

SYMPOSIUM

Exam-centred Meritocracy in Taiwan: Hiring by Merit or Examination?

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As a legacy of Imperial China, the Taiwan civil service entrance examination (CSEE) represents the hallmark of a unique exam-centred meritocracy, in which government agencies and public managers are deprived of selection power. This system diverges from the trend of managerialism in Anglo-Saxon countries. This paper argues that the evolution of meritocracy in Taiwan has been built around the CSEE and has contributed to a top-down state-building approach. The current system is a product of a long-term power struggle among the Examination Yuan, government agencies, and civil service examinees. In contrast to the popular framework of patronage versus merit, the policy debate in Taiwan is better framed as whether or not recruitments are made on the basis of competitive examination. The value of 'equality' is upheld at the expense of the value of 'competence'.

Key words: *merit, staffing, civil service examination, Taiwan*

This paper aims to provide a critical account of exam-based meritocracy in Taiwan. Exam-oriented recruitment characterizes most Asian civil service systems (Poocjaroen and Brillantes 2013), a tradition that has been influenced by Chinese Confucianism, which established a competitive civil service examination system in Imperial China without a modern civil service system. The Nationalist regime in the Nanjing era (1927–1937) established a modern civil service system coupled with the examination tradition. Taiwan succeeded to the lineage when the regime retreated to the island. In contrast, Communist China broke away from this tradition until the 1990s and its current system mirrors this tradition less than Taiwan does.

This account will review how this line of tradition frames a legitimate staffing system in its modern evolution. The paper argues that 'merit' as a concept and discourse has never been the focus in Taiwan's policy debate. The question of whether and how civil servants are 'hired by examination' is a better way in which to frame the debate. Other staffing systems that meet merit principles in the Western sense

do not legitimize the identity of the recruits. Enhancing 'hiring by examination' has been an ideal for the state personnel authority (the Examination Yuan) to pursue, but 'hiring by examination' disabled the staffing power of public managers. Public managers have been trying to break through the rigidity by resorting to alternative labour sources. The evolution of the meritocracy in Taiwan has been built around the function of the civil service entrance examination (CSEE) vis-à-vis the discretion of public managers. The existing system is the product of long-term struggles among the Examination Yuan, government agencies, and civil service examinees: the Examination Yuan strives to uphold the sanctity of the examination; government agencies strive for more flexibility under the sanctity of the examination; and civil service examinees strive for more opportunities to access public offices. This paper will first review how the concept of merit is applied to civil service employment in Anglo-Saxon countries followed by a review of the Taiwan staffing system of civil service and the evolution of 'hiring by examination'.

What is Merit in the Civil Service Employment?

‘Meritocracy’ was first defined as ‘intelligence plus effort’ (i.e. $I + E = M$) by the British sociologist Michael Young in 1958 (Young 1994). The rise of meritocracy generally implies an overthrow of aristocracy of birth and plutocracy of wealth. Meritocracy was instigated in the civil service as early as the second half of the 19th century to counteract the prevailing practice of patronage in Western countries. However, ‘merit’ in civil service recruitment is an evolving concept. In this regard, according to Kernaghan (2011), we should make a distinction between the merit *principle* and the merit *system*, in which the *principle* refers to some guiding values and the *system* refers to administrative processes, practices, rules, and procedures to fulfil the merit principle.

Although there is no explicitly agreed definition of the merit principle, two values can be identified to set its parameters. The first is ‘depoliticization’ of official appointment (usually referring to ‘impartiality’ or ‘neutrality’). ‘Depoliticization’ and ‘merit’ are in fact two separate ideas. For instance, the 2003 Public Service Employment Act of Canada requires the following: ‘appointment by the [Public Service] commission to or from within the public service shall be made on the basis of *merit* and must be *free from political influence*’ (section 30(1))’ (emphasis added). To be sure, depoliticization is believed to be able to exclude patronage and nepotism from recruitment. As part of the merit system, an apolitical personnel authority (e.g. the Australian Public Service Commission) is usually established to enforce the merit principle. In other words, ‘depoliticization’ and ‘merit’ are mutually reinforced.

