studies by Guan Xiaohong, including *How the Imperial Examination Was Brought to an End and the Problems Left Behind*, *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University*, No. 5 (2011); *The Chain Reaction of Suspending and Abolishing the Imperial Examination in the Late Qing*, *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University*, No. 1 (2013); and *Surviving Elements of Special Examinations after the Abolition of the Imperial Examination*, *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, No. 2 (2013). These works are among the most representative in the field. Other relevant studies include: Zhou Hangyu: *Investigating the 'Aftermath Examinations' in the Late Qing Imperial Examination System*, Master's Thesis, East China Normal University, 2019; Xu Yue: *Late Qing Preferential Examinations and the Joint Memorial by Shandong Governor Yuan Shuxun*, *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, No. 3 (2016).

¹⁸ More studies exist for major provinces. Examples include: Zou Haofei: *A Preliminary Exploration of 'Gun Substitution' in Late Qing Guangdong Imperial Examinations*, *Journal of Wuyi University*, No. 2 (2006). Zhao Na, *A Study of the Late Qing Shuntian Provincial Examination*, Master's Thesis, Xiamen University, 2007. Many other works also focus on this topic.

¹⁹ Representative studies include: Several works by Chen Shangmin, for example: *The Shaan-Gan Divided Examination Venue and Chronological Patterns of Gansu Jinshi in the Qing Dynasty*, *Qinghai Social Sciences*, No. 5 (2009); *Qinzhou Academy, Jinshi, and Modern Society*, *Journal of Tianshui Normal University*, No. 1 (2010); *A Discussion of the Late Qing Shaan-Gan Divided Examination Venue*, *Historical Archives*, No. 4 (2012); *Revisions to Late Qing Imperial Examination Regulations, Academy Reforms, and Ideological Changes Among Gansu Scholars, Education and Examination*, No. 4 (2018). Yang Yinquan: *A Comparative Study of the Geographical Distribution of Shaanxi Top Provincial Examinees Before and After the Shaan-Gan Divided Examination Venue*, *Journal of Xinyang Normal University*, No. 3 (2015). Shi Huanxia: *A Dissection of the Late Qing "Shaan-Gan Divided Examination" Incident and Its Insights into Current Preferential Policies in the College Entrance Examination*, *Education and Examination*, No. 6 (2010) Qu Ju, *A Study of Late Qing Gansu Jinshi*, Master's Thesis, Lanzhou University, 2006. In addition, Ji Hongbin has frequently contributed to forums on Late Qing Gansu imperial examinations, including *A Brief Analysis of the Five Policy Questions from the Dingyou-Year Provincial Examination in Qing Gansu*.

²⁰ Chen Shangmin: *A Study of Gansu Jinshi in the Qing Dynasty*. Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, 2013.

²¹ Wang Li: *Why Did Late Qing Zhuangyuan Often Emerge from Small Provinces?—A Study of Prominent Examination Figures from Smaller Provinces in the Qing*, presented at So Much to See: The 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies.

²² Wang Haiyan: *Liu Dapeng's Imperial Examination Complex*, *China Examinations*, No. 4 (2007). Du Liang and Peng Qilin: "Hard-Study" Culture and Its Limits: A Sociological Inquiry into the Late Qing Exam Experiences of Liu Dapeng, a Juren from Shanxi, *Tsinghua Journal of Education*, No. 6 (2022).

²³ Li Muzhou and Zhong Weichun: *Exploring Cross-Era Imperial Examination Figures through the Lens of Examination History: A*

of educational commissioners and other imperial examination officials²⁴. Examination “onlookers,” by contrast, are frequently studied in the context of missionaries and other foreign visitors to Late Qing China²⁵. Scholarship on broader imperial examination cohorts spans multiple angles, with particular emphasis on those who passed in the same exam year²⁶, families whose members shared examination success²⁷, geographically defined examination communities²⁸, and examiner groups²⁹. Nevertheless, numerous works on individuals or groups do little more than note how these figures obtained their degrees, thus shedding limited light on the broader history of the imperial examinations.

