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The making of 'exam ronins': young people's desire for public service jobs in China

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ABSTRACT

Public service positions are increasingly sought after by university graduates in China, especially in the post COVID-19 era. Drawing on Gramsci's hegemonic power, this article analyses the 'exam ronin' phenomenon among young Chinese people, a term used to describe those who chronically remove themselves from the labour market to prepare for civil service exams. The findings reveal a more nuanced and complex picture than previous studies indicated regarding the reasons why young people choose civil service jobs. The study found that the participants' decisions to work towards securing civil service jobs were the result of constrained career options and an absence of vocational guidance. In addition, their choice-making processes were shown to be influenced by heightened parental ambition and Confucian societal sentiment in relation to civil servants. The young people in this study perceived the exam-based recruitment system as fair and meritocratic, and viewed exam success as indicating 'people of higher quality'. The participants' 'horizons for action', i.e. the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made, appear to have been shaped by their strong attachment to the party-state.

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Introduction

In China, universities have produced approximately 7–8 million graduates annually in the last two decades (Mok et al. 2018). Young people are in fierce competition with one another during their job searches, especially in urban areas (Liu 2021). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified youth unemployment as it resulted in a sharp economic downturn (Mok, Xiong, and Ye 2021). In such a competitive labour market, an increasing number of young people in China are seeking refuge in the old 'iron rice bowl'[1]: a permanent job in the government sector, which offers lifelong job security (Liu 2021). Such employment is normally unaffected by 'market mechanisms' as it is controlled by the party-state as part of the *Bianzhi*[2] system (or employment 'in the system', as the Chinese call it). In order to obtain a secure public service job, young people in China are required to take civil service exams. Similar to the 'public service job fever' phenomenon to be found in some other Asian countries (Kim 2022; Kim and Park, 2021), many of

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China's young graduates aspire to be civil servants. In 2022, 6.6 million graduates registered for these civil service exams, 41% more than in 2018 (Yue et al., 2022). The average acceptance ratio in the 2021 civil service exam was 1:61 (Yue et al., 2022). This soaring competition to become a government employee is leaving many young people perpetually trapped in a cycle of studying for the civil service exams[3], which is leading them to remove themselves from the labour market. According to the 2021 National Graduate Employment Report, 24.2% of graduates put working within a 'governmental administrative organ' as their top job choice, while 31.4% of them preferred a government 'service organisation'. In 2021, more than two-thirds of the graduate population wished to have a job with *Bianzhi*, which is directly controlled by the party-state (Yue et al., 2022).

Originating in Japan, the term 'exam ronins' refers to young people who continuously take exams in the hope of being hired for a public sector job (Kim and Park, 2020). A number of Korean studies have reported the challenges that young 'exam ronins' face, including mental illness (Im 2012), social disaffiliation (Chung 2010), as well as marginalisation in the job market (Kim 2022). Moreover, much has been written on what motivates people to seek work in the public sector. Some argue that bureaucrats might want to maximise power, income, or prestige (Downs 1967; Tullock 1965), while other emphasise such motivational aspects as altruistic dedication and self-sacrifice (Bozeman and Su 2015; Perry and Wise 1990). Despite the rapidly increasing demand for public service jobs among Chinese youth, the way in which their school-to-work transitions articulate with remain under-researched and under-theorised. To address this gap, new findings are presented here from interviews with young people who have held the status of 'exam ronin' for at least two years, with a focus on how they make their choices and how they perceive the recruitment system. The paper locates the findings within the debates on the impact of Confucian heritage on Chinese society. It analyses the findings through the lens of Gramsci's notion of hegemonic power and the theory of 'careership' (Hodkinson 2008), and draws on studies examining public service motivation.

The next section presents a brief discussion on young people's motivations for seeking public service careers. It is followed by an exploration of the political and economic context within which Chinese youth are situated, with particular reference to the influence of Confucian values. Next, the theoretical arguments and framework are presented, followed by an explanation of the methods used to conduct the research, and the findings. Finally, there is a discussion of the findings and some conclusions.

