

Examination Meritocracy in Contemporary Korea and Song Confucian Scholars' Criticism of the Civil Service Examination

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Abstract

In intense fairness discourse, Koreans have shown strong belief in “examinations.” Examination meritocracy is supported by belief that it is the most objective and fair way to prove “merit” in the selection process. It is widely recognized that exam meritocracy is tied to Confucian tradition. Confucian scholars, however, have criticized it since the Song dynasty, when it was firmly entrenched.

Sima Guang criticized the civil exam system for lacking fairness, arguing that the political, economic, and cultural disparity at the regional level played a decisive role in determining the success or failure of the examination. He argued that there must be a guaranteed quota for each circuit. Ouyang Xiu challenged Sima Guang’s argument about correcting the structural unfairness, as he believed it severely impacted the formal fairness. Cheng Hao asserted that virtue could not be assessed by examinations and proposed to promote candidates from provincial schools to the Imperial University through recommendation. Zhu Xi’s proposal seems to be at odds with Sima Guang and Cheng Hao. He believed that as the vested interests of Southern Song dynasty were consolidated, the ease of access to the university for vested students actually exacerbated the unfairness. Therefore, he argued for reducing the quota of the Imperial University and returning the quota to the provinces, and emphasized moral education at the local level.

The criticism of the examination can be traced throughout Confucian history, revealing that these beliefs are unreliable, and that therefore the current idea of examination meritocracy is built on a weak and questionable foundation.

Keywords: Civil service examination, meritocracy, morality, fairness, quota

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I. Introduction: Civil Service Examination as the Confucian Origin of Examination Meritocracy

The Confucian ideal of governance by those who possess virtue and ability has been considered as the origin of the political meritocracy in China and exam meritocracy in Korea in contemporary times. This article argues that Confucian scholars thoroughly rejected the belief that the examination is a fair system for selecting individuals with moral virtues and capabilities, which has been justifying the examination meritocracy in Korea. I will support this argument by introducing the criticisms and alternatives of the Song Confucian scholars to the civil service examination as the institutional manifestation of political meritocracy (*xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治).

Meritocracy, as defined by Michael Young, is “the governance by those who possess abilities” (Young 1958). Eun-Joo Chang further splits this concept into a narrow meritocracy and a general meritocracy. In a narrow sense, it can be interpreted as a system where political power is dominated by people who are qualified to be the most competent through a series of selection processes. Meanwhile, in a general sense, it refers to the system in which those with great abilities in society ask for greater wealth and power (2011, 74). The former can be considered a political meritocracy, while the latter can be a social meritocracy in a broader sense, and both are said to share the same Confucian origin.

Intriguingly, both in Korea and in China, the “examination” is acknowledged as the most objective and fair way to prove “merit” in the selection process. Scholars, such as Zhang Qing and Daniel Bell, who devised political Confucianism, argue that it corresponds to the ideal of Confucian political thought, where a selected minority of the wise and the moral hold the political authority in response to the crisis of Western democracy (Zhang 2003; Bell 2015). However, the question remains: how can the eligible be selected? Bell finds the answer in the civil service examination in Confucian civilization. He analyzes that, despite a few shortcomings, the civil service examination was designed to overcome the limits of the examinees’ background and to assess their virtue and ability fairly. Similarly, the current system of examination in China, originating from the civil service examination,

still possesses these benefits and significantly enhances the intellectual abilities of political leaders (Bell 2015, 81–89).

In Korea, it is widely recognized that social meritocracy is tied to Confucian civilization, primarily through similarity between the civil examination system and contemporary examination systems in Korea. Regarding fairness discourse, there are several examples, such as the plan to convert temporary workers at Incheon International Airport and Seoul Metro into full-time employees,¹ and the special admission processes for rural village residents to enter college, among others. The main criticism of these cases is that they provide advantageous privileges to the beneficiaries or bypass fair examination and selection processes. At its core, this criticism stems from the strong belief that those who excel in exams and prove their ability should hold a dominant position in society and have control over resources, regardless of differing interpretations of what constitutes fairness. It is a widely shared idea that people who have never demonstrated any competence should be granted various privileges based solely on the fact that they have succeeded in examinations, and that passing such examinations is more important than moral maturity, trust, experience, and proficiency. Kwon-il Park characterized these thoughts and behaviors as economic “rent-seeking behavior” that has nothing to do with productivity (2021, 123–33). Even if one were to fully accept meritocracy’s logic, there is a significant gap between the skills assessed by the test and the skills required in the real world.

The strong belief in the value of examinations in East Asian societies, especially Korea, is deeply rooted in the tradition of the civil service examination. Kwon-il Park argues that while the civil service exam cannot be considered the sole source of current exam-based meritocracy, there is a correlation between the two (2021, 39–42). This

¹ In June 2020, Incheon International Airport Corporation announced the conversion of 2,143 non-regular workers (mostly security screeners) out of a total of 10,000 to regular positions through its subsidiary, sparking controversy over fairness with regularly employed workers hired through open recruitment (Park 2020). While the intensity was weaker, a similar controversy arose when Seoul Metro converted 1,285 non-permanent contract workers to regular positions through a new hiring method in March 2018 (Lee 2020).

is evident in the similarities between the civil service examination and the current systems in Korea, including college entrance exams, national exams, and “open” corporate recruitment. Chang notes that this belief in meritocracy is still prevalent, as demonstrated by the idea that “public service jobs should go to those with the best competence,” which applies to all social classes (2011, 79).

These two beliefs support exam-based meritocracy:

- 1) It is fair for individuals with virtue and ability to hold a dominant position in society and control its resources.
- 2) The examination is the impartial means of judging an individual’s virtue and ability.