The second value is ‘competence plus equality’. As demonstrated by the formula ‘ $I + E = M$ ’, ‘competence’ can be considered an alternative, simplified expression of ‘merit’ in a workplace context, whereas ‘equality’ helps realize ‘competence’ in the sense that the former increases opportunities for government agencies to select suitable talent. The value concerning ‘equality’ or ‘fairness’ is usually included in the merit or employment principles

of many Anglo-Saxon countries. For instance, in Australia, the merit principle incorporates a condition that ‘all eligible members of the community were given a *reasonable opportunity* to apply to perform the relevant duty’ (emphasis added, Public Service Act 1999 Section 10A).

A further question is how to define ‘competence’ or select the competent, which is a problem of the merit system. ‘Examination’ was first identified as a tool to help solve this problem. The Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854, which marked the founding of the modern British civil service, advocated using a competitive examination by written tests conducted periodically by a central board of examiners. As evidenced by Teng (1943), such a proposal imitated the practice of the civil service examination in Imperial China. Under the reform of the Pendleton Act of 1883, the United States then undertook a similar examination system.

However, by the second half of the 20th century, such an examination system was no longer considered a desirable tool. Although the system promoted the value of neutrality, it could not adequately measure job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities of examinees (Hays and Kearney 1982). Civil service recruitment then became so decentralized that agencies and line managers were given authority to specify qualifications, organize their own examinations, and directly hire staff under the guidelines and supervision of the human resources office (Hays and Sowa 2005). In the United Kingdom, the centralized examination continued right up until the 1980s. In Australia, recruitment of civil servants moved from a centralized rule-based approach to a model of professional principles and standards supplemented by agency-based guidance and policies (Godwin 2011).

In general, the current trend in defining the merit principles and system in Anglo-Saxon countries stresses the notion of ‘fitness to do the job’ and enabling public managers to exercise more selection power (in line with the idea of New Public Management (NPM)) rather than a ‘centralized examination’. ‘Competitive selection’ remains a common rule but not essential. In Australia, an appointment should be based on the assessment of ‘the relative suitability of the candidates to perform the relevant

duties, using a competitive selection process' (Public Service Act 1999 Section 10A). In Canada, 'competitive' is not essential. Merit in Canada is simply defined as 'the person to be appointed meets the essential qualifications for the work to be performed, as established by the deputy head' (Public Service Employment Act, Section 30(2(a))). Comparison among candidates and advertising positions is not essential (Kernaghan 2011).

In contrast, a centralized examination system remains the major tool for civil service staffing in Taiwan. The so-called examinations in most cases refer solely to a written-test selection, with no interview at all.¹ These examinations mainly test the academic and legal knowledge of examinees through multiple-choice questions and essay writing. Job assignment should prioritize candidates with higher scores with reference to their agency preferences. In fact, examination per se is the end-cum-means in the meritocracy of Taiwan.

Background of Civil Service Staffing in Taiwan: An Imperial Legacy

Except in academic discourse, 'merit' has never literally been a function of state personnel policy in Taiwan; instead, 'hiring by examination' is an explicit constitution-level policy. Article 85 of the constitution of Taiwan clearly stipulates the following: 'In the selection of public functionaries, a system of *open competitive examination* shall be put into operation ... No person shall be appointed to a public office unless he is qualified through *examination*' (emphasis added). The *examinations* conventionally only refer to those organized by the Examination Yuan.

Of course, we could consider 'hiring by examination' as synonymous with the 'merit principle' in Taiwan and local public administration textbooks usually associate 'hiring by examination' with the 'merit principle'. However, a 2011 survey² of civil servants in six Asian countries and the United States found that the sample from Taiwan was the lowest (35%) to agree that their departments upheld merit principles in hiring even though Taiwan

has a stringent examination system (Poojaroen and Brillantes 2013: 147). The paradox may be caused by the ill-designed question for the context of Taiwan, because government agencies in Taiwan have no authority to select their staff from the pool of newly qualified examinees from the CSEEs. In this sense, the result may imply that most respondents did not consider such a 'hiring by examination' either a function of the merit system or a well-functioning merit system, or they were considering the hiring of staff from the internal labour market, or they did not fully grasp the concept of merit. All of these possible explanations suggest that although 'merit' should not be rejected as an analytical concept here, we should go beyond it to illuminate the real situation in Taiwan.