Public service motivation, Confucian legacy, and the 'exam ronins'

Numerous studies have examined the motivations of job seekers who aspire to public office (e.g. Christensen, Paarlberg, and Perry 2017; Vandenabeele 2008). Based on public choice theory, some argue that self-interest may be a factor, as such work may offer access to power, income, security, or convenience (Downs 1967). However, Perry (1996) suggests that a commitment to the public interest is a common normative motivation for public officials, which might not be tied to tangible or personal rewards. Some scholars in East Asia also note that national culture and the influence of Confucianism might also contribute to people's desire to take on public service jobs (Kim 2022; Kim and Park 2021).

In Imperial China (221 BC-1912 AD), scholar-officials, or *shidafu*, were members of the ruling class educated to become scholars of the Confucian classics and experts in morality. These people administered the empire and occupied the highest positions in the social hierarchy, above the peasants, craftsmen, and merchants (Münch and Risler 1987, 23). S*hidafu* were regarded as superior people (*junzi*) by Confucius. In order to be a scholar-official, one had to take civil service exams, known as the *Keju,* which were primarily tests based on classical literature and writings of Confucian philosophy (Elman 2013). Between the years 606 and 1905, the *Keju* examinations were a central part of the government-orchestrated system of high-stakes employment testing and test-driven education (Suen and Yu 2006). Through *Keju*, Chinese emperors identified individuals to serve in high-powered positions. Within the hierarchical Confucian society, class, power, status, and prestige were generally reflected by success in these exams (Suen and Yu 2006).

The *Keju* system and Confucian values continue to have an impact on Chinese society today (Kung 2022). The current civil service examination consists of 140 questions covering logic, mathematics, politics, and philosophy, including an analysis of policy and an essay on a political issue. A system for recruiting civil servants based on exam-based meritocracy is still viewed as fair and just in contemporary China (Song 2016), and the social respect shown to those achieving success in these exams is apparent (Kipnis 2011, 143). In Song's (2016) research on students' perspectives of the fairness of the government exams, the student participants expressed a sense of 'affective commitment' and regarded the exam system as sacred, fair, and a means of achieving success. Kipnis (2011) analyses the reasons behind this examination culture, arguing that the system reflects an impersonal, meritocratic imagination (p. 92) and affords a way of fighting corruption and nepotism (p. 121). Exam results are seen as evidence of merit and considered to prove the overall quality of a person (Kipnis 2011, 122).

In the Imperial Era, the *Keju* system produced generations of 'exam ronins', who gave up other parts of their lives to prepare chronically for the exams. There are many recorded cases of people struggling with delusions, illusions, and insanity attributed to repeatedly failing the *Keju* exams (Elman 2013). Similar to the 'exam ronins' in Imperial China, in some Asian countries, such as South Korea, young candidates spend 13 hours a day studying for 4–5 years, during which time the only focus of their lives is to achieve their career goal (Kim and Park 2021). This has placed significant psychological and financial strain on the candidates and their families (Suen and Yu 2006). The following section presents the study's theoretical lens through which the experiences and opinions of young 'exam ronins' can be analysed from both the individual and structural perspective.

'Careership' and 'horizons for action'

Based on an analysis of the perceptions of young people in vocational programmes in the UK, Hodkinson uses the term 'careership' to refer to the way that young people make their career decisions (Hodkinson 2008; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Hodkinson's central idea is that career decision-making and progression are bounded by a person's 'horizons for action' (2008, 4), i.e. the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 34). Horizons for action are constrained by the pervasive influences of social structures (2008, 5). They are also influenced by a person's dispositions, and their ways of viewing and understanding the world (2008, 5), i.e. young

people and their families' perceptions and interpretations of what is 'out there' or appropriate (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996, 150). These two elements are 'interrelated, for perceptions of what might be available and what might be appropriate influence decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 34). Hodkinson emphasises the influence on young people's career decision-making of their positions in the field and the resources at their disposal (Hodkinson 2008, 7), as well as the impact of the 'culture' or 'habitus' in which they have lived and are living (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 33). Hodkinson and Sparkes also observe that decision-making involves 'turning points' and 'routines' (Hodkinson 2008; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), and stress the nonlinearity of the career development found in their samples (Hodkinson 2008).

