

Two reforms in 11th century China

Ec 365
October 20, 2026

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Keju: the examination system in China

The Political Economy of China's Imperial Examination System

Elements in Political Economy

DOI: 10.1017/9781009347600
First published online: May 2025

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Abstract: Just as councils and assemblies were central to European polities for centuries, the imperial examination system (Keju) constituted the cornerstone of state institutions in China. This Element argues that Keju contributed to political stability, and its emergence was a process, not a shock, with consequences initially unanticipated by its contemporaries. The Element documents the emergence of Keju using evidence from early Chinese empires to the end of the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century.

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The origin

Three important stages preceded *keju*:

Date	System	Main characteristics
134 BCE, Han	<i>Xiaolian</i> (孝廉)	Local officials recommended candidates for their filial piety and integrity. Some candidates were subsequently examined.
Han dynasty	Imperial examinations and evaluations	Candidates could be questioned on the Confucian classics and government policy, including through written responses.
220s CE, Cao Wei	Nine-rank system (<i>jiupin zhongzheng</i>)	Officials assessed candidates and assigned ranks. Over time, powerful families came to dominate the process.

The critical distinction is between **recommendation followed by examination** and **examination as an institutionalized route to appointment**.

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The bureaucratic state

Period	Development	Historical significance
Eastern Zhou, especially Warring States (5th–3rd centuries BCE)	Territorial states develop administrative hierarchies, appointed officials, population registers, taxation and legal codes.	Emergence of bureaucratic government, replacing or bypassing hereditary aristocratic authority.
Qin, 356–350 BCE	Reforms associated with Shang Yang introduce systematic administrative and military organization.	A particularly important step toward centralized bureaucratic government.
Qin Empire, 221 BCE	Qin Shi Huang unifies China and extends commanderies and counties under centrally appointed officials.	Creation of a unified imperial bureaucratic state.
Han, 206 BCE–220 CE	Consolidation and adaptation of Qin institutions, with increasingly important Confucian education and recruitment.	Establishment of a durable imperial administrative tradition.

Thus, **221 BCE is the conventional date for the creation of the unified Chinese imperial bureaucratic state**, but the essential institutions had developed during the preceding two centuries.

- Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai (2003). “War and Bureaucratization in Qin China: Exploring an Anomalous Case.” *American Sociological Review*, 68(4).
- Yuri Pines (2020). “Institutional Reforms and Reformers during the Warring States Period.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Early China*, pp. 615–622.

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The divergence

- “The “Great Divergence,” in which Western Europe industrially outpaced the rest of the world by the early 19th century, has puzzled scholars for centuries.”
- Central to this political divergence is the role of institutions, such as European parliaments. These parliaments limited the power of rulers through checks and balances, while the resulting credible commitments fostered political stability to a degree far greater than what was seen in many other parts of the world.
- We argue in this Element that an important parallel institutional development in East Asia was the Imperial Civil Service Examination System, hereafter referred to as Keju (科举). Keju served as a method of recruiting officials for the imperial government through a standardized written test on Confucian classics and literature – a test that was open to most males. Emerging sometime between 587 and 622 CE and lasting until 1905 CE, Keju was not only an outcome of political development but also a potential contributor to the political divergence that set the East and West on different historical paths.

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Origins and consequences

- “A new scholarship in historical political economy now distinguishes between an institution’s **consequences** from its **origins**, though much of this literature chiefly concerns with representative institutions.”

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The origins of Keju

- The “Chaju” system, in the 2nd-century BCE, involved local officials nominating individuals for entry into the bureaucracy via examination.
- The Nine-Rank Rectifying System(NRRS), dominant from the 3rd to 5th centuries, categorized men into different grades based on **virtue** and **pedigree**, with entry into the bureaucracy largely reserved for those with high grades.
- Keju began to take shape during the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) as an **outgrowth** of previous recruitment methods, still restricting participation to those nominated by government officials.
- The **Tang dynasty (618–907 CE)**, was opened the exam to most men and continued to mature throughout the 7th–9th centuries.
- The **Song dynasty (960–1279 CE)** refined the system by institutionalizing multiple levels of exams and strictly enforcing regional quotas. Participation further broadened at the societal level with the state’s commitment to promoting broader education and advancements in printing technology....
- The system was abolished in 1905 as the Qing dynasty faced internal and external pressures, including modernization demands and Western colonialism.