As noted above, Taiwan carries more of a legacy from the traditional Chinese civil service examination system than Communist China. This traditional system, as a staffing system, has a different logic of development from Western counterparts. In fact, meritocracy in Western countries emerged from a context of a democratic political system in which the meritocracy was pursued to stabilize and professionalize administrations despite frequent changeover of elected governments, and as a check against the overuse of political patronage. Exam-based meritocracy in China was pursued long before the modern epoch (institutionalized during the Sui dynasty in 622 A.D.). Its aim was to strengthen the legitimacy of the empire by engaging well-educated social elites, partly from the local gentry, into the imperial government and to facilitate state penetration into local governments by assigning loyalists selected through the civil service examination to key local official positions. This logic remained valid after the Imperial era. Immediately after the 1911 revolution, the revolutionary government under Sun Yat-sen, although still mired in political turbulence, already mulled over establishing an examination system to select loyalists to govern local areas.³ Promoting the 'hiring by examination' was already on Sun's state-building agenda from the outset of the republic.

Supply-driven System

Three unique characteristics of the imperial exam-based staffing were succeeded and developed by Nationalist China and Taiwan. First, the examination is a *supply-driven system*. In the Imperial era, the civil service examination was a means of searching for social elites to serve the empire. It was regularly held (every 3 years since 1066 A.D.) to add some social elites to serve the government whether or not vacancies existed in agencies and without regard to the demands of specific agencies. In principle, the examination was to create a talent reserve pool for the government, so it was not essential to appoint all qualified candidates to offices. During the Warlord era (1916–1928), the Beijing central government had already held a couple of civil service examinations. However, it was only a qualifying examination, offering candidates for selection by government agencies. During the Nanjing era, the Nationalist government started to realize Sun Yat-sen's ideal of 'hiring by examination' and held the first CSEE in 1931. Different from the Beijing-government practice, the Nanjing government assigned all qualified candidates to government offices for appointment. However, this supply-driven system did not take the needs of agencies into account and, as a result, many of the new recruits became redundant.⁴ This mismatching issue was less significant in the Imperial era because the examination at that time was aimed at finding candidates for mandarins (who were similar to senior officials and political executives now) – some hundreds of generalists each time. The examination in post-Imperial China is extended to the selection of almost all staff in the government agencies (excluding political appointees and manual workers) – up to thousands of administrative and technical workers every year. As a result, during the Nationalist rule in mainland China, the problem emerged of how to adequately pair qualified examinees with vacancies.

More serious was the problem of oversupply as the examination was regularly held to supply manpower. This problem was exacerbated in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), because non-examination sources (e.g. recommendations,

succession by sons, position buying) were open for official appointment in the dynasty. Many candidates who had passed the examination were kept on a waiting list for a job assignment for years, especially in the late Qing period (Xiao 2007). Non-examination sources were portrayed as a leading 'evil', which caused the malfunctioning of the civil service examination. In response to the lesson learned from the Qing dynasty, the Nationalists tried to minimize 'exceptional' sources from outside the CSEEs (Chiang 1997: 206). This response further hastened an agenda for building up an appropriate pairing mechanism.

Examination-Appointment Dual System

The pairing problem is highly associated with the second characteristic of the staffing system – an *examination-appointment dual system*. In the Imperial era, the Ministry of Rites was in charge of examinations whereas the Ministry of Personnel was in charge of appointments of officials and other personnel administrative affairs. The Ministry of Rites supplied the Ministry of Personnel with candidates for appointment. The latter assigned the entrants to various positions across the empire. The Nationalist government followed this tradition, establishing the Examination Commission (renamed the Ministry of Examination in 1948) and the Ministry of Civil Service under the Examination Yuan. This dual system divided the staffing system for entrants into two distinct procedures: examination and appointment. Communist China did not follow such an institutional setting when it established the modern civil service system in the 1990s.