This section focused on the individual dimensions and provides a theoretical understanding of young people's career choices. The following section explores, through a Gramscian perspective, how individuals negotiate their decision-making processes within a structural context, in particular under the influence of hegemonic power.

Hegemonic power and giving consent

Based on Marx and Engels's work, Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony, which, he explains, is 'an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religions and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations' (Williams 1960, 587). Gramsci, like Marx and Engels, argued that the ruling class uses the state 'to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling class' (Gramsci 1971, 258). What those subjected to the state must do, Gramsci says, is engage in 'critical elaboration' so as to be conscious of what one really is 'as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (1971).

Hegemonic rule relies on voluntarism and participation, rather than on coercive threat and punishment. It is achieved by securing 'the consent of the governed' (Gramsci 1971). In his writings, Gramsci portrayed 'consent' as both active and passive (Femia 1975). On the one hand, he says, it is given spontaneously by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, as the masses falsely believe the ideology and political leadership is the expression of their beliefs and aspirations. On the other hand, it emerges in 'a condition of moral and political passivity' because the masses lack the 'clear theoretical consciousness' to enable them to act effectively (Gramsci 1971, 333). Manifested as consent given by the masses, false consciousness has made hegemonic rule possible (Eyerman 1981, 47).

Methods and data

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the specific ways that young Chinese people labelled 'exam ronins' understand themselves and their situations. The paper aims to uncover their choice-making experiences and their perceptions of being unemployed

and chronically preparing for government exams. This qualitative study employed a narrative interview approach to encourage and stimulate the participants to narrate the significant events in their lives (Bauer 1996). The approach goes beyond the question-response-type interview, and follows 'self-generating schema', using everyday communicative interaction, namely storytelling and listening. The narrative interview technique is used to investigate 'hot issues' that may be potentially embarrassing for respondents or of a personal nature (Bauer 1996). Since the participants of this study were young graduates who had not landed a 'decent job' or might have considered their 'unemployed status' a source of embarrassment, the narrative interview technique was deemed to provide 'a more sensitive approach' to investigating such issues (Bauer 1996, 12).

The data were collected during a two-month period of ethnographic fieldwork carried out at five universities in central China in 2022. A total of 18 unemployed graduates were recruited for the study via connections with faculty members at the five universities. All of the participants were in the process of studying for civil service exams and had taken the exams at least twice. The sample was made up of 7 male and 11 female students. The participants' study areas fell into four categories: four were in finance and management, five were in engineering, five were in teaching, and four were in IT. Moreover, five of the participants had at least one parent who worked for a government department or public service organisation (with *Bianzhi*). In terms of socio-economic demographics, six participants came from urban, middle-class backgrounds, nine came from urban, working-class backgrounds, and three of them came from rural, underprivileged backgrounds.[4]

The reason for including in the sample young people who had at least one parent working for the government was that they may exemplify or densify their particular 'proprieties and dimensions' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 201). Previous studies on young people in China have suggested that they were more likely to 'carry with them the ideals of their parents' (Liu 2008, 194), and wish to 'maintain or improve their family's social position in a more competitive society' (Stockman 2000, 112). One potential limitation of including such participants is the possibility of introducing bias through purposive sampling, which would impede the researcher's ability to draw inferences about a population (Etikan et al., 2006). Moreover, it is possible that the young people in the sample might have exhibited social desirability bias in the presence of the researcher (Bryman 2012), especially when the researcher became an 'insider researcher' (i.e. as one of the faculty members) during the data collection process (Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

The interviews were conducted in Chinese and, subsequently translated into English at the transcription stage. The themes below were generated from the data using coding procedures such as open coding and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the stage of open coding, analytic techniques such as asking questions (Charmaz 2003, 94) and making comparisons (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 73) were utilised to open up lines of inquiry and bring out the different properties and dimensions of the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 73). Axial coding involves reassembling data and relating themes or categories to their subcategories (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 124). The themes capture the full range of the participants' perspectives of their choice-making experiences (e.g. 'choosing a civil service job'), as well as their perceptions of the exam-based recruitment system and their places within it (e.g. 'a fair game' and 'meritocratic logic').