That is, the belief and expectation that those selected by examination have objectively verified abilities and morals is widespread in Korean perception. It is clear that ruling by virtue and merit was a central tenet of Confucian political thought, so the ideal was that officials should be selected based on a fair assessment of virtue and merit. Although these ideals were rarely realized, the perception that passing an examination proved that one was virtuous and capable was accepted for a very long time, as was the civil service examination system.

More often, however, such ideas worked the other way around, serving as the ruling ideology that justified the social and political dominance of those already selected and in charge of governing (or those with vested interests). This has contributed to the implicit but strongly held belief and expectation today that “because they must have been selected through a fair and proper process, high-ranking public officials or executives must have the competence and morals to do so.” As opposed to Alain de Botton’s “to the injury of poverty, a meritocratic system now added the insult of shame” (2005, 71), we have “the honor of morality compounded by the political and economic goods of office and peerage.”

Given the strong connection between exam-based meritocracy in Korea and Confucian culture and the civil service examination, one question arises: Is the civil examination an official selection process that embodies the Confucian ideal? While Confucian scholars generally

agree with the first belief (individuals with virtue and ability should hold a dominant position), they challenged the second belief (the validity of the examination). In terms of positive evaluation of the civil service examination system, it is a development from a society of literary aristocrats to a society where people are given the opportunity to become government officials based on their literary skills regardless of their lineage,² and it is quite in line with the ideal of equality of opportunity in the modern sense.³ Song Confucian scholars criticized the effectiveness and fairness of the civil service examination as a means of selecting individuals with moral virtue and ability. In the following sections, I will examine the disconnect between Confucian political ideals and the civil service examination by analyzing the criticisms and alternative perspectives on the examination put forward by the prominent Confucian scholars Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1030–1200) during the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1127) when the civil service examination was firmly established. Their criticisms show significant similarities to the criticisms levelled against exam meritocracy in contemporary South Korea. This study will not focus on analyzing the similarities between Song China and modern Korea. Instead, it will try to show that the beliefs that support meritocracy have already been criticized by leading Confucian scholars, and that the

² Ha's research cautions against overestimating the modernity of the civil service examination. He argued that those who attained the *jinshi* 進士 degree after passed the preliminary examination (鄉試), rather than going through the Imperial University, which was usually reserved for aristocratic children, could not be considered commoners or from insignificant families, because preparing for the examination as an incense maker required a significant economic and cultural base. Therefore, during the Tang dynasty, a high percentage of those who passed the civil service examination were from powerful families (Ha 2021, 350–58). Especially toward the end of the Tang, as the civil service examination became the primary route to high government positions, aristocrats also actively participated in civil service examination. For example, the Lu 盧 family from Fanyang 范陽, with its dominant aristocratic background, produced 116 successful *jinshi* degree holders by the end of the Tang (Miyazaki 2003, 204–205).

³ One of the most prominent figures to recognize the modernity of the examination system was Sun Wen 孫文 (1866–1925). He argued that “selection of officials by examination” was unique to China and should be the foundation of the new Chinese political system. The system was revived in 1928 as a uniquely Chinese bureaucracy called the National Examination Center (考試院) (Ha 2021, 21).

current understanding of the Confucian origins of exam meritocracy needs to be reconsidered.

II. Criticism of the Civil Service Examination by Northern Song Confucian Scholars

The most important political imperative in Confucianism was the morality of the ruler, so Confucianism always advocated the rule of the virtuous, regardless of whether it was realized in practice. Since the Song dynasty, as the political subjectivity of the literati awakened and they came to recognize themselves as governors of the world alongside the monarch (Yu 2004, 3–40), morality was also a requirement for the bureaucrats who formed the backbone of state governance. Therefore, in East Asia, there have been constant attempts to evaluate the moral virtue of official candidates during the selection process.

This evaluation was done mainly through civil service examinations and educational recommendations. The civil service examination was first implemented by Emperor Wen 文帝, the founder of the Sui 隋 dynasty, and in the Tang 唐 dynasty, although it was an aristocratic society, it was utilized as a system for recruiting middle and lower-level bureaucrats. However, since the Song dynasty, when the civil service examination system was firmly established, it has been criticized for its inability to assess the morality of candidates. This questioned whether the civil service examination could truly assess a person's ability and morality to govern. Nevertheless, the illusion of fairness was one of the most powerful factors that sustained the civil service examination system for so long. However, there was also a debate about whether the civil service examination was fair on a societal level beyond the individual. This is because, although it was claimed to be fair, socio-economic background, place of origin, and other contingent circumstances meant that candidates were never on an equal starting line.

Educational recommendation was presented as a system of bureaucratic training and selection to replace the exam which was criticized for its inability to foster and assess the qualities required of

bureaucrats and to ensure formal fairness. They basically proposed, and in some cases implemented, a system of gradual promotion from lower to higher schools through evaluation and recommendation of academic ability and virtue, with the final evaluation and selection of bureaucrats taking place at the capital's Imperial University (*taixue* 太學). However, this system also suffered from a number of problems and failed to replace the old system.

A. Criticism of the Feigned Fairness of the Civil Service Examination

When the examination system, which had been abolished after the last examination in 1904, was revived, the “modernity” which Chinese political leaders found was a merit-centered factor in society. Fairness is the key factor that justifies this meritocracy. The significance of the very fairness is that factors other than the examinees' abilities would not interfere with the evaluation results. Alexander Woodside argues that it was clear that the civil examination was, at least formally, a merit-based system in which officials were selected through merit-based examinations based on the obvious rule despite concerns about the beliefs of Chinese bureaucracy (2006, 1–8).