In contrast with the Western personnel-staffing concept of 'recruitment and selection' in which an examination is only one step or a tool in the selection process and the step of (final) selection is usually undertaken by appointing agencies, an examination per se in Nationalist China and Taiwan covers or replaces the procedures of recruitment and selection. However, the examination only settles the 'selection', not the 'appointment'. The candidates selected by the CSEE are ultimately appointed by government agencies that are

monitored by the Ministry of Civil Service. Hence, in principle, passing the CSEE does not guarantee an appointment.

On the other hand, the qualified examinees do not necessarily assume government positions (immediately). The choice to take the CSEE is considered a basic right for all citizens. Article 18 of the constitution of Taiwan reads as follows: 'The people shall have the right of taking public examinations and of holding public offices'. This implies that the CSEEs are not only supposed to serve the manpower needs of government agencies, but also to ensure a citizen's right to access the CSEE and a government position. In that sense, the CSEEs must be organized regularly to qualify prospective civil servants whose qualifications should be legally protected.

The *supply-driven system* and the *examination-appointment dual system* jointly generate a particular personnel administration issue in Taiwan, the so-called examination-appointment pairing. This pairing subsequently evolved into a debate over whether the examination should simply qualify examinees or if it should go further and guarantee a qualified examinee an official job.

Examination Centralism

The above issue is further complicated by another hallmark of exam-based staffing, *examination centralism*. Since the establishment of the Examination Yuan in 1930, the CSEE has become a centralized function. This state-level organ can be compared to public/civil service commissions in other countries, but it is more powerful. The Examination Yuan is independent of the executive branch of the state – that is the Executive Yuan – and monopolizes the authority and execution of state-regulated examinations (including professional licencing). In the Nanjing era, due to the size of the mainland and extensive role of examinations including for staffing lower-ranking government officials, the Examination Yuan could not organize examinations for all positions in central and local governments. However, the Examination Yuan still controlled those CSEEs in staffing higher-ranking positions and these

examinations were held only in Nanjing. After 1949, the Nationalist rulers in Taiwan were better able to organize all examinations.

This centralism reflected a particular role of the CSEE. If the adoption of meritocracy in democracies was a collective decision to neutralize employment of officials against political patronage at the top echelons, then the adoption of meritocracy in Nationalist China and Taiwan was a ruling-party decision at the top to neutralize employment against all other sources outside the jurisdiction of the Examination Yuan, not just by nepotism and patronage. This neutralization was to help facilitate the state penetration into localities (So and Li 2011), which, in the case of the Nationalist government on the mainland, was not successful, because the CSEEs contributed no more than 1% of civil service manpower in the 1930s (Strauss 1994: 218). The Examination Yuan was determined to strengthen this centralism rather than to decentralize authority. The social reputation of the Examination Yuan in promoting fairness and equal opportunity was well established as it maintained the anonymous marking that had already been adopted in the Imperial era. There has been no explicit social pressure to decentralize the system ever since the founding of the CSEE, in contrast to the trend of decentralization among Anglo-Saxon countries, as noted above. However, this centralized system exacerbates the examination-appointment pairing problem. To appropriately pair a centralized pool of candidates from across the country with all positions in agencies across all central and local governments is an extremely challenging task.

Evolution of Hiring by Examination: The Disabling and Self-enabling of Public Managers

In the supply-driven system, the recruitment of new civil servants has never functioned as position-based in the sense that applicants join an examination without reference to a job position. It is an annual common recruitment exercise that is divided into various disciplines of examinations. The CSEE was divided into a

junior-level and a senior-level examination at the outset. An additional level, the elementary-level examination, was added in 1997. Those who pass a specific examination are eligible for a variety of positions in a specific job field at a definitive rank and grade.