The making of 'exam ronins': choosing a civil service job

'There is nothing else for me'

The young people in this study were asked to reflect on their choice-making experiences, especially how they decided to take the exams and to seek work with the government. Many considered that their decisions to choose a job in the civil service may have resulted from perceptions of constrained career options or a lack of conscious planning. For example:

> I know the university that I attended is one of the lower-ranking ones, and I was not even one of the top students there. I do not think any company could see me favourably. Working for a governmental sector may be one of the few options left for me. The job is stable, and the benefits are ok. (Shi, male, 23)

> I have been told that I need a career plan ever since I got into university. But even now I am not sure what an ideal job is for me as I have never really tried any, to be honest. I do not know what I can do. Many of my friends are preparing for government exams. So I will give it a go. (Han, female, 22)

Bian, who had been on a software engineering programme for four years, explained her concerns:

> My major is in software engineering. But I am not good at that at all, and I cannot compete with others or develop a career in this area. I want to find a job in my hometown, which is a small town with very few big companies. There is nothing else for me but to pursue a civil servant position.

It is evident from the above excerpts that the young people experienced a sense of inadequacy and a lack of confidence when it came to competing in the labour market. They may have placed themselves at the back of the labour queue (Thurow 1975), based on self-assessments of their levels of skills, competence, and the prestige of their universities. Chinese youths face 'perpetual competition and anxiety' stemming from their preparations for post-graduation careers (Mulvey and Wright 2022). Some of the participants employed a variety of strategies to avoid becoming 'stuck' in positional competition, while others had less clear plans about how to realise desirable 'possible selves' (Mulvey and Wright 2022). For the young people in this study, their decisions to take the exams and seek work with the government seem to have stemmed from a desire to avoid the fierce competition of the labour market.

Some of the graduates appear not to have had an opportunity to explore different career paths or acquire a broader and more realistic understanding of jobs and careers; as Han said: 'I never really tried any'. Due to a lack of exploration and career guidance, they were not certain about what constituted an ideal job. According to Kim et al.'s research on urban Chinese youth, parents 'talked reason' with their children, which consisted of convincing their children of the importance of studying in order to find good jobs in the future (Kim, Brown, and Fong 2016). However, Kim et al. found that there was a general absence of discussion regarding the types of career children should pursue, which may have been due to the parents' lack of familiarity with the rapidly changing academic and professional fields that would be available for their children, given they had only experienced the era of planned economy (2016).

'I will not let my parents down'

Some of the unemployed youth preparing for the government exam saw themselves as filial children, and sometimes expressed their filial piety by choosing this career path. For example, Yang shared her experience as follows:

> I think I am doing this [choosing a civil service job] simply for my parents. It is a way to show my gratitude for their 23 years of support, to honour my family. If I passed the exam and were selected for a job as a civil servant, my parents would be so proud, as they always regard it as 'a real job', a respectable job. They would not have to worry about me anymore if I got this job. (Yang, female, 23)

> My parents have always expected me to have a 'job in the system'. My father does not have a *Bianzhi* job. He does business here and there. He admits being prejudiced in favour of jobs with *Bianzhi*. I hope I can live up to my parents' expectations by sticking at preparing for these exams. I will not let them down. It would have been selfish of me to choose other career paths. (Guo, female, 22)

The young people's decisions 'stick to' the exam path could be considered an act of filial piety and an endeavour to protect their parents from the risk of an uncertain future. They could also be viewed as attempts to avoid the anxiety and insecurity of a competitive job market. However, for Yu, her parents' expectations also made her very anxious:

> It has been stressful … you know … I haven't been working for two years since graduation. My parents never ask me to earn money and they will support me in this [preparing for exams]. But I can feel the tension at home, as they talk about other people's kids who passed the civil service exams or got into graduate school. I always feel provoked by this kind of talk. [The other children] all seem to have great futures, good jobs, graduate school … and me, I have nothing, and I just stay at home. (Yu, female, 24)