This strong commitment to fairness provides legitimacy to both the nominated officials and the examination system itself. This authority derived from fairness also led to a greater level of respect for officials selected through the civil service examination, compared to those who were appointed through inheritance. This was true even during the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907), when aristocratic systems were firmly established. It is precisely because of the authority that comes from this impartiality that even in the Tang dynasty, it was considered a greater honor for aristocratic sons to pass the preliminary examination (*jieshi* 解試) and the departmental examination (*shengshi* 省試) than to study at the Imperial University (*guozijian* 國子監) and obtain a government position.⁴

⁴ In this regard, Twitchett (1976) opposed the mutually antagonistic view of examinees and aristocrats and argued that meritocracy emerged in the late eighth century in Tang dynasty.

However, there is skepticism about the fairness of the civil service examination. Miyazaki takes a more cautious approach when it comes to the impartiality of the civil service examination. While it's true that the civil service examination system provided more opportunities for official positions compared to an aristocratic society, only a limited number of individuals were able to take advantage of these opportunities due to their economic backgrounds and access to education. However, he thought that these problems are not unique to the civil service examination system as they still exist in the modern world (2003, 213–20). John Chaffee highlights the unfairness of the Imperial University and the civil service examination system established during the Song dynasty, through the presentation of various case studies (1995, 96–156). Firstly, Chaffee notes that a disproportionate number (around 50%) of all *jinshi* 進士 degree holders during the Northern Song period came from Kaifeng, which was favored by the descendants of high-ranking officials. Secondly, Chaffee observes that most of the *jinshi* degree holders were from the southeastern region,⁵ where the political climate was stable and the economy was well-developed. Thirdly, Chaffee cites widespread cases of favoritism and cheating that occurred during the Southern Song period due to intense competition. This highlights that even procedural fairness could not be ensured, as the civil service examination was not designed to assess “virtue,” which was deemed an essential factor in the selection of officials.

In the following section, I will concentrate on the issue of “un-fairness due to regional disparity” by analyzing the debate between Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang, as presented by Chaffee. In his memorial titled “A Plea that Circuits Should Allocate Quota for Past Examinees” (貢院乞逐路取人狀), Sima Guang suggested that a quota (*jie'e* 解額) should be established for each circuit (*lu* 路) in both the preliminary examination and the departmental examination to ensure fairness

⁵ This refers to the Liangzhe Eastern Circuit (Liangzhe donglu 兩浙東路, today's southern Jiangsu), the Liangzhe West Circuit (Liangzhe xilu 兩浙西路, today's Zhejiang), the Jiangnan East Circuit (Jiangnan donglu 江南東路, today's western Jiangsu and southern Anhui), the Jiangnan West Circuit (Jiangnan xilu 江南西路, today's Jiangxi), and the Fujian Circuit (Fujian lu 福建路, today's Fujian).

(Sima n.d., vol. 32, 8a–13b). The quota is a number of the preliminary examination that is taken by each circuit before the departmental examination. During the Northern Song period, the economic gap between the north and the south (mainly the southeast) was widening day by day, and the conflicts between the northern nations, the Liao 遼 and the Xixia 西夏, were increasingly devastating the social fabric of the northern regions. He compared the ratio of *juren* 舉人 to *jinshi* degree holder for each circuit in the 1059, 1061, and 1063 examinations. Through this comparison, he demonstrated that in the case of Kaifeng and the Imperial University, the passing rate was about 1 out of 4.5 in the three exams (66: 396, 97:374, and 96:418, respectively) (8b–10b).⁶ In the other regions except for Kaifeng, the Imperial University, and the southeast, the passing rate was less than 1 out of 30. Sima Guang pointed out that the disparity was becoming increasingly extreme. This demonstrated that even if a politically unstable and economically backward region could produce *juren* candidates due to the quota, they could hardly pass the departmental examination.

In terms of fairness, Sima Guang argued as follows:

- 1) Candidates from less developed and remote regions should not be excluded from the selection of officials. The official selection process should be based on the proportion of the population and not monopolized by specific regions in terms of the quota of official positions (11a–12a).
- 2) Others who were fixated on formal fairness argued that the low rate of *jinshi* was due to the lack of literary ability among *juren* candidates from remote regions compared to those from the capital. However, Sima Guang argued that the main objective of the state in selecting competent candidates and appointing them to official positions was for the education of the people, governance, military affairs, and maintenance of the law, but this kind of examination excluded people who could actually contribute to the governance of the state. Therefore, it was unjust to make literary skill the sole criterion in the examinations (12a–12b).

⁶ These figures are tabulated by Chaffee. See Chaffee (1995, 121).

- 3) To sum up, Sima Guang argued that there must be a guaranteed ratio of *juren* to *jinshi* for each circuit (13b).

At the time, the northern regions of China were suffering due to the constant invasions of foreign neighbors, while the southeast region and Kaifeng dominated a large portion of the official service positions and enjoyed political stability and economic prosperity. Sima Guang criticized the civil examination system for lacking fairness in a practical sense, as the political, economic, and cultural disparity at the regional level played a decisive role in determining the success or failure of the examination. He argued that using literary knowledge as the absolute criterion for selecting officials was unjust, especially in the northern regions where low production and ongoing warfare made it difficult for most literati to dedicate themselves to literary pursuits. His critique of the viewpoint that considers literary ability as an ultimate attribute implies that literary ability by itself cannot fully assess the required capacities for various national governance-related duties, and that it does not consider these environmental factors.