During the time of the Nationalist Government of China, those examinees that passed the CSEEs (with a score of 60) were qualified to be assigned to any office they selected without the need to consult employers' preferences and demands, which resulted in conflicts between public managers and new recruits. Even though the agencies could not decline the manpower offer sent by the Examination Yuan, they could put the recruits in idle positions and even dismiss them with excuses. Some new recruits asked for reassignments of their jobs.⁵ In fact, alternative sources of manpower were allowed and available at that time for agencies to select. Mismatching and oversupply problems had already emerged.

As early as 1934, a 'qualifying examination' and an 'appointment examination' were initiated as two options to solve the problem (Yang 2003: 445). The former only qualified an examinee but did not place him or her in a job whereas the latter placed all qualified examinees in positions. This qualifying-appointment examination dichotomy subsequently became the major frame of policy debate, in which the 'qualifying examination' enables the selection discretion of public managers but provides no job guarantee for qualified examinees, and the 'appointment examination' with the reverse problem. The 'appointment examination' was eventually decided upon.

However, in the first 15 years of its rule in Taiwan (1950–1965), the Nationalist government was forced to adopt the 'qualifying examination', as millions of mainlanders along with the émigré regime moved to the island, causing an oversupply of government manpower. The CSEE simply qualified the examinees and offered them credentials. All qualified examinees were put on the 'waiting list' for the selection and appointment of agencies. Such a system turned the staffing process to the agencies' advantage. However, the examinees on the waiting list were seldom appointed officials as

the government prioritized Nationalist loyalists from the mainland. Non-examination sources were not shut down to facilitate 'exceptional' staffing. To be appointed, qualified examinees had to appeal to 'back-door' means to secure a job (Chiang 1997: 202). In response, the Ministry of Examination tried to switch it over to an appointment examination in the early 1960s while taking agencies' demands into account.

The Job-assignment System with Two Groups of Examinees (1966–1986)

In 1966, the 'waiting list' system was replaced by a 'job-assignment' system. A year later, the newly established Central Personnel Administration (CPA) under the Executive Yuan was assigned to register the available agency vacancies before each CSEE and keep the vacancies away from staffing from other sources. This was aimed at ensuring a balance between manpower supply and demand. The 'job-assignment' system disabled public managers' ability to select and failed to meet the manpower demand. As noted above, qualified examinees did not necessarily or were unable to report for duty for various reasons such as the following: they were conscripted or remained in school. In addition, all examinations still adopted a fixed passing score (60). This meant that there could be an oversupply for certain vacancies but an undersupply for others (Chiang 1997: 204). It should be noted that the Examination Yuan could not restrict conscripts and students from taking the CSEE as it was their constitutional right. From then on, agencies tried to avoid filing all vacancies to the CPA to retain some flexibility in hiring new staff (e.g. hiring qualified examinees who did not accept job assignments and through the internal labour market).

In response, in 1979, the Examination Yuan divided the examinees into two groups: Group One included those not in school and not on military service. The number of qualified examinees matched the vacancies available. Examinees in this group had to accept the job assignment immediately. Group Two was composed of students and conscripts who took the examination. The passing score remained 60.

Those qualified in this group were put on a waiting list and could postpone the job assignment until the barriers to reporting for duty were lifted. However, this new arrangement led to a double standard of qualifying the examinees. In 1981, the standards were unified to a single passing score of 60. If the qualified candidates in Group One undersupplied the agencies, the passing-score standard could be lowered, but to no less than 50. If the agencies were oversupplied, the extra manpower was put on the waiting list. A subsequent situation of oversupplying then developed, which led to proliferating 'back-door' practices or imposing pressure upon the government agencies through whatever means available (e.g. through lobbying of people's representatives) to secure jobs (Li 1988). This practice caused trouble for the government agencies.

Nevertheless, the ratio of duty reporting improved, as only one job assignment was allowed in the assignment regulations revised in 1978. Duty reporting rose from approximately 40% before 1979 to 78% in 1979–1985 period (Li 1988). However, some candidates with credentials declined job assignments and managed to find other positions.

