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Power for a Price: The Purchase of Official Appointments in Qing China

By Lawrence Zhang. Harvard University Press, 2022. 328 pages. Hardcover, \$59.95 USD, ISBN: 9780674278288. Paperback, \$32.00, ISBN: 9780674278295.

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Power for a Price, by Lawrence Zhang, examines an important but understudied feature of Qing officialdom: the sale of degrees and offices by the state. The study is multi-faceted. Zhang considers office and degree purchase from the perspective of the state as well as the families and individuals who made use of it. Through his careful and comprehensive analysis of a diverse array of sources, Zhang demonstrates that office and degree purchase played an important but until recently mostly unappreciated role in the appointment and selection of officials during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that families that were successful in the examination system purchased degrees for other sons, and that individuals with exam degrees routinely purchased office. This work, along with related work by Elizabeth Kaske and Wu Yue, begins to remedy a gaping hole in our understanding of the Qing produced by decades of neglect of degree and office purchase.

This reassessment of the role of office and degree purchase during the Qing is long overdue as a corrective to the widespread but mistaken belief that in late imperial China the examination system was not only the main pathway to appointment, but the sole pathway. Belief in the primacy of the examination system is so influential and entrenched that social scientists conducting historical studies routinely include statements without any caveats claiming that all officials in imperial China were selected by exam. Contemporary commentators on education and officialdom make similar claims. Zhang suggests, no doubt correctly, that the neglect of office and degree purchase not only reflected a mistaken belief that they were an exceptional practice limited to times of crisis, but also broader discomfort with the topic rooted in the belief that it was illegitimate, embarrassing, and even corrupt. In this context, office and degree purchase has been an awkward and unwelcome guest at a dinner party that everyone ignored in the hope they would go away.

It is important to clarify that degree and office purchase in Qing China differed from superficially similar practices in the West, most notably office sale in Europe before the twentieth century. In China, the practice was managed by the state, and the revenue went to the government. Usually, the revenue went to the central government, but on some occasions, it went to provincial governments. Appointment on the basis of purchase was not a sinecure: appointees were reviewed and could be terminated. This is in marked contrast with historical European practice, where officeholders owned their posts, and kept the money after they sold them. Another contrast was that in China, purchasing an

office usually did not result in immediate appointment to a specified post, but rather inclusion in a pool of candidates from which officials were appointed as vacancies arose.

One of the most important of Zhang's findings is that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sale of degrees and offices by the state was routine, not an exceptional response to crisis. While rounds of office sales were named for disasters or emergencies, as time went on, the revenue they produced was more likely to go to the treasury and used for general expenses, and less likely to be used for remedying whatever situation it was named for. Government budgeting assumed a steady stream of revenue from office and degree sales. In the middle and late nineteenth centuries, the sale of offices and degrees became so common and the resulting waiting time for appointments so long that prices collapsed, leading eventually to the abolition of the system.

Importantly, Zhang shows that the Yongzheng emperor found office and degree sale useful for personnel management, not just revenue. Even when state coffers were full and the revenue from degree and office sale unnecessary, Yongzheng resisted lobbying by officials with exam degrees to abolish purchased degrees, because officials with purchased degrees were less likely to form cliques than holders of exam degrees, and were therefore more responsive to instructions and easier to remove. Remarkably, the Yongzheng emperor expressed skepticism that examinations produced better and more committed officials than purchase and emphasized rigorous performance reviews as opposed to degree qualifications as more important to ensuring the quality of officials. While other emperors may not have openly defended the practice in the way that Yongzheng did, neither did they make serious efforts to eliminate it, in spite of complaints from officials who held examination degrees.

Turning from the state to the individuals and families who purchased degrees and offices, Zhang shows that many of the same families who participated in the examination system also purchased degrees and offices. There was no clean distinction between families who acquired degrees through examination and families who acquired degrees through purchase. Rather, families were strategic about choosing which sons they would prepare for the exams, and which sons they would purchase degrees for. Thus, even prestigious lineages that were known for their success at the exams over multiple generations also purchased degrees. Purchase was especially important for lineages who sought to maintain their status after initial success on the exams.