Chinese parents emphasise the utilitarian value of education and work more than their Western counterparts (France, Jin, and Huang 1991). Students are expected to experience their childhoods and youths as endless projects of school work, and they are promised by their parents that their efforts will eventually pay off in terms of higher future returns (Woronov 2015). In his work *Governing Educational Desire*, Kipnis (2011) suggests some of the reasons why Chinese parents have such high expectations for their children. According to Kipnis, the historical intersection of economic growth and rapid urbanisation with the nationwide expansion of university places has allowed the majority of parents to dream of having a child attend university and enjoy a promising future, a dream that may not have been possible at another historical moment (2011, 54). Rapid development has left undereducated parents with the feeling that times are changing and that their own lack of experience of higher education and career exploration is irrelevant to the possibilities available to their children (Kipnis 2011, 55). Moreover, in the context of China's birth control policy, the experience of having fewer children has also heightened parents' ambitions for their children, in rural and urban households alike (Kipnis 2011, 61). Most public servant applicants are supported financially by their families during the exam preparation period (Chung 2010). Although the financial strains can be significant for aging parents, they are willing to take on the financial burden for their children's sake as civil service jobs are so highly regarded by their generation (Kipnis 2011). Therefore, pushing one's children to secure a civil service job may be viewed as a family pursuit, rather than a personal one.

'Dusty worker' vs. 'lady in the office'

For twelve centuries, social rank in China has been determined more by one's qualification for office than by one's wealth. This qualification for office, in turn, has been determined by the results of examinations (Weber 1951, 107). Most officials were selected by the Imperial Examinations System, which tested applicants' understanding of Confucian ideas and how far they had become 'a cultured man' (Durant 1992). The hired officials administered Imperial China, occupying the highest positions in the social hierarchy, above the peasants, craftsmen, and merchants (Münch and Risler 1987, 23). In contemporary China, the Imperial officials have evolved into civil servants, and Chinese students are still motivated to become civil servants rather than skilled workers (Xiong 2011). The legacies of Confucian appear to be enduring to this day in terms of the power and status afforded to civil servants, which drives the increasingly fierce competition for positions of office (Liu 2016; Xiong 2011). In the present study, Han reported her concerns regarding the social prestige and recognition assigned to different occupations in her hometown:

> My hometown is a small mining town in Shanxi province. Whoever works for the government is considered upper-class. Those who work for the coal mining companies, whether you are a technician or a manager, are seen as 'workers'. They live and work in horrible environments and always look so grey and dusty. Ever since I was a kid, I have been encouraged by friends and family in town to be someone who works in an office, like an office lady, away from the coal mines. So I am determined to take these government exams. (Han, female, 22)

Other participants expressed similar views:

> I think the society, the general public, see jobs with *Bianzhi* as more respectable and prestigious. It is not about the salary or working hours … it is about making you look nice. For example, in a social gathering, those with civil service jobs will be heard the most, while those who are labourers or workers won't be taken seriously. (Peiqin, male, 24)

> Within the context of COVID-19, I guess the advantages of civil service jobs have been shown, especially in terms of their social status. (Guo, female, 22)

The Confucian societal sentiments in relation to government jobs were captured in the young people's accounts of their experiences. In *The Analects*, Confucius advised his students to undertake the following course of action: 'The student, having mastered his studies, should apply himself to be an officer' (*The Analects*, Zi Lu, 9:13; Legge's translation, 1861). Confucian views on the division of labour and the professional hierarchy appear to have led the young people in this study to perceive civil servants as being naturally superior to skilled workers, as they hold positions among the 'upper-class' and are 'heard the most'.