It is in this context that he criticized the view of literacy as an absolute quality. On the surface, his criticism is that literary knowledge and skills cannot serve as a comprehensive assessment of the competencies required for the various tasks involved in governing a country. However, based on the fact that his criticism stemmed from a concern that talented people from economically deprived areas might be marginalized in bureaucratic selection, we can infer that the cultivation of literacy is closely related to the economic level of the region. In the northern region, where productivity was low and war could break out at any time, it was difficult to create a stable economic and political environment in which a large number of people could devote themselves to studying for a long period of time to develop their literary skills. Therefore, he emphasized that it was unfair for people with talents other than literary skills to be rejected due to economic disparity.

Sima Guang did not specifically mention the southeast region in his memorial, but it is evident that he was referring to the significantly higher passing rates in Kaifeng and the Imperial University than

in other regions. He mentioned the number of candidates in each region of the state, not even mentioning the number of candidates from southeast China and Chengdu 成都 (today's western Sichuan 四川 area). However, it is very clear that his criticism is actually directed at the southeast. This is supported by the fact that most of the 244 examinees whose regions are unknown out of the 541 *jinshi*⁷ from 1059 to 1063 were likely from the five circuits in the southeast and Chengdu Prefecture (Sima n.d., vol. 32, 9a–11a). Additionally, the southeast produced 7,138 *jinshi* out of a total of 9,630 (excluding Kaifeng and the Imperial University) who passed the departmental examination in the Northern Song dynasty (Chaffee 1995, 196–202).⁸

For this reason, Sima Guang's controversy over the quota immediately drew the ire of officials from southeast, of which Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 was a central figure. As Sima Guang came from a prestigious family in the northwest, while Ouyang Xiu came from a low-level official's family in the southeastern province (Jiangxi 江西), the controversy between the two figures is often seen as a conflict between the vested elite group and the emerging one, or between regions. In this discussion, however, we will focus on the different meanings of justice that they put forward.⁹

Ouyang Xiu wrote an essay entitled "Discussion on Appointing Officials Based on Their Circuits" (論逐路取人劄子) (n.d., vol. 113), in which he challenged Sima Guang's argument about correcting the unfairness caused by regional economic disparities, as he believed it severely impacted the formal fairness. He put forth the following

⁷ In 1059, 1061, and 1063, respectively, 165, 183, and 193 persons passed the departmental examination and became *jinshi* degree holders. See the "Xuanju 選舉" chapter of the *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 (Xu 2014, vol. 1).

⁸ The difference in the proportion of *jinshi* degree holders between the southeast and other regions was not actually as significant as it seemed. This is because among the successful candidates from Kaifeng and the Imperial University, there were not only those who were purely from Kaifeng, but also many candidates from other regions (Kracke 1975b, 49).

⁹ Ouyang Xiu, of course, had a strong suspicion that vested interests from the northwest were trying to change the system to maintain their position. This can be seen in his comparison of the north, with its strengths in the classics, to the south, with its strengths in literature in the following appeal, criticizing the north for not complaining when it prevailed in the past, but then seeking to change the system when conditions changed (Ouyang n.d., vol. 113, 11b).

arguments:

- 1) Despite its imperfections, the civil service examination was a fair system that played a crucial role in providing the necessary manpower for statecraft over a long period (10b–11a), defining fairness as the consistent application of evaluation standards and the elimination of private relationships.¹⁰
- 2) Implementing a quota system for each circuit would bring about double discrimination and double benefit. He believed that the *juren* from the southeastern region, who already faced intense competition in the preliminary examinations,¹¹ would be further discriminated against if a quota system was introduced. On the other hand, those from the northwestern region, who benefited from lower competition, would have an advantage in the departmental examination (12a–12b).

The economically prosperous southeast was ready to support the desire to advance to higher status through education, and competition from same area was as fierce as in the departmental examination. The high competition of the preliminary examination in the southeast ensured a high level of literacy among the successful *juren* candidates, who could reap the rewards of their hard work through a high pass rate in the departmental examination. However, if Sima Guang's proposal were to be implemented, the formal fairness of distributing resources (government posts) based on a consistent standard of performance would be disrupted, namely that:

¹⁰ This is the kind of fairness that might have been justified in a time when government positions were monopolized by hereditary aristocrats and warlords. But such formal fairness is also the logic behind the refusal to address economic disparities and structural inequalities between regions. A case in point is the aforementioned South Korean university admissions and employment system.

¹¹ In the southeast, a 1:100 preliminary exam competition ratio was common, while in the northwest, the competition ratio was around 1:10, making them very easy to qualify for the departmental examination. In Fuzhou 福州, the province with the highest number of successful candidates in the Southern Song 南宋 period, the preliminary exam competition rate was as high as 15:1000 (Lee 1985, 146–47).

- 3) Evaluating literary knowledge based on poetry (*shifu* 詩賦) may have its own issues, but altering the evaluation criteria despite already having established it as the standard for selecting officials would harm the consistency of the system.
- 4) Sima Guang's approach may provide temporary relief through its intervention in the process, but it does not address the root issue in policy decision-making and only artificially manipulates the outcome.¹² It not only would never be a fundamental solution, but would also lead to all sorts of expedient methods and side effects.¹³

Ouyang Xiu chose to ignore the structural unfairness pointed out by Sima Guang, rather than finding a logical solution. He justified the privilege of the southeast region by claiming that it was historically strong in literary studies and its candidates were selected in the *jinshike* 進士科 (a Tang-era departmental examination evaluating literary knowledge), while the northwest was strong in classical studies and its candidates were selected in the *mingjingke* 明經科 (a Tang-era departmental examinations evaluating knowledge of classics). However, this argument was more relevant to the Tang dynasty, and the “northwest” here refers to Changan 長安, the capital of Tang. His reference to the Tang capital was entirely out of context. This shows that Ouyang Xiu lacked the motivation to address the persistent problems of economic disparity and unequal educational opportunities among regions during the Song dynasty.