2.4. Research Organized by Systems

The imperial examination system has emerged as a major theme in recent scholarship on Late Qing political institutions³⁰, especially regarding the crises and reforms it underwent. Certain scholars examine how the exam system influenced shifts in educational institutions—particularly the evolution of traditional academies into modern schools³¹—while others look into modifications of examination procedures or the legal frameworks underpinning them³².

Case Study of Tang Wenzhi, Education and Examinations, No. 4 (2021). Wang Lei: *Between Imperial Exams and Modern Schools: The Struggles and Solutions of a Young Liu Yizheng (1901–1910)*, presented at the workshop “Region and Space: Old Approaches and New Perspectives in Imperial Examination Research,” hosted by the Center for Historical Geography, Fudan University, 2020.

Yu Zixia and Wang Haifeng, *Investigating Huang Yanpei’s Examination Experiences*, presented at the 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies. Yang Bin and You Yuhao, *Criticism and Aspiration: Late Qing Scholar Liu Shaokuan’s Perspective on the Imperial Examination*, *Journal of Anshun University*, No. 3 (2023).

²⁴ An Dongqiang: *Reform Proposals and Disputes over Provincial Education Commissioners in the Late Qing*, *Academic Research*, No. 3 (2012). Xie Junmei: *How Late Qing Imperial Exams Were Organized and Candidates Admitted: A Study of Several Provincial and Metropolitan Examinations Led by Weng Tonghe*, *Imperial Examination Studies Anthology*, No. 1 (2015). An Shaofan, *Educational Officials’ Career Tracks and Their Understanding of Western Knowledge during Late Qing School Reforms: Focus on Ye Changchi’s Early Post as Gansu Education Commissioner*, *Historiography Monthly*, No. 8 (2018). Zhang Zhongmin: “Exams without Being Exams”: *Zhi Hengrong and Preferential Exams in Late Qing Zhejiang*, in *No Turning Back: Rethinking the Centennial Abolition of the Imperial Examination*, edited by the Department of History, Fudan University, and the Center for Comparative Studies of Modernization, Fudan University, Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2020, pp. 293–345.

²⁵ Lin Liqiang: *The Late Qing Imperial Examination Through the Eyes of the American Missionary Justus Doolittle*, *International Sinology*, No. 1 (2004). Yuan Jinshan, *Identifying the “Other” during Late Qing Turmoil: The Reasons behind William Alexander Parsons Martin’s Praise of the Imperial Examination*, presented at the symposium “The Imperial Examination System and Examination Culture in Modern China.”

²⁶ Bu Yongjian and Li Lin: *Exam Halls, Eight-Legged Essays, and Changing Times: A Study of the 1886 (Guangxu 12) Bingxu Jinshi Cohort*, Hong Kong: Zhonghua Book Company, 2015. Li Lin: *The Last Disciples of the Emperor: The Late Qing Jinshiguan and Its Jinshi Groups*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017; Han Ce, *Imperial Examination Reform and the Final Jinshi*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017; and *Ups and Downs of the Guimao (1903) and Jiachen (1904) Jinshi Cohorts around the 1911 Revolution*, *Chinese Classics Journal*, No. 2 (2018), among others.

²⁷ Li Ruipiao: *Modern Transformations of Anhui Families Rooted in the Imperial Examination*, Master’s Thesis, Huaibei Normal University, 2020; Ye Mengnan: *Shifting Scholar Professions and Local Societal Changes Surrounding the Abolition of the Imperial Examination: A Case Study of the Yang Clan at Shaode Hall in Meicheng, Eastern Guangdong*, Master’s Thesis, Nanchang University, 2023, and others.

²⁸ Qu Ju: *A Study of Gansu Jinshi in the Late Qing*, Master’s Thesis, School of History and Culture, Lanzhou University, 2006; Li Junyi: *Investigations into Late Qing Juren and Jinshi in Rehe*, PhD Dissertation, Inner Mongolia University, 2016, among others.