While the Confucian legacies could provide some historical explanation of the phenomena identified in this study, Hodkinson's (2008) theory of careership might also inform the discussion, as these young people's career decision-making processes were shaped by their horizons for action, which were determined by a constrained employment field as well as the individuals' dispositions and their subjective perceptions of what employment might be available and appropriate (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 34). As they perceived working for the public sector as 'respectable and prestigious', a career progressing towards other jobs may remain outside of their horizons for action. The perception that becoming 'an office lady' or a government official is a 'valid or

appropriate' choice for a future career was formed through the young people's family and personal interactions (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996). The 'aspiration window', through which they view the possibilities existing within their social sphere, is usually based on the opportunities available within their community (Gutman and Akerman 2008). The next section explores how these young people perceived the exam-based recruitment system, as well as how they articulated the merits of those individuals who succeed in the exams.

Working for the common good

A fair game: 'It's all down to me'

There was a popular assumption among the participants that the exam-based recruitment system provides all graduates with fair conditions in which to compete. Once the test scores are published and compared, the graduates are rewarded based on their test performance; hence, the results are considered to be fair and just. A large number of the graduates in this study praised the system for its fair and meritocratic nature. Jing, for example, was a staunch believer in the fairness of the system:

> Of course it is a fair and transparent competition [for the government jobs]. If you were ranked at the top in the exams, you got the job fair and square. This brings hope and faith to people like me, who have few social and economic resources and come from humble backgrounds. (Jing, female, 23)

Based on the perceived fairness of the system, many of the participants considered an individual's chances of attaining a government job accorded with their level of diligence in preparing for the exams, even though they were aware that there was a strict cut-off line for each post and a large percentage of candidates necessarily failed the exams. Hence, they felt that when they were eliminated from the competition, they only had themselves to blame:

> I've taken the exams four times now and I've failed four times. Sometimes, I would browse through posts that people shared online about their exam prep experiences. I tried to figure out why I didn't make it and see what it was that I didn't do that other people did. I think the main reason is I did not put enough effort into it. It's all down to me, isn't it? It's my fault for not making it. (Jie, female, 22)

> Well, I guess I could never know how many candidates I would compete with or what their test scores would be when applying for a post. But if I worked hard enough and became good enough, I would get the job for sure. (Han, female, 22)

> I think it is all up to individual choice. It is a fair game, isn't it? The amount of effort equals the amount of return. No pain no gain. You need to work hard for this. (Miao, male, 23)

The youngsters in the study repeatedly described the exams as 'a fair game'. They were convinced that they simply needed to 'work hard enough', and that they had deserved to be eliminated because they 'did not put enough effort into it'. They tended to blame themselves for failing the exams. They could only come to accept their unsatisfactory outcomes if they could be made to believe (even falsely) that the system used to determine them was fair and legitimate (Jost 1995).

The structural constraints on these young people and their futures had become invisible. As a consequence, they came to view the institutional risks they faced as the result of individual decision making: 'It is all up to individual choice', as Miao stated. Gramsci argued that people seldom know or ask the reason behind the apparently obvious taken-for-granted understandings (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). It becomes part of what Gramsci calls 'common sense', which is the uncritical perceiving and understanding of the world that has become 'common' in any given epoch (Gramsci 1971, 322). These ideas and beliefs constitute a general worldview and uphold a particular form of hegemonic power, which 'saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the limit of commonsense for most people under its sway' (Williams, 1960). Therefore, as Jing stated 'Of course, it [the exam] is a fair and transparent competition'. Thus, the young people had been made to accept their unfavourable place 'in the competition for a livelihood' from the perspective of 'common sense' (Brown, 2003, p. 142). The following section explores in greater depth the young people's perceptions of the attributes of those who achieve exam success and secure employment with the government.

Meritocratic logic: 'They are people of higher quality'

During the Imperial Era, Chinese society viewed those succeeding in passing the exams to become officers not merely as possessors of knowledge, but also as holders of magical qualities (Weber 1951, 128). Confucian philosophers considered social stratification as a functional necessity for social cohesion in Imperial China (Liu 2016, 13). Examinations were believed to bring about an equilibrium that both justified social stratification and enhanced social cohesion (Ho 1962). The imperial examination system performed an important meritocratic social function by inducing the majority of the population (the peasant class) to accept their status as labourers on the land and to believe that the selection of persons for office was based on merit, intelligence, and hard work (Liu 2016, 25).