¹² However, Sima Guang's intentions were somewhat recognized, and later dynasties allocated quotas for the departmental examination by origin and even by ethnicity (Kracke 1975a, 262–65). Of course, it is possible to argue that this policy was more politically motivated by imperial unity than by compensating for educational disparities.

¹³ “The government should only appoint officials on the basis of talent, but someone want to reject talented people and pass untalented people to equalize the number of candidates in each circuit. . . . If this law is implemented, ‘cheating’ (寄應) people will rush to the examination booths, as evidenced by the cancellation of the Kaifeng. This is the so-called ‘when the law is set, there will be cheating’” (Ouyang n.d., vol. 113, 12b–13a). Here, “cheating” refers to things such as relocating to an area where it is easier to pass the examination.

B. The Ideal of “Selecting Officials Based on Virtue” and the Cultivation of “Merit” through Government Education

Even if the ideal of “fair selection of officials” (公正取士) is realized, the question that remains is whether the process has resulted in the selection of virtuous and practical candidates who have the “merit” to contribute to the state and society. There was a general consensus among the Song dynasty scholars that such competence consisted of practical skills and morality. First, practical skills can be divided into understanding and judgement in governing the state, and Zhu Xi suggested subjects such as classics (經), thought (子), history (史) and government affairs (時務) as ways to cultivate them (Zhu 2002, vol. 23, 3357).¹⁴ The study of classics and history was not merely the accumulation of knowledge, but the analysis and examination of the words of major historical figures and the resulting historical events to secure a basis for making correct judgements about the events of the times, while thought was the study of Confucian thought to provide direction for such judgements. Finally, Government Affairs assessed the student’s understanding of specific issues of the time.

Next was Morality. Both Sima Guang and Ouyang Xiu believed that literary knowledge alone should not be the determining factor in selecting officials, and that virtue was equally important. In fact, morality could have been considered a priority quality for officials, given the detrimental effects of corruption on the efficiency of the governing system and the role of officials as social exemplars in Confucian society.

Significance of this viewpoint is exemplified by the attempt by Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) to reform the civil service examination in 1044 by calling for the abolition of the “Huming Law” (糊名法). The law, first introduced in the Tang dynasty, was meant to prevent examiners from showing favoritism to examinees they knew, but it was criticized for only assessing examinees’ literary knowledge, not their virtue. He advocated for a reform of the civil service examination system in 1044, arguing not only for the abolition of the Huming

¹⁴ Sources from Vol. 23 of Zhu 2002 correspond to the “Xue Xiao Gong Ju Si Yi 學校貢舉私議” chapter in Vol. 69 of the *Zhu Zi Da Quan* 朱子大全 (Great Works of Master Zhu).

Law but also for an adjustment of the examination subjects from a focus on poetry to a focus on discourse (論), countermeasure (策), and understanding of classics (經義) (Li 2016, vol. 143, 5b–7b). This shows that the preoccupation with formal fairness (an attempt to maintain the Huming Law), with consistency and objectivity in assessment at its core, hindered the verification of morality as an essential qualification for ruling the state, and that poetry, the main subject of the departmental examination at the time, could not assess practical abilities at all. On the other hand, Discourse, Countermeasure, and Understanding of Classics are useful subjects that provide a sense of the duties of office in preparation, and are better suited to assessing the qualities of an official.

Fan Zhongyan's attempt at reform failed, but this issue continued. The problem was that virtue could not be assessed by examination, so the question naturally arose as to how to train virtue through education and promote candidates to the higher schools through recommendation. Cheng Hao's 1068 memorial (請修學校尊師儒取士箚子) envisioned a school system that aimed to cultivate both virtue and practical ability (See Cheng and Cheng 2004). As the title suggests, the essay is a discussion of principles for selecting officials to govern a state, but his intention is made clearer by what he didn't say.¹⁵ He completely rejected the examination of literary knowledge by not mentioning them once and instead proposed a system of recommendation based on "virtuous behavior and knowledge of classics." He also provided suggestions for fulfilling this system by establishing specific institutional conditions (2004, 449).

The first of these conditions was that:

- 1) The selection of academy teachers based on their exceptional competence is crucial for the success of the recommendation system.

¹⁵ Cheng Hao's appeals also state that in the end, high-level officials would examine and grade the students recommended by the Imperial University on their classical knowledge and practical abilities (Cheng and Cheng 2004, 448–49). "太學歲論其賢者能者於朝，謂之選士。朝廷問之經以考其言，試之職以觀其材，然後辨論其等差，而命之秩。" This examination, however, is fundamentally different from the established one, which centered on poetry, with no assessment of virtue. It is because these examinations were only for those who had already been appointed, and only those who excelled in virtue were given these examinations.

In other words, these teachers are responsible for cultivating, evaluating, and recommending students' virtue, making their competence vital to the system's effectiveness. However, in practice, this was often unattainable, as teaching positions in traditional China were not highly sought after due to poor working conditions and limited advancement opportunities, with only those who can no longer afford to continue their careers in the bureaucracy reluctantly taking up the position, leading to a decline in competence and disrespect from students (Miyazaki 2003, 62–63). Although Miyazaki's study analyzed a phenomenon that occurred in schools in the Qing 清 dynasty (1616–1912), the situation does not appear to have been very different in the Song dynasty.

The second of Cheng Hao's proposed conditions was that:

- 2) The central government should establish a nationwide school system and dispatch official teachers.