²⁹ Wang Xiagang, *Late Qing Education Commissioners’ Efforts to Promote Learning and the Continuation of Modern Scholarship*, *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities*, No. 4 (2014). *Examiners and Examinees in Late Qing Primary Exams (Tongshi)*, *Education and Examination*, No. 1 (2023). Huang Tian: *Research on the Late Qing Jiangxi Education Commissioner*, Master’s Thesis, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, 2015, among others.

³⁰ Cui Zhihai: *A Decade of Late Qing Political History Research in China*, *Lanzhou Academic Journal*, No. 5 (2020).

³¹ Studies focusing on changes to exam venues include: Yang Rui: *Exam Halls in Late Qing Hubei*, Master’s Thesis, Huaibei Normal University, 2019; Xu Lu and Li Xiao: *The Late Qing Exam Hall in Taihe County, Anhui: A Historical Overview*, *Journal of Chaohu University*, No. 1 (2023). Research on shifts in examination management includes: Xie Junmei: *Exam Enforcement and Late Qing Official Governance*, *Journal of Yancheng Teachers University*, No. 3 (2007); Zeng Zhiping: *Restructuring Dining Utensils for the Late Qing Shuntian Provincial Exam and Its Debates* presented at the 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies; Zhang Wandong and Wang Xiaojing: *Salt Lijin Revenues and Examination Privileges: The Merchant Registration System in Late Qing Sichuan Salt Regions from the Perspective of Cultural Capital*, *Salt Industry History Research*, No. 4 (2020). Scholarship on changing pass rates includes: Two works by Wang Xiagang: *Analyzing Admission Rates in Late Qing Yuan Exams—Insights from Education Commissioners’ Diaries*, *Jinyang Academic Journal*, No. 3 (2022), and *Research on Late Qing Yuan Exam Reexaminations*, presented at the 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies; Zhang Ruilong: *Central vs. Local: How Expanded Quotas from Monetary Contributions Shaped Middle Quotas in Late Qing Provincial Exams*, *Modern Chinese History Studies*, No. 1 (2018), among others.

³² Zeng Shaodong: *Law and Society: A Critical Analysis of Late Qing Imperial Examination Regulations*, Master’s Thesis, Jiangxi

Of particular note are emerging breakthroughs, including scholarship on newly implemented Late Qing examination structures³³ and fresh attention to related institutions such as the Binxing System³⁴.

2.5. Research Organized by Sources

Among all the research categories, source-based studies of the Late Qing imperial examination history exhibit the greatest overlap with other approaches; nevertheless, they warrant a separate examination here. Scholarship that leverages Late Qing imperial examination history documents can be grouped into two main types. The first type involves investigations into the reading materials used for the Late Qing imperial examinations, spurred by contemporary trends in publishing and reading history. A prime example is Cao Nanping's *Reading Transformations and Knowledge Transitions: A Study of Late Qing Imperial Examination Textbooks*³⁵. The second type centers on research into surviving primary sources related to Late Qing imperial examinations. Depending on the nature of the materials, these studies typically draw on personal archives³⁶, public records³⁷, or official documents³⁸.

3. Research Issues and Future Directions

3.1. Problems in Late Qing Imperial Examination History Research: Multiple Forms of Fragmentation

By classifying recent studies into five categories, this review of the late Qing imperial examination history seeks to capture the current scholarly landscape and pinpoint existing issues, rather than simply enumerating accomplishments.

A key issue in current scholarship is the lack of continuity across time and space. The late Qing examination history represents a pivotal transitional phase in imperial examination history. While many Qing-era studies do consider the late Qing context and some late Qing research

Normal University, 2003; and *Legal Features of the Late Qing Imperial Examination: Focusing on the Imperially Approved Regulations for the Examination Halls*, *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, No. 10 (2005).