The Job-assignment System with Deferring Credentialing and the Two-list System (1987–)

To further close loopholes, a new system was enforced in 1987. The examinees were no longer divided into two groups and the number of qualified examinees matched the number of corresponding vacancies. All qualified examinees would not be credentialed until they accepted the job assignment and completed a training course, which could suppress the opportunism of qualified candidates. However, it could not prevent students and conscripts from taking the examinations. Delay of duty reporting remained if the examinees passed. Hence, the Ministry of Examination resorted to inflating the number of qualified examinees, which, in turn, led to an oversupply problem.

In addition, vacancies could become available every day. Hence, those vacancies that were released after the vacancy registration

could not be filled in a timely manner. As a result, in 1995, the job-assignment system was further revamped so that all qualified examinees were separated into two categories: those who scored higher were placed on a regular list to fill the registered vacancies whereas those who scored lower were placed on a reserve list. After all the candidates on the first list were assigned a job, government agencies with remaining vacancies could select their staff from the reserve list; these were eligible for selection until the release of the next CSEE results, including for emerging vacancies. In addition, under certain conditions the qualification of candidates who could not report for duty immediately could be retained. Except conscripts on the regular list who were allowed to retain the qualification until the completion of their military service, other candidates had to report to duty. In 2001, this restriction was relaxed. Those candidates on the regular list who were ill, pregnant, had a parent with a terminal illness, were working towards a post-graduate degree, or had any irresistible causes that led to delay of duty reporting could retain the qualification for job assignment.

This two-list system generated a new concern about unfairness to candidates on the regular list, because those on the reserve list could select any offer from among agencies, but those on the regular list had to accept 'one' job assignment. In fact, some agencies managed to deliberately hold off on vacancies and not report them to the CPA. Once the examination results were released, these agencies immediately accessed candidates on the reserve list for interviews and selection. The candidates whose scores were lower than those on the regular list might secure a 'better' job (Hsu 2003). This outcome was not acceptable to the general public.

As a result, at the end of 2007, the two-list system was further adjusted. A job assignment is now extended to candidates on the reserve list. Once the job assignment for the candidates on the regular list has been completed, those on the reserve list will be assigned to agencies that still have vacancies in accordance with their scores and agency preferences. These vacancies cannot be filled by a 'selection' from

other pools of qualified candidates until all candidates on the regular and the reserve lists have been exhausted, which means that there is no longer any voluntary job matching between newly qualified candidates and agencies. In response to calling for a protection of the right to access public office, the right to retain qualification for a job assignment now extends to conscripts on the reserve list.

In addition, the overhaul of the civil service system in 1987 at the same time made the internal labour market more flexible, allowing a transfer of staff between agencies and professional groups. This resulted in an increase of reliance on the internal labour market rather than the external labour market (i.e. the CSEE; Shih 2003). Agencies can selectively open vacancies to existing civil servants working in other agencies or to the recruits from the CSEE. Through the former, the public managers can assess and hire adequate applicants. Note that without a demand side, the internal labour market does not function. Many new recruits applied for transfer not long after assuming their assigned job.⁶ This shows a lack of consideration of job fitness or job matching behind the job-assignment system.

As a result, many government agencies suffered from a high turnover rate. The internal labour market has grown at the expense of the external labour market. To suppress vacancy concealment and the overuse of the internal labour market, at the end of 2007, the CPA also required all agencies to gradually enhance the ratio of vacancies for the general CSEEs (Chang 2009). At the same time, the general CSEE imposed a new restriction on new recruits, prohibiting them from transferring to agencies in a different ministry or department line in their first service year, and further extending that restriction to the first three service years beginning in 2014.

From the above account of the development of the staffing system of career civil servants, one can see that the policy line of the Examination Yuan was to try to minimize or remove any discretion of public managers in staff selection, especially from the pool of the newly qualified candidates (see Table 1).

This is an extreme response to the pursuit of 'procedural fairness' (Shih 2003), in which a system should minimize 'touching by human hands'.

Non-examination Sources: Hiring by Selection with Lack of Legitimacy

The Examination Yuan has never 'sanctified' the entire public personnel system. Besides selection from the internal labour market, other manpower sources 'touched by human hands' remain available in every corner of the public sector, but the non-examination sources of manpower have never been well legitimized.