While this proposal cannot be said to have been born out of the ideal of universal education, it can be inferred that it shared some of that ideal. His proposal would have expanded educational opportunities in areas that were economically backward and unable to provide private education, thus ensuring that economic disparities between regions did not lead to educational disparities.¹⁶

Cheng Hao's third condition was that:

- 3) Admission to higher schools and the selection of officials should be based on recommendation and evaluated on virtue and understanding of the classics.

He proposed that criteria such as “good conduct, filial piety and fraternity in the family, a sense of honor and courtesy, excellent academic performance, and statecraft skills” should be used in the

¹⁶ From the fact that Sima Guang raised the issue of unfairness due to economic disparities between regions in 1164 and Wang Anshi dispatched three to five instructors to each of underdeveloped northern circuits as a priority during his reform in 1171 (See Ma n.d., vol. 46, 1341), we can confirm that such awareness was widespread at that time.

selection process, which could be continuously assessed through observations by peers and teachers. The conditions set out by him are entirely consistent with those of the ideal ruler in Confucian political thought, and he believed that these virtues could only be evaluated by constant observation by those around him, including his teachers and peers, rather than by examination.

And finally, his fourth proposed measure was that:

- 4) Recommenders must take responsibility for the results of their recommendations.

In other words, if the actual virtue and scholarship of a student recommended in a school of each class fell short of the recommendation, the recommending teacher and the local official should be removed from office for life, and the examiner who failed to detect this should also bear the heavy responsibility of being demoted two ranks. This measure, along with the third step of having multiple evaluators, was meant to ensure impartiality and prevent recommendations from being influenced by personal relationships or feelings.

It can be said that Cheng Hao's memorial was based on the judgment that the virtues necessary for statecraft cannot be evaluated through the examination, nor can they be cultivated during the examination preparations. Several Song Confucian scholars shared the view that virtue cannot be assessed by examination, but must be cultivated and assessed through long-term education and observation (Tiwald and Reid 2024, 121–30). This ideal had a significant impact on the reform of government academies, led by Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) and Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047–1126), despite their political differences.¹⁷ This reform implemented the “Three Colleges Law” (*sanshe fa* 三舍法), selecting students from the county schools (*xianxue* 縣學) and the provincial schools (*zhuxue* 州學) to be admitted to the

¹⁷ In this regard, Zhu Xi was also positive. Zhu Xi's criticisms of Wang Anshi focus on his choice of classics (emphasizing the *Book of Rites* [禮記] and excluding the *Rituals* [儀禮]) and his imposition of his own understanding of the classics (Zhu 2002, vol. 20, 687; from the “Qixiu sanli zhazi 乞修三禮筭子” chapter of the *Zhuzi daquan* 朱子大全, vol.14). “熙寧以來，王安石變亂舊制，廢罷儀禮，而獨存禮記之科，棄經任傳，遺本宗末，其失已甚。”

Imperial University, and after completing the internal examination in stages¹⁸ and being promoted, the government would select those who excelled in their studies and behavior as officials. This highlights the agreement that training and selecting morally upright bureaucrats cannot solely be achieved through the civil service examination, regardless of political affiliation.

Both Sima Guang's and Cheng Hao's discussions challenge the belief that "the civil service examination is a fair system for selecting individuals with moral virtues and capabilities." This belief can be divided into the fairness and appropriateness of the civil service examination, with Sima Guang criticizing its fairness and Cheng Hao criticizing its appropriateness. The core of Sima Guang's argument was that the civil service examination could never provide a fair opportunity for examinees due to various external conditions (such as political stability and economic prosperity). However, this did not mean that he rejected the civil service examination completely, and while he pointed out the structural problems of the civil service examination, his solution was to adjust the quota within the institutional framework, rather than changing the structure itself.

In contrast, Cheng Hao's discussion called for structural changes to the management selection system itself. He argued that examinations could not properly cultivate or evaluate the virtues needed for bureaucrats, and proposed a system of graduated recommendations from lower to higher schools and from provinces to the center as an alternative. This was a fairer way to ensure that students in economically disadvantaged areas had access to education, but more importantly, it attempted to evaluate practical skills and morality rather than literary skills. Of course, it is debatable whether the recommendation system can be a realistic alternative, but it is significant that it was the first to be proposed as an alternative to the civil service exam in East Asian societies.

¹⁸ *Waishe* 外舍 (2,000 candidates) → *neishe* 內舍 (300 candidates) → *shangshe* 上舍 (100 candidates)

III. The Solution of Zhu Xi: Back to the Normalcy of Government Academies

The aim of government education was to address the shortcomings of the civil service examination in training moral bureaucrats. However, it ultimately failed with the abolition of the “Three Colleges Law” in 1121. Since then, no practical attempts had been made to replace the civil service examination with educational institutions amidst the chaos of the fall of the Northern Song and the founding of the Southern Song. Scholars like Chaffee (1995, 84–88), Miyazaki (2003, 60–70) and Lee (1985, 169–80) all pointed to the “subordination of the government academies to the examination” as the reason for the failure of government education. Despite Cai Jing’s effort to implement recruitment through the Imperial University (*taixue* 太學), the civil examination remained dominant, making entrance to the Imperial University merely a means to exempt oneself from the preliminary examination or an easier way to take the departmental examination. The only important thing for the students was the fact that they were registered in the Imperial University, therefore the cultivation and evaluation of virtue and good conduct was not effective due to the malfunctioning of education at the Imperial University.