³³ Li Wenjie: *The Zhangjing Examination at the Late Qing Zongli Yamen and the Selection of Diplomats under the Imperial Examination System*, *Modern Chinese History Studies*, No. 2 (2011). Han Ce: *Imperial Examination Reform and the Origins of the Edict Establishing the Jinshiguan*, *Modern Chinese History Studies*, No. 1 (2015). Liu Haifeng: *Education First: Reforming the Imperial Examination Essays during the Late Qing New Policies*, *Education Research*, No. 9 (2024), among others.

³⁴ Qi Xiaofang: *Binxing in Late Qing Hunan*, Master's Thesis, Hunan Normal University, 2019; Jiang Qin and Liu Zhixiang: *Families, Gentry, and Binxing in Late Qing Songyang County, Zhejiang*, *Journal of Qing History*, No. 6 (2020); Zeng Guilin: *Evolving Binxing Practices in the Late Qing Imperial Examinations*, *Eastern Forum*, No. 6 (2021).

³⁵ Cao Nanping: *Reading Transitions and Shifting Knowledge: Research on Late Qing Imperial Examination Textbooks*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2018.

³⁶ Personal exam papers are the most frequent resource in individual archives. Notable examples include: Chen Shangmin: *Educational Development and Exam Experiences: Master-Disciple Relationships in the Zhujuan—A Case Study of Su Yaoquan's Metropolitan Exam Paper*, delivered at the 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies; Zhang Linjie: *Examining Liao Ping's Metropolitan Exam Paper (Zhijuan)*, *Education and Examinations*, No. 5 (2022); Tan Xiaohua: *An Analysis of the Imperial Examination Papers of Fu Zengxiang, a Major Modern-Era Book Collector*, *Journal of West China Normal University*, No. 2 (2022). Many other personal sources exist. For instance: Tang Ruzhao, *A Glimpse of the Late Qing Hui Prefecture Children's Exam Environment via Zhan Mingduo's My Little History*, *Journal of Huainan Normal University*, No. 6 (2020); Ye Peng: *Revisiting the Enrollment Age of Qing Dynasty Shengyuan: Reading Two Name Lists Compiled by Weng Xincun and Li Fen: The Life of Imperial Commissioners Sent to Oversee Late Qing Provincial Examinations: A Comparative Study of Shen Bingyuan, Sun Yuwen, and Yu Beiyun's Diaries in Sichuan*, both presented at the conference *The Imperial Examination System and Examination Culture in Modern China*; Lei Jingjing: *Life Narratives and Identity Crises: Imperial Examination Writing in Wenxianglou Poetry Draft*, presented at the 22nd International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Imperial Examination Studies.

³⁷ Public sources largely consist of newspapers and periodicals. For example, Jiang Jianguo's *Imperial Examination News, Exam Commerce, and Reader Perceptions in Late Qing Newspapers*, *Journalism & Communication Studies*, No. 6 (2021), is based on such public materials.

³⁸ Official documentation mainly comprises institutional regulations and archival materials. Notable studies include: Wang Xiagang: *Examining Modern Shanxi Education Commissioners through Archival Records*, *Shanxi Archives*, No. 3 (2020); Wang Fan: *A Brief Look at Candidate Rules in the Late Qing Jiangnan Examination Hall*, *Cultural Relics Authentication & Appreciation*, No. 19 (2021); Wang Lexin: *Western History Q&A in Late Qing Imperial Examination Reforms*, *Journal of Hubei University*, No. 5 (2023), among others.

reengages with Qing history, there is still a notable disconnect—both from earlier Qing examination history studies and from events after the abolition of the system. Scholars like Zhang Zhongmin and Guan Xiaohong have helped bridge the research gap in the period after the imperial examinations were abolished, thereby lessening some of the chronological fragmentation in late Qing examination history. However, further study is necessary. Currently, the biggest temporal divide arises when specialized research on the late Qing fails to compare and contrast its findings with earlier Qing or pre-Qing examination systems. Consequently, general phenomena may be mistaken for unique traits—overinflating their significance—or truly distinctive features may go unnoticed due to limited knowledge of earlier contexts, causing missed opportunities. From a regional perspective, while smaller provinces and less-developed areas have received some scholarly attention, studies on major provinces and prosperous regions remain far more prevalent. This imbalance can only be addressed through sustained efforts by researchers across different locales.

