

# Changes in the Social and Spatial Background of China's Educated Elite 1865-2014

James Lee, Liang Chen, Cameron Campbell

For the last thirty years, Western scholars from Bourdieu (1989/1998) to Karabel (2006) have gone to great length to document how in France and in the United States, national and regional social and economic elites monopolize elite higher education. In China, in contrast, a system of elite examinations admits a significant proportion of students from different social and spatial backgrounds. This paper uses a combined Big Historical Dataset of over 600,000 successful examination candidates that includes all imperial degree holders, the majority of registered Republican university students, and all undergraduate students from several select elite PRC universities to document how changes in the examination system during the last 150 years have changed the social and spatial origins of successful degree candidates during four distinct periods: 1865-1905, 1906-1952, 1953-2003, 2004-2014. Our results suggest that while elite higher education elsewhere largely reproduced social and economic elites from specific feeder populations, in China elite higher education was more independent and in addition to reproducing older social and economic elites during these four periods also transformed them.

## References

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989/1998 *La noblesse d'État: grandes écoles et esprit de corps*. Translated as *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Les Editions de minuit/Stanford University Press.

Karabel, Jerome. 2006. *The chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.