In fact, the government understands the limits of 'hiring by examination' for filling all job positions. First, while the number of the regular workforce is reaching full strength, the work of the government is still growing. So a non-civil service workforce is the sole alternative. In an attempt to cut red tape and for managerial flexibility, functional departments occasionally have pursued convenient sources of manpower outside the CSEEs for new single-purpose agencies. Second, examination sources are unable to adequately provide agencies with certain professionals, as those professionals are unwilling to take the CSEEs or it is difficult to design an examination for recruiting this particular type of talent. As a result, the government allows managerial discretion to select and hire their own staff from non-examination sources but only on non-civil service or contract and temporary terms and conditions. The non-civil service employees do not enjoy equal status with career civil servants. In particular, they are not entitled to the remuneration package, any career advancement opportunities, retirement benefits, and other fringe benefits enjoyed by career civil servants.

However, due to organizational reshuffling, the government employees in these agencies were allowed to join some special 'conversion' examinations from time to time to change their status into civil servants. The practice is disdained as it looks unfair to those who take an extremely competitive CSEE to obtain civil servant status. Such a 'conversion' examination

Table 1. Development of the CSEE system in Nationalist China and Taiwan (1931–)

Period	Examination system	Key features
1931–1949	Appointment examination without regard to vacancy availability	60 as a passing score; job position selected by qualified examinees.
1950–1965	Qualifying examination	Waiting-list system: a pool of candidates selected by agencies.
1966–1978	Appointment examination with regard to vacancy availability	Job-assignment system: register available vacancies for job assignment.
1979–1986	Appointment examination with two groups of examinees	Those qualified examinees not in school and not on military service had to accept job assignment right after examination; students or conscripts could postpone job assignment.
1987–1994	Appointment examination with deferring credentialing	Qualified examinees credentialed after accepting job assignment.
1995–2007	Appointment examination supplemented by qualifying examination	Two-list system: regular list for registered vacancies, reserve list for selection by agencies with vacancies before next examination.
2008–	Appointment examination with compulsory job assignment	Job assignment applied to both regular and reserve lists.

is currently not allowed to uphold the sanctity of the open and competitive CSEEs, but problems remain. The management system of the Bureau of Labour Insurance and the National Health Insurance Administration was converted from a type of state-owned enterprise to that of government administration in 2013. Hundreds of regular but non-civil service staff members thus became non-regular workers and were not allowed to convert into civil servants, even though the Executive Yuan tried to fight for their status conversion by arguing that the workers had already passed a qualification examination organized by government agencies. The Examination Yuan insisted that the examination was not a competitive examination open to all people, so the employees could not be considered legally qualified workers by the examination.⁷

However, in terms of the merit principles and systems used in Anglo-Saxon countries, we cannot simply say that staffing from non-examination sources does not meet the merit criteria. For instance, the staffing of government contract employees is growing

into a merit-based system, though the general impression is that the contract employees are hired by nepotism and political patronage, and the abuse of this kind of manpower is sabotaging the policy of ‘hiring by examination’.

There is evidence that government agencies are increasingly using competitive selection to hire them. In a nationwide survey conducted in 2012, over 87% of sampled agencies had adopted an open selection in which an interview was the major means for selection and 47% of the agencies had arranged a written test (So and Yeh 2012: 58). By direct recruitment, government agencies are allowed to offer a tailor-made list of job requirements for a specific position. The interview procedures in some cities are highly standardized to ensure fairness to all applicants, with impartial university teachers and personnel officers joining the interviews.⁸

In this sense, some contract employee recruitments are merit-based in the current Western sense and agencies are able to seek capable and suitable workers. But the point for

Taiwan is whether they have been qualified by the CSEE. These contract employees will never become civil servants unless they pass a CSEE. Their work experience and performance in the government holds no credit in terms of an examination result. What does this phenomenon imply for the exam-centred meritocracy of Taiwan's civil service system?

Discussion and Conclusion: Hiring by Merit or Examination?