The second problem is the strong influence of “imperial examination studies” on imperial examination history, which has led to disciplinary fragmentation. This rift arises not from weak ties among related disciplines, but from ties that are so close they hinder the independent development of imperial examination research. It is undeniable that the emergence of imperial examination studies significantly advanced the exploration of examination-related issues, promoted the development of examination history, and offered theoretical support from multiple fields, thus setting the stage for the current flourishing of imperial examination scholarship. Yet, as imperial examination theories evolve at a rapid pace, they have inadvertently weakened the link between imperial examination history and broader historical inquiry. This theoretical convenience can produce shallow interpretations, with insufficient attention to the deeper historical realities. Late Qing examination history research, like much of the field, is often confined to theoretical interpretations rather than rigorous analysis of primary sources. For example, a few late Qing examination cases in the Northwest appear in *Research on Examination Fraud in the Qing Dynasty*³⁹, but they are only briefly cataloged as examples from smaller provinces, without substantial analysis or deeper inquiry. This pattern is far from rare in contemporary late Qing examination history studies. From an ideological standpoint, this dynamic is driven by the widespread “examination hell” mindset in current society, adding undue practical constraints to historical scholarship.

The third issue concerns a lack of depth in current research. While new theories and methods appear regularly in contemporary research on the imperial examination history, many are treated too superficially⁴⁰. Traditional approaches—such as investigating the effects of abolishing the exams—continue to dominate, making popular topics even more entrenched. Consequently, the same sources are reanalyzed repeatedly, restricting the overall quality⁴¹. Meanwhile, inquiries that use theory thoughtfully or adopt new angles with limited resources often go overlooked⁴². This disconnect explains why, despite the seeming vibrancy of late Qing examination history studies, true breakthroughs remain scarce.

In short, the three issues currently affecting late Qing examination history studies all exhibit pronounced fragmentation, which hinders more substantial advancement⁴³. Resolving these

³⁹ Liu Xiwei, *A Study of False Residency Registration in Qing Dynasty Imperial Examinations*, Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2012, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Tuoheti A. Islam in China--A History of European and American Scholarship (The 21th Century)[J]. *History Research*, 2021, 9(1): 39-48.

⁴¹ Zhu Y. China's Heritage through History: Reconfigured Pasts[M]. Taylor & Francis, 2024.

⁴² Xu S. Ideology and politics in junior-secondary Chinese history textbooks: Comparing two versions published in the 21st century[J]. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 2021, 51(3): 448-468.

⁴³ Li K C, Wong J M S, Chau S M. The Notion of the “Scholar” Among the Chinese: From Confucianism to Contemporary Practice[M]//*The Contemporary Scholar in Higher Education: Forms, Ethos and World View*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024: 231-249.

instances of fragmentation is crucial for the next stage of progress in late Qing imperial examination history studies.

3.2. Advancing Late Qing Imperial Examination History Studies

The challenges in studying the late Qing imperial examination history demand collective effort from researchers and individual insight from everyone involved. In the discussion below, I will provide several personal suggestions for addressing these difficulties, hoping to spark further meaningful debate.

First, in light of the extensive yet fragmented body of work on late Qing examination history, it is crucial to compile thorough, long-term research overviews. Progress in the field depends on a careful review of existing scholarship, emphasizing the continuity and historical perspective of late Qing examination history research⁴⁴. Such overviews should guard against the fragmentation discussed earlier, ensure balanced content, and steer future scholars toward more comprehensive explorations.