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Early developments of Keju

- Keju gradually became the dominant pathway to power despite its minimal and ad hoc beginnings.
- Keju’s rise was so gradual that the “signal” of this development was hard to discern from the various noises of politics.
- Keju emerged from a gradual institutional evolution spanning four hundred years.
- By the end of the Tang, Keju had become a game changer.
- By the mid-7th century, less than 22% of the Tang chief ministers entered the bureaucracy through Keju, increased to 85% in the 9th century.
 - 3.8% of the male elites had examination credentials by the mid-7th century, 17.6% in the 9th century.
 - A popular theory credits Empress Wu (武则天) in the late 7th century. As the only female monarch in a Confucian society, she faced strong opposition from the aristocracy and is thought to have promoted Keju to weaken their influence by introducing new talent into the bureaucracy. This idea, proposed in the 1940s, has faced significant criticism over the years but has recently been revisited by social scientists like Huang (2023), who argue that Keju strengthened autocratic rule.

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Extension

- Keju broadened the “selectorate” by leveling the playing field within the elite class (32)
- Why did Keju become an institution that sustains itself. Our answer is that both the ruler and the elites increasingly found it beneficial. For the ruler, although we initially minimized the notion that Keju was intentionally implemented to weaken the aristocracy or existing political powerholders, from a certain point onward, it became increasingly clear to the Tang emperors themselves that Keju indeed could serve such a political purpose.
- For the elites, they adapted to the new paradigm and began to view the Keju-credential as a key step in their political promotion.

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Intermediate conclusion

- Since the late 7th century, however, both quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that Keju had increasingly become the game in town for political selection regarding top government positions. Keju’s significance for overall social mobility had also dramatically risen over time, while the importance of aristocratic pedigree for officeholding rapidly diminished.
- The Tang emperors eventually recognized Keju’s role in expanding the “selectorate,” and consequently took consistent efforts to preserve such equalizing potential.
- Other political and institutional developments facilitating the rise of provincial military commissioners and the Hanlin academicians further enhanced and entrenched elites’ incentives to compete in the Keju.

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Plan

- China around 1050
- The state's problems
- Wang Anshi
- Reforms and opposition

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Reformers: Fan Zhongyan and Wang Anshi



- **To simplify: failure and success**
 - Fan Zhongyan Renzong 1043–1045 (Qingli Reforms)
 - Wang Anshi Shenzong 1069–1085 (New Policies)
 - Renzong initially supported Fan Zhongyan's reforms but withdrew his support amid political opposition.
 - Shenzong was a more committed supporter of Wang Anshi and continued many of his policies even after Wang left office.
- **Reference** : Smith Paul Jakov (2016). "Anatomies of Reform: The Qingli-Era Reforms of Fan Zhongyan and the New Policies of Wang Anshi Compared" Chapter 4 in *State Power in China, 900-1325*.

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Tang-Song transition

(755...960/960...1127...1279)

- Widely recognized as the crucial watershed in the e c. hist. of imperial China (RvG 208)
- "New foundations of the Chinese economy during the T-S would endure throughout the rest of China's imperial aera. (G-209).
- By 1100, 100 M people.



After 1127 13

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• Initial Cause: Sino-Tangut war 1040-44

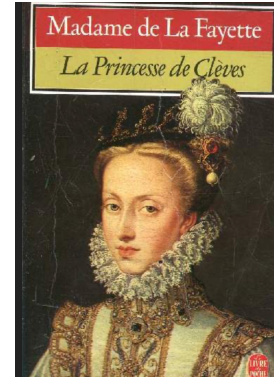
- The monarchy and the literati consolidated their hold on the early Song state by neutralizing the once-powerful military class and, with the signing of the Chanyuan peace treaty with the Kitan around 1000 CE, replacing warfare with the payment of peace tribute as the primary strategy of national defense.
- The bureaucrats used three decades of peace to solidify their multigenerational hold on office, and the Ordos-based Tangut Xi Xia improved their position.
- Using some pretext, upstart Tangut chief launched a massive series of attacks that exposed the hollowed-out state of Song defenses.
- In the absence of competent military commanders, the court turned for help to a coterie of brilliant civilians headed by Fan Zhongyan and Han Qi.
- During their three years on the Shaanxi– Xi Xia front, the two men and their lieutenants neutralized the battle prowess of the Tanguts with the organizational powers of the Song bureaucracy.
- Fan's success prompted Renzong to summon him to the capital to enact a reform program. A treaty was concluded in 9:==

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Examination curriculum in France: culture / expertise