Zhang also shows that exam degree holders routinely made use of office purchase to advance their careers. Again, there was no clean distinction between exam degree holders who were appointed and promoted based on their credentials alone and purchased degree holders who subsequently relied on office purchase for appointment and promotion. Office purchase was employed not only by holders of lower exam degrees like the *jurem* who otherwise might wait years or decades for an appointment but also by holders of the *jinshi* degree who sought specific promotions or transfers.

Examination of career outcomes yields little evidence that the performance of officials with purchased degrees or offices differed systematically from that of holders of examination degrees, at least not before the mid- or late-nineteenth century. The only major exception is that holders of purchased degrees very rarely attained high office because regulations barred them from being promoted to such positions. Emperors and others recognized a risk that inexperienced officials who purchased appointment could cause damage if their initial appointment was to administrative posts outside the central government where they were unsupervised, so sometimes advocated that they first serve in the capital in posts where they could be monitored and couldn't cause too much trouble.

For this study, Zhang draws on a remarkable variety of traditional and novel sources. Edicts and memorials illuminate deliberations among the emperor and other high officials about the proper role of purchase; genealogies demonstrate the coexistence of purchase and exam degrees within the same lineages; resumes document the role of purchase in specific appointments and promotions; and personal diaries and novels yield insight into the calculations and strategies of purchasers. Unique to Zhang's book is a remarkable list of 10,978 purchasers from every province and more than 1,500 counties. Entries in the list provide information on the family backgrounds of purchasers. By linking the purchasers named in this list to their records in other sources, including resumes and personnel records, Zhang is able to analyze their career outcomes.

Importantly, Zhang concludes with a call to rethink our understanding of meritocracy. So far, in the Chinese context and elsewhere, meritocracy has been conceptualized as the selection of an elite governing class by use of supposedly objective standardized exams that were in principle open to men from nearly all backgrounds. Based on Zhang's analysis, there is little evidence that the performance of officials who had purchased degrees or purchased their appointments was inherently better than that of exam degree holders or officials appointed without purchase. Indeed, the relative merits of the different categories of officials were actively debated in the eighteenth century. As the Yongzheng emperor recognized, what may have been more important was not the credentials that were the basis for appointment, but rather the rigorous evaluation of their performance after appointment, and good judgment in decisions about promotion, transfer or termination.


This is an important study, with implications for our understanding of Qing officialdom and society. As a critical assessment of the role of the examination system, it joins a long line of now classic studies by Robert Hymes and Ben Elman. These and other studies focused on exam degree candidates and holders and showed that they were not as socioeconomically diverse as proponents of the exam system claimed. Zhang moves beyond these studies by decentering the examination system itself and showing that it was but one part of a more complex and potentially flexible system that offered multiple paths to appointment and promotion. One clear implication is that quantitative social scientists studying the late Qing need to move past their fixation on the examination system and exam degree candidates and account for the role of degree and office purchase in their analyses.

Power for a Price and other recent work on purchase will hopefully inspire new lines of work on the implications of degree and office purchase in the late Qing, and meanwhile deflate some of the more exuberant claims made about the implications of the examination system by social scientists and contemporary commentators. A variety of questions emerge as ones that merit further attention. Are there other ways of comparing the career outcomes and performance of officials according to whether they held exam or purchase degrees, or purchased office? What were the social and institutional consequences of the vast increase in the numbers of degree purchasers that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century after provinces also began to sell offices, competing with each other and driving down prices, and what happened after the central government reasserted control over the sale of offices? How did the emergence of other economic opportunities in the late nineteenth century affect the calculations of prospective purchasers?

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Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok

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Thongchai Winichakul's monograph *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* is both an academic and personal work, written through the experience of