Second, existing late Qing examination materials have not been adequately collected and organized. Although moving the focus of imperial examination history research to more localized contexts often lead to gaps in primary sources⁴⁵, this shortfall takes on a different shape in late Qing studies. In fact, late Qing imperial examination history materials are more plentiful than those from many other eras. Because this period is relatively recent, large quantities of official records remain—such as the *Xianfeng-era Jiangsu-Anhui Archives for Borrowed Examination Venues in Zhejiang*⁴⁶, along with original exam papers. Private sources are also extensive; for example, the newly compiled *A Collection of Rare Qing Imperial Examination History Sources in the Zhang Wenda Collection*⁴⁷ preserves numerous documents concerning late Qing imperial examination history. Newspapers, novels, and personal memoirs further capture public discourse on the late Qing exam system, with newspaper sources being especially valuable—something earlier examination history studies rarely enjoyed. The immediate task is to collect and consolidate existing late Qing examination sources, thereby enabling more thorough future research. This approach also reorients the field toward primary evidence and alleviates some of the limitations that have long hampered late Qing examination history studies.

Lastly, it is essential to leverage previous breakthroughs more effectively and actively seek out new avenues for research⁴⁸. Promising areas of inquiry include overlooked events, locales, individuals, institutions, and documents, as well as new theories that can illuminate the history of late Qing examination practices. Researchers should persistently explore these potential breakthroughs, while also revisiting established areas of study that remain underexamined⁴⁹. In my review, I found several promising topics, including analyzing public opinion on exam reforms, investigating the half-abolished nature of late Qing examinations, focusing on smaller examination provinces, and examining bystander figures within the late Qing system⁵⁰. These

⁴⁴ Xu H, Siththada T. The Traditional Chinese Education on Modern Educational Management in China[C]//Proceeding National & International Conference. 2024, 16(2): 18-24.

⁴⁵ Yuan Jinshan, *Thirty Years of Imperial Examination Studies: Its Formation and Growth*, *Chinese Historical Research Trends*, No. 1 (2023).

⁴⁶ *Archives on Jiangsu and Anhui Using Zhejiang's Examination Venue for Their Provincial Exams in the Late Xianfeng Era*, *Historical Archives*, No. 1 (2019).

⁴⁷ Chen Weizhao and Zhang Wenda: *A Compilation of Rare Qing Imperial Examination Sources from the Collection of Zhang Wenda*, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2022.

⁴⁸ Zhang Y, Li Y. From 'Practical Application of Knowledge' to 'Academic Self-Awareness': A Historical Examination of Knowledge Production in Chinese Middle East Studies[J]. *Middle East Critique*, 2024: 1-20.

⁴⁹ Tian Z, Pan W. History of Chinese Education Study in Forty 40 Years of Reform and Opening-Up—Based on Journal Articles and Doctoral Dissertations[J]. *Educational Research in China: Articles from Educational Research*, 2021: 67-92.

⁵⁰ Yan F. Identity of China's modern academic system: A Chinese - Western interaction perspective[J]. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2021, 22(2): 157-174.

areas have not received the attention they merit and could significantly benefit from researchers' specialized skills.

Other questions, such as how to address excessively polarized views on late Qing examinations⁵¹ have been tackled in existing studies and need no further discussion here. Imperial examination history research today extends well beyond a single discipline, with interdisciplinary collaboration now commonplace and many notable publications emerging⁵². As late Qing examination history studies continue to attract interest from multiple fields, I hope scholars will also reinforce its foundation as a branch of historical research, build upon current findings, and ultimately make new strides forward⁵³.

⁵¹ Chen Xingde, *Negative Trends in Evaluating the Imperial Examination during the Late Qing*, *Journal of Xiamen University*, No. 5 (2015).

⁵² Cao H, Champadaeng S. The Art of Chinese Calligraphy: Educational Protection and Literacy Study of Cultural Heritage[J]. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 2024, 12(3): 160-171.

⁵³ Chen Z, Zhang L. The History of Chinese Meteorology[M]//Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science. 2024.