- On February 23, 2006, in Lyon, Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior and a candidate in the presidential election, promised before an assembly of civil servants to “put an end to the pressure of competitive exams and tests”.
- He then remarked: “*The other day, I was amusing myself—one amuses oneself as best one can—by looking at the syllabus for the administrative attaché exam. Some sadist or idiot had included in the syllabus a question on The Princess of Clèves. I don’t know if you’ve ever asked the teller what she thought of The Princess of Clèves. Just imagine the scene!*”
- There were numerous reactions, including public readings of the entire novel in front of the Pantheon in Paris



Written in the 17th century
Plot in the 16th century

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Failure

- Fan articulated his reform vision in a series of razor-sharp critiques submitted between 1025 and 1036 that denounced the political culture of complacency, nepotism, sycophancy, and censorship personified by Lü Yijian. Three times Fan’s audacious broadsides earned him expulsion from the capital.
- Each of Fan’s demotion just served to energize and enlarge a tight-knit fraternity of young supporters who shared Fan’s idealistic “ancient style” (guwen) vision of morally charged government.
- Underscoring the urgency of their messages, both Fan and Wang predicted disaster for the dynasty if major changes were not enacted.
- Both men thought one of the first places luck might fail was on the frontier, where defensive preparations were in dire need of reform.
- 1042: The Liao threatened military intervention and demanded additional concessions. The Song agreed to increase annual payments of silver and silk, avoiding war.
- Dangers on the frontier were just a symptom of the larger problem identified by Fan and Wang: a fundamental failure of the institutions established by the Song to train and mobilize a professional class of officials ready and able to meet the challenges of the day.

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Fan's view

- Be social esteem of the literati class vis-à-vis other claimants to power (the military, merchants, the clergy) was based on their mastery of literary learning.
- But for both Fan and Wang, the bookish pedantry and literary embellishments that characterized high culture and the examination curriculum contributed nothing to the ancient goal of learning: to prepare men for the tasks of governing.
- Fan Zhongyan, a leading advocate of the ancient style movement to which most of the Qingli reformers subscribed, the way to reinstate sagely learning and save “this culture of ours” was to replace the frivolous writing style of a morally corrupt age with the pristine, unembellished style of the sage kings.
- During his short time in power Fan tried to bring his educational views to fruition by emphasizing the Six Classics over poetry and literary prose in the examination system, and by ordering every prefecture and county to establish a school overseen by a teacher who had mastered the Classics.

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Fan Zhongyan

Reform Initiative / Dates	Objective
1. Clarify Standards for Promotion and Demotion (明黜陟) 1043/10–1045/2	Make merit and the challenges of each post rather than time in office, encourage service in the provinces, break monopoly of well-connected young men over choice positions in the capital, advance the careers of young men of talent dedicated to “advancing the public good.”
2. Restrain Nepotism (抑僥倖) 1043/11–1045/2	Reduce glut of expectant officials drawing salaries. Academic institutes and imperial archives (館閣) barred from nepotism and open to merit alone.

Improve the link between exams and an ability to address the critical challenges of the day by emphasizing the Six Classics over poetry and literary prose, stressing the character and conduct of the candidates, and establishing an empire-wide system of schools.

Attached to Local Posts (寄資州) 1043/11–1044?	Improve salaries so that accomplished officials will be eager to serve in the provinces and thus “deeply understand the suffering of the people, which is the foundation of transformative governance.”
6. Promote Agriculture (厚農桑) 1044/1/28–?	Charge circuit officials with improving irrigation works, especially in Jiangnan, and with encouraging agricultural improvement, in order to cope with soaring grain prices and “strengthen the nation” (強國力).
7. Improve Military Preparedness (修武備) Never enacted	Recruit 50,000 able-bodied men from the metropolitan region to serve in a militia modeled after the Tang fubing (府兵) system
8. Reduce Corvée (減徭役) 1044/5–?	Consolidate administrative units by reducing superfluous counties to zhen (鎮) status, in order to lessen overall corvée burdens on the local population.
9. “Spread Beneficence and Trust” (覃恩信)	Forgive tax arrears to reestablish trust between the sovereign and the people. No details on enactment.
10. Stringently Enforce Imperial Decrees (重命令)	Severely punish officials who do not rigorously implement imperial orders. 18 No details on enactment.