In contemporary China, the exam-based recruitment system might at first appear to be 'meritocracy in action', given that selection is exclusively based on exam performance, which in turn can be viewed as depending on intelligence plus effort (Jin and Ball 2019, 2). Meritocracy involves the giving of rewards to individuals based on merit or achievement (Walton, Spencer, and Erman 2013), and promotes the notion of equality of opportunity (Jin and Ball 2019). When writing about the concept of meritocracy in the 1950s, Fox (1956) and, later, Young (1958) warned that if society were considered to be meritocratic, there might be no sympathy for the disadvantaged, who would be assumed to deserve their fate (Littler 2018). However, the concept of meritocracy has been enthusiastically embraced as a positive term in the West, as it appears to constitute a highly attractive 'progressive' goal to which centre-left parties can commit (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007, 4). Many researchers have challenged this concept, arguing that meritocracy creates an illusion of social justice that disguises structural inequalities (Bell 1973; Brown and Tannock 2009; Dench 2006).

Whilst the Chinese exam-based recruitment system might, at the surface level, appear to be 'a prime meritocratic environment' (Jin and Ball 2019, 13), it is questionable to what extent the system is in fact meritocratic. When investigating the effect of the College Entrance Exam (CEE) as a selecting mechanism for universities in China, Liu (2013;

2016) found that, with its association with meritocratic selection, the CEE justified the privileges of urban residents and advantaged families in the form of 'merited' outcomes, while at the same time maintaining social inequality among different regions and between the rural and the urban. As exam performance is assumed to be evidence of merit, it is viewed as proof of a person's overall quality (Kipnis, 2011). Under the influence of an 'examination culture', academically focused, exam/credential-driven societal attitudes are evident in contemporary China (Kipnis, 2011, p. 143). Test scores have become more than just a quantitative expression of educational outcome; they condense and represent the social value of young people (Woronov, 2015).

Based on perceptions that the system is fair and meritocratic, those who 'make it' are considered to possess key 'merits' and social value that may set them apart from those who do not. The majority of participants believed that an excellent test performance could demonstrate a candidate's outstanding qualities: such as their 'high level of ability to learn', 'patience and perseverance', or 'solid and comprehensive knowledge'. Below is a selection of the young people's comments in which they articulate their meritocratic logic:

> If they could manage to pass the exam and get the job, they must have a higher level of comprehension and understanding of things. They are also swift in responding, as it is one of the requirements of the exam. You need to make accurate judgements in a very short time. I think, overall, they are people of higher quality. (Bian, female, 22)

> The exam selects those who have advanced learning abilities as well as a more comprehensive knowledge base. One needs to have a strong and solid background in learning. (Yu, male, 21)

> I think they [civil servants] always have this humble and knowledgeable air, free of arrogance or impetuousness. I know a few family members who have 'jobs in the system'. I find that they are outstanding people; for example, they have a greater ability to analyse complex problems, respond to crises and prioritise tasks. (Yang, female, 23)

In addition to the perception that civil servants possess excellent scholarly skills, they are also viewed as being morally superior and more socially aware, as noted by the young people in the study:

> I think the government, as a workplace, would not tolerate its employees behaving immorally or unethically. So people who work for the government have greater *suzhi*.[5] If one of them were to do something immoral, for example, there would be serious consequences. But people working somewhere else might consider [the immoral behaviour] to be normal. (Lee, male, 24)

> Those who work in the system must have a particularly strong sense of social responsibility and political standing, as it is required by our government. We need people like that to work for the country, for the people. (Shi, male, 23)

The meritocratic exam system seems to provide the basis for automatically explaining any differences in individual outcome. Those who achieve exam success are viewed as being 'people of higher quality'. The false belief in the logic of meritocracy could be seen in terms of what Gramsci calls 'stratified deposits' (Gramsci, 1971), as it is slowly settled or sedimented into 'popular philosophy', 'without leaving an inventory' through which to trace its sources. Civil servants are perceived as being a group of 'intellectuals', in

Gramscian terms, thus giving legitimacy to the categories and structures of everyday life (Boggs, 1976).