In response to this situation, Zhu Xi, a Southern Song scholar, proposed reforms to the civil service examination and government education by combining existing systems and proposals (especially Sima Guang and Cheng Hao). He thought that the civil service examination should eventually be abolished, and he was skeptical about the possibility of improving the Imperial University (Zhu 2002, vol. 17, 3530),¹⁹ but he also acknowledged the difficulty of arguing for education reforms excluding them (3536). In his essay “Personal Discussions with School Education and Official Selection” (學校貢舉私議), he presented two solutions to improve the fairness and efficiency of both the civil service examination and government academies, which had become flawed and inadequate in cultivating and evaluating

¹⁹ Sources from Vol. 17 of Zhu 2002 correspond to Vol. 109 of the *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Classified Sayings of Master Yu).

statecraft abilities. In the following sections, I will analyze this essay and his other comments in terms of promoting fairness and cultivating capacity for state governance.

A. Strengthening Fairness: The Adjustment of the Quota and Blocking of a Bypass Route

First and foremost, Zhu Xi discussed adjusting the quota for passing the preliminary examination. Zhu Xi believed that the quota for passing the preliminary examination was skewed; the quota allotted for each province was too low, while the quota for the Imperial University was excessively high, making it the easiest path to the departmental examination. In his proposal, Zhu Xi advocated for equalizing the quotas based on the number of candidates from each province, as well as reducing the enrollment at the Imperial University (Zhu 2002, vol. 23, 3357).²⁰ His concept of “equalizing” the quota was not about making it identical for each region, but instead determining it based on a multiple, typically twenty times, of the number of candidates participating in the final stage of the examination, known as the palace or court examination (*dianshi* 殿試) (vol. 23, 3357).

Zhu Xi’s suggestion is highly beneficial for regions with candidates who previously performed well, which appears to be in contrast with Sima Guang’s idea of fixed quotas per circuit to address economic disparities among regions. However, this difference should be considered in light of the different social milieu of Sima Guang and Zhu Xi. According to Zhu Xi:

- 1) The abundant quota of the Imperial University made passing departmental exams accessible and there were special ways to become an official through internal recommendation in itself, while competition in rural areas was fierce due to the preliminary exams being the only way to become a government official.

²⁰ Sources from Vol. 23 of Zhu 2002 correspond to the “Xue Xiao Gongju Siyi 學校貢舉私議” chapter in Vol. 69 of the *Zhuzi Daquan* 朱子大全.

- 2) As the literati's social status in the Song dynasty became more rigid, providing a route for scholars from non-official family backgrounds became necessary.

According to Chaffee (1995), the proportion of officials appointed through inherited privilege (*yinbo* 蔭補) steadily rose in the late Southern Song period. In 1213, only 40% of the 2,392 officials from the sixth to ninth ranks were *jinshi* nominees, with 52% appointed through inheritance. Of course, he noted that the overwhelming majority of ministers still come from the *jinshi* degree holders (albeit in lower proportions than in the past), but he considered the increase in officials appointed through inherited privilege as evidence that Southern Song society has moved towards a relatively hereditary status (23–27).

And finally, Zhu Xi argued that:

- 3) The Imperial University became the main pathway for becoming an official, making it easier for students from the capital or well-off regions to enter and unfairly disadvantageous for those without access to the exams.

Zhu Xi insisted several times that the reason why he discussed adjusting the quota for passing the preliminary examination was to ensure that students could continue to study in their home provinces (Zhu 2002, vol. 17, 3543).

Whereas Sima Guang focused on addressing “impartiality due to regional disparity” between Kaifeng, the southeast, and the north, Zhu Xi focused on addressing “the unfairness experienced by rural or economically disadvantaged students who lacked access to the Imperial University.” As a result, he suggested a solution to adjust quotas in a different manner from Sima Guang.

One original point Zhu Xi made was the demand for *hunbu* 混補, which allowed admission to the Imperial University based solely on mastery of the classics. This was seen as advantageous for students from regions with high levels of education. Though Zhu Xi objected to this method in principle (vol. 17, 3540),²¹ he partially agreed with it

²¹ Zhu Xi was cynical that Ye Shi 葉適 was trying to enforce this to make selections for his home province (Wenzhou).

stating that the requests from regions such as Wenzhou 温州, Chuzhou 處州, Wuzhou 務州, and Fuzhou 福州 were understandable due to the rapid increase of officials from those regions during the Southern Song period (vol. 23, 3357).²² From the perspective of the new literati from these regions, it was considered unfair to enter the Imperial University, which primarily accommodated students from official families, hence there was an urge to provide them a fair opportunity to enter.

Zhu Xi's criticism of the civil service examination and government education concentrated primarily on its failure to cultivate or evaluate virtue and practical ability. However, he also criticized the entire system of selection of officials—the civil service examination and the Imperial University which had been submerged by the civil service examination—for not being fair at all. Although Zhu Xi's reform plan appeared to be at odds with Sima Guang's proposal for fixed quotas for regions with high numbers of examination candidates, both Confucian scholars recognized the inherent unfairness in the system. However, Zhu Xi's proposal was limited in that it did not address the regional disparity faced by literati from northern regions bordering Qin 金, making it difficult for them to become *jinshi*.

B. Education with an Emphasis on the Classics, History, Thought, and Government Affairs and the Selection of Virtuous Officials

In line with the growing trend of the Imperial University as the path to government positions, Zhu Xi's plan was not to increase access to the university, but to eliminate the recommendation system and distribute quotas to provinces (Zhu 2002, vol. 23, 3363). Despite his previous stance criticizing the civil service examination and advocating for education-based recommendations, Zhu Xi's critique of the university was that it was not fulfilling its role of fostering virtue and practical skills. Hence, he proposed multiple reforms to improve the training of officials.

²² The increase in the number of officials was as follows: 83 to 1125 in Wenzhou, 550 and 2249 in Chuzhou, 193 to 506 in Wuzhou, and 67 to 466 in Fuzhou (See Chaffee 1995, 196–202).