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- In Fan's view, the ideal official should excel in the four traits Confucius used to distinguish among his own disciples: ethical behavior, sound administrative skills, frank and honest speech, and cultural learning. Similarly, the ideal career for such a man was characterized by **extensive** experience throughout the bureaucracy rather than **intensive** specialization in a functionally defined field. It was precisely this broad experience that the oligarchs precluded when they monopolized good court offices for their kin:
 - “Be sons of men of power and status rarely leave the capital to rotate through the duties of the hundred offices, and so they are completely ignorant about affairs throughout the empire.
 - Wang thoroughly rejected the virtues of the generalist, instead privileging the kind of functional specialization that **Max Weber** would later identify as a hallmark of the modern bureaucracy. Wang deplored the usual practice of assigning a man who advanced to office on the basis of literary learning to a post in finance, say, only to then transfer him to law, or ritual, with no concerns about his lack of training. “But any given individual must be ready to fulfill **every** office, so that it is difficult to match their abilities to **any** office.”¹⁹

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Wang' view

- Wang was dismissive of the examination curriculum, which cultivated strong memories at the expense of practical knowledge. Rejecting completely the model of the ideal official as a generalist, Wang insisted that “a man's abilities are brought to fruition through specialization and under-mined by dilettantism.”
- The Sino-Tangut war obliged the court to recruit men based on merit rather than pedigree, catapulting the careers of brilliant newcomers shaking the hold on power of the prewar bureaucratic oligarchy.
[French Revolution and Napoleonic reforms/armies]
- In addition budget problems because of the military.

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New policies

- It was the inconclusive outcome of the war and reforms that animated the challenges faced by Renzong's grandnephew Shenzong when he assumed the throne in 1067 at the age of nineteen.
- State in poor condition

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Wang Anshi (1)

Reform measure and date	Objectives
1. Tribute Transport and Distribution (均輸法) 1069/7	Replace the command requisition of government-needed goods with a market-oriented procurement system that authorized the circuit supply commissioner (發運使) to buy necessities and sell surpluses on the market, reducing the power of "wealthy merchants and great traders" ↓
2. Green Sprouts Rural Credit (青苗法), aka Ever-Normal Granaries (常平法) 1069/9	Create a state-run rural credit system capitalized by liquidating reserve grain stocks in the Ever-Normal and Universal Charity granaries, managed by the new Intendants) supervising county magistrates and local village officers. Intended to free poor households from dependence on rural moneylenders and thereby unleash rural productive capacity, but transformed instead into a robust government revenue stream.
3. Agricultural Land and Irrigation (農田水利法) 1069/11	Productivity-oriented measure that initiated 10,793 water-control and land reclamation projects empire-wide (1070–1076), reclaiming almost 39 million acres of agricultural land and remedying conservancy and flood control problems along the Yellow River and Bian Canal.
4. Mutual Security System (保甲法) 1070/12	Organize local residents as a banditry and social control measure. In five northern circuits add drill and review (教閱), complete militarization of the baojia system, incorporation into the defense of North China.
5. Revised Examination Curriculum (修經義) and Three Hall System (三舍法) 1071/2, 1071/10	Reform government school curriculum to focus on classics and policy issues.

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Wang Anshi (2)

Reform measure and date	Objectives
6. Service Exemption (免役) (aka Hired Service [募役]) 1071/10	Relieve the often-ruinous burden on middle- and rich-peasant households of conscription into sub-bureaucratic functions at the village, county, and prefectural level (the “drafted service system” [差役法]) by replacing conscripts with volunteers paid for by a tax imposed on all but the poorest rural and urban propertied households, including those (such as ranked officials and temple households) previously exempt from service.
7. State Trade Policy (市易法) 1072/3	Break the monopoly over trade in the capital held by rich monopoly merchants by creating a Metropolitan State Trade Bureau (市易務) to make commercial loans and buy and sell commodities. In 1073/10 provincial branches were created throughout the empire, financed by occasional investments from <u>Shenzong</u> himself.
8. Local Horse Pasturage System (保馬法) 1072/5	Give militia and <u>baojia</u> households collective responsibility for raising horses in return for stipends and tax exemptions.
9. Land Survey and Equitable Tax Measure (方田均稅法) 1072/8	Equalize the tax burden in the five circuits of North China by pushing through new cadastral surveys. Uncovered some 34.7 million acres of untaxed land and may have ameliorated some of the tax and labor burdens imposed on northern households by militarization of the north.
10. Create Prototype of the <u>Superintendancy for Tea and Horses</u> (都大提舉茶馬司) 1074 (THA)	Officials buy tea in Sichuan to exchange for horses purchased from Tibetan traders in Qinghai, Shaanxi, and Gansu. The THA dominated the economy of Northwest China and the Upper Yangzi, generating substantial revenues for reform projects and the imperial war chest.

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Difference in outcome

- Wang’s greater success in five domains:
 - capturing key institutions of government,
 - creating powerful new reformist organizations,
 - neutralizing political foes
 - mobilizing bureaucratic followers,
 - and— above all— retaining the unwavering support of his emperor for the reforms.

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