Working for the party-state: 'serving the people'

The participants showed a strong attachment to the party-state:

> Since the war with Japan, the CCP has been a special leader for the Chinese people, as its goal is to serve the people. The Party has earned the public's trust and dependence since the war. Those who work for the government are all party members. Their priority is to contribute and sacrifice themselves for the people. (Peiqin, male, 24)

> I think it is a great and noble cause, working for the party, for the government. Even though the position may be very insignificant, for example, a local teacher, it is still a great thing, isn't it? We need to think in accordance with our communist values. (Jie, female, 22)

> In order to prepare myself for the exams, I have been following the news of every congress meeting and reading every policy report from the Party. I think it is important for me to be close to the Party because this could bring a sense of reward and meaning. (Rui, female, 24)

These young people demonstrated strong 'altruistic motivations to serve the public' in China, which is considered a key attribute of public officials (Bozeman and Su, 2015). They aligned their career aspirations and plans to a considerable extent with government initiatives. In the process of preparing for the exams, their 'employment field' was shaped by their strong attachment to the party-state as well as to the 'social imaginary' constructed in contemporary Chinese society (Taylor, 2004).

Conclusion

This article has analysed the 'exam ronin' phenomenon among young Chinese people. These are individuals who remove themselves from the labour market to prepare for civil service exams. Based on empirical data, the paper illustrates the processes that underlie these young people's decision-making throughout their school-to-work transition in China. The paper also highlights the influence of Confucianism and the *Keju* system on young people's desire to secure public service jobs. Since the Imperial Era, the perceived meritocratic exam system has justified social stratification, maintained social cohesion, and consolidated the rule of scholar-officials (Ho, 1972).

The motivations of the young people in this study for choosing a civil service job seem to be more nuanced and complicated than previous studies indicated (Ritz and Waldner, 2011). On the one hand, their 'choosing' of a civil service job can be seen as a result of constrained career options and an absence of vocational guidance. On the other hand, their choice-making processes were influenced by heightened parental ambition and Confucian societal sentiment in relation to the figure of the civil servant. The young people in this study perceived the exam-based recruitment system as fair and meritocratic, and saw those who achieve exam success as 'people of higher quality'. Moreover, their 'horizons for action', the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 34), appear to have been shaped by their strong attachment to the party-state.

This paper draws on the perspectives of a small purposive sample of young 'exam ronins', who had removed themselves from the labour market to prepare for the civil

service exams in China. Inevitably, with a small sample, there are limitations to what the data can yield. Whilst the analysis uncovered significant findings regarding young people's experiences and perceptions and provided the basis for a more extensive study, it did not allow for examination of issues relating to class and gender. Moreover, there is a possibility of bias (both from the researcher and the participants) in this study. Further related studies could involve multiple data collection techniques and examine the experiences of young people with more diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

Notes

1. "Iron rice bowl" refers to the job assignment system that comes with a lifetime guarantee of a steady salary and the benefits of a socialist welfare package (Hoffman, 2006, p. 551).
2. Bianzhi is the authorised number of personnel (the number of established posts) in a party or government administrative organ (*jiguan*), a government service organisation (*shiye danwei*) or a state-owned enterprise (*qiye*) (Brødsgaard, 2002). By controlling *Bianzhi*, the party-state is able to exercise control over the entire administrative apparatus from the central to local level. The benefit for workers of having a *Bianzhi* is that it affords them "iron rice bowl" privileges, i.e., the lifetime guarantee of a steady salary and the benefits of a socialist welfare package (Hoffman, 2006). However, employees with *Bianzhi* can neither change jobs nor gain rapid promotion or a salary increase, as was the case in the planned economy.
3. These exams include the provincial/national civil servant exams and exams to apply for jobs at various governmental departments.
4. The social class classification used in this study follows the work of Lu (2004), which originated from the social-cultural context of contemporary China.
5. *Suzhi* may be glossed as the human qualities involved in the processes of governing contemporary China (Kipnis, 2007).

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