The key aspect of Zhu Xi's reform proposal was to eliminate the teaching and assessment of poetry and instead select officials on the basis of their knowledge of classics, history, thought, and practical affairs (vol. 23, 3356). This is what Wang Anshi had tried before, and Zhu Xi also agreed to his policy. Despite criticisms from Neo-Confucian scholars, poetry remained as an objective measure of assessment (vol. 23, 3358). However, Zhu Xi was aware of its negative effect. Although he did not discount the importance of poetry per se, he criticized the standard evaluation criteria adopted to distinguish good and bad poems, which he believed encouraged cheating and misconduct after than promoting virtue and honor. Competition among students to become government officials through poetry had a detrimental impact on their moral character (vol. 17, 3540). Therefore, students who performed well on the examinations were often more proficient at cunning and deceit, thereby defeating the ideal of meritocracy that supported the civil service examination and government education.

To address the issues with the selection process, Zhu Xi proposed adding a subject on "virtuous conduct" (*dexing* 德行) as a selection criterion. After the quota for the preliminary examination was met, the government was to assess the candidates' virtuous conduct and select 50% of the quota for each province, prioritizing them for official appointment. In the departmental examination, the passing rate for the subject of virtuous conduct was to be twice as high (around 10%) as the other subjects (vol. 23, 3358). By implementing this, half of all candidates would be selected based on virtuous conduct and evaluated through a separate system from the *juren* who passed the preliminary examination. In fact, this measure aimed to protect *juren* from "virtuous conduct" against *juren* from the preliminary examination even in a highly competitive environment.

Adding to the large number of candidates selected from the subject of virtuous conduct (equivalent to the number selected from *jinshi*), Zhu Xi further proposed complementing the existing examinations with a subject focused on virtuous conduct. This aligned with Cheng Hao's belief that the government should recruit officials from provinces based on their virtue and then send them to the Imperial University for further education in classics, history, thought, and practical affairs.

This way, the selection process would successfully exclude those who are not morally upright and ensure that only those with a strong moral character become state officials. With both virtue and practical ability, these officials would be equipped to serve the state effectively, as the Imperial University can would aid in the development of practical skills.

Despite these suggestions, Zhu Xi's view of the Imperial University was less optimistic, and he repeatedly called for reducing the number of students at the university. This could be due to the fundamental limitations of the Imperial University system, where candidates focused solely on demonstrating their eligibility for official posts without relying on recommendations from other people. As a result, Zhu Xi placed a greater emphasis on education in local provinces and prefectures, rather than central government education (vol. 17, 3529). Moreover, the conditions of the Taoist academy, with its separation from everyday practice and immersion in scholarship, were not an appropriate space for observing and evaluating the "virtues" that were so important to Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucian scholars. He also encouraged the establishment of private academies (*shuyuan* 書院) as spaces for moral cultivation, separate from the official service (Chaffee 1995, 17).

IV. Conclusion: The Delusion of Meritocracy in Korea

Can examinations accurately measure an individual's morality and abilities? Does passing the exam guarantee a person's moral and practical ability? Many modern Korean meritocrats believe so. The belief is rooted in Confucian political meritocracy and over 900 years of the civil service examination history in Korea (over 1,400 years in China). It is difficult to rebut that this cultural background has a long-standing position in forming the exam meritocracy in Korea. Despite the criticisms of the civil service examination by Neo-Confucian scholars, the situation has remained unchanged even after the dominance of Neo-Confucianism. From the thirteenth century onwards, students were expected to memorize Neo-Confucian com-

mentary on the classics and write their answers in a specific format (such as *baguwen* 八股文) to pass the exams, and the increased competition that came with higher productivity led to an even greater focus on formal processes. To sum up, it was nothing more than a textbook turned into a Neo-Confucian commentary.

However, the Neo-Confucian critiques of the civil service examination and the decline of government education (which is eerily similar to the current situation in Korea) tell us that there always have been skeptics of the system. The Confucian scholars discussed in this paper can be counted as supporters of meritocracy in a broad sense, as they believed that the distribution of the limited social resources—official positions should be based on “merit,” i.e. morality and practical ability for statecraft, rather than the socio-economic background. However, most Song scholars (Ouyang Xiu being an important exception) asserted that the examination system was not an adequate means of measuring ability and was prone to structural unfairness. Their criticisms focused on the inevitable malaises inherent in the examination format itself. This paper highlights these typical issues: inequality regarding regions and classes, preoccupation with the subjects of the examination, obsession with formal fairness, and attempts to cheat the examination system due to fierce competition. It is clear that these problems would not be solved by changing the subject of the exams and tweaking the content of the education.²⁵

The Confucian tradition and the civil service examination have a close relationship, with the long-standing exam being considered a cornerstone of the belief in examination meritocracy. The various examination systems in Korea today are based on the belief that “students who have merit are selected fairly and admitted to prestigious universities or get good jobs” just as the civil service exami-

²⁵ It demonstrates a very similar pattern to the various reforms that have been attempted in South Korea in response to excessive competition in the education and entrance examination system, all of which have failed and exacerbated the situation. The problem of overcrowded entrance exams in South Korea is not a problem of the education system or test subjects, but rather the dissipation of intense competition for a scarce commodity: access to prestigious universities and specific majors as gateways to good jobs and good conditions.

nation system was based on the belief that “students who have merit are selected fairly and appointed as officials.” However, the criticism of the examination can be traced throughout Confucian history, which reveals that these beliefs are unreliable, and that therefore the current idea of examination meritocracy is built on a weak and questionable foundation.

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