'Merit' per se has never been the focus in the official policy and laws of civil service staffing in Taiwan. Instead, 'hiring by examination' is a more popular and well-accepted concept. Of course, 'hiring by examination' is designed to work against aristocracy and plutocracy, which is essentially the same as meritocracy. The evolution of merit-based staffing in Anglo-Saxon countries took this track at the outset. However, merit principles in Anglo-Saxon countries diverged in their subsequent development. Divergence of meritocracy in Nationalist China and Taiwan should be attributed to varying causes. 'Hiring by examination', as a form of meritocracy, is also aimed at achieving state penetration and plays a 'sacred power' to ensure absolutely equal and fair access to scarce public resources or privileges – namely, public office staffed by citizens. 'Equality' becomes a dominant value in this regard. This notion is further consolidated by an enduring staffing system that is characterized by a *supply-driven system*, an *examination-appointment dual system*, and *examination centralism*.

If 'merit' in a workplace context means 'fitness to do the job', 'hiring by examination' in Taiwan does not fulfil this criterion due to the absence of public managers in the staffing process. The Examination Yuan does try to take agencies' demands into account, but, at most, the pairing mechanism tries to meet the manpower demand 'in number'. The CSEE simply offers a type of one-size-fits-all system, which leads to a high turnover rate and the overuse of the internal labour market.

In fact, meritocracy in Taiwan is more concerned with accountability to examinees than responsiveness to the needs of public managers. What the examinees are concerned with are the procedural fairness 'untouched by human hands' and whether job assignment is prioritized in an orderly fashion from top to lower scores. The supply-driven plus centralized system serves this purpose and it is the only system that is officially considered 'hiring by examination'; other staffing systems that meet the merit principles are not. On-the-job performance is completely overlooked (as in the case of government employee conversion to civil servants). Such a supply-driven system is justified only by its competitiveness. The acceptance rates of the CSEEs averaged 6.51% in 2002–2011 (Ministry of Examination 2012). A high degree of competitiveness is always supposed to enable screening of the *crème de la crème*.

Some have observed the impact of NPM on Taiwan's recent administrative reforms (Kuo 2001; Tang 2004); however, this paper argues that NPM had nothing to do with the civil service staffing system, as Taiwan has reversed the NPM-sponsored trend of decentralization and managerial flexibility. Taiwanese civil servants' response in the cross-country survey of 'merit' that was noted above reveals that the merit concept is problematic in Taiwan. Hence, the author argues that the popular framework of patronage versus merit does not project the situation of Taiwan. The debate between 'hiring by examination' and 'hiring by non-examination means' is better able to frame the logic of the system's evolution in Taiwan.

The Taiwan experience enriches our understanding of exam-oriented civil service recruitment in Chinese societies, especially for their historical context of 'meritocracy prior to democracy'. The meritocracy entails a top-down state-building function. Clinging to the exam-centred meritocracy in post-authoritarian Taiwan implies an enduring social distrust of government officials. The value of 'equality' thus tends to be upheld at the expense of the

value of 'competence', giving public credibility to the government on this trust-lacking policy issue.

Endnotes

1. According to Peng (2010: 39), only around 30% of the CSEEs arrange interviews and 8% of the examinees need to be interviewed in the examination process.
2. Besides Taiwan, these countries are China, Malaysia, South Korea, India, and the Philippines.
3. See *Nanjing Provisional Government Gazette* (No. 19, 20 February 1912): 8–9; *Nanjing Provisional Government Gazette* (No. 21, 24 February 1912): 2.
4. See *Examination Yuan Gazette*, 1932 (No. 7~12), appendix: 72.
5. See *Examination Yuan Gazette*, 1932 (No. 7~12), appendix: 72.
6. According to official statistics, an average of some 30% of new recruits of the 2001–2010 cohorts from the general CSEEs moved to other agencies or changed their professional groups in their first service year. See So and Yeh (2012: 98–99).
7. See *United Daily News* (in Chinese), (4 January 2013): A3.
8. The author joined the recruitment exercises four times.

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