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Contending for Merit and Power in Early Medieval China: An Intellectual History of the Nine Ranks System

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CONTENDING FOR MERIT AND POWER IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA: AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE NINE RANKS SYSTEM

Yuzhou Bai

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Abstract

My dissertation is a history of the nine ranks system, an institution that guided the selection of officials in early medieval China (220-589), with an emphasis on the intellectual dimension of its inception, development, and impacts. The two central questions I seek to answer are: why did China adopt this unique system of arraying official candidates into nine ranks for more than three hundred years? What impact did this political institution have over Chinese individuals, over their social and intellectual lives? By examining primary sources from this period, I characterize the nine ranks system as a meritocratic experiment that sought to overcome the shortcomings of the recommendation-based system yet diverged from its initial design and further stifled social mobility in this period. Moreover, by analyzing the intellectual discourses about the nine ranks, I contend that this political institution also shaped the social and religious lives of individuals through its impact on their perceptions of merit, power, order, and social hierarchy.

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Introduction

The nine ranks system (*jiupin guanren fa* 九品官人法) was a Chinese political institution that guided the selection and appointment of government officials from the third century to the end of sixth century. For nearly four hundred years it provided a framework for both the early medieval Chinese government to oversee the inflow of talents and for Chinese individuals in pursuit of professional success to try to navigate the bureaucratic hierarchy. Since the nine ranks system constituted a central aspect of the political system and the lives of individuals seeking an impactful career, students of early medieval China regularly encounter it in primary sources: sometimes in writings by top officials who supported it or argued for its reform, sometimes in literary works by recluses contemplating the joy of detaching oneself from the tedious process of seeking higher ranks that the system created.

The many impacts that the nine ranks system had on the public and personal lives of early medieval Chinese individuals makes it a worthwhile subject of inquiry, not only for researchers of Chinese institutional history, but also for intellectual historians. This dissertation does not offer a definitive and comprehensive history of the nine ranks system; instead, it is my intention to explore the constellation of concepts, arguments, and perceptions associated with the unfolding of this political institution throughout the early medieval period. I bring in an intellectual historical perspective to answer the fundamental questions regarding the nature of the nine ranks system: What was it? How did it come into being? What led to its decline? Why was it important? Special attention is paid to intellectual discourses that both shaped and were shaped by the nine ranks system, including the categorization of humans, the epistemology of knowing people, and the political ideology of meritocracy.

1. Literature Review

The nine ranks system is a key topic of Chinese institutional history that has received significant attention from Chinese and Japanese historians since the early twentieth century. This long and fruitful history of scholarship, and the wealth of information and discourses that it brought to light, has fed into all chapters of my dissertation. The following literature review seeks to capture and outline only some of the major themes of those foundational works to which I am greatly indebted. More detailed references and notes will be provided throughout this dissertation to credit works that have directly inspired my specific arguments and interpretations of primary sources.

The establishment of the nine ranks system in the context of the fall of the Han dynasty in the early third century was a main area of focus of an early wave of scholarship in the twentieth century. Yang Yunru 楊筠如 provided the first book-length study of the nine ranks system. In it, he centered his inquiry on the symbiotic relationship between this political institution and the political interests of the aristocratic clans (*menfa* 門閥) of the early medieval period. Yang's main argument is that the nine ranks system was established at the beginning of the Cao Wei dynasty (220-265) as an institutionalized form of the "pure discussions (*qingyi* 清議)" among elite scholars in the late Eastern Han time in response to the existing corrupt system of recommendation.[1] His book also suggested that the nine ranks system eventually fell out of favor with the emperors due to the role it actively played in granting unchecked power to the elite clans, which, after the Sui-Tang unification of China, led to its replacement by the

[1] Yang Yunru 楊筠如, *Jiupin Zhongzheng yu Liuchao menfa* 九品中正與六朝門閥 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1930), pp. 2-12.

developing civil examination system (*keju* 科舉).[2] Building on Yang's pioneering study, Tang Zhangru 唐長孺 clarified the complex heritage of the Han tradition of "pure discussions" by pointing out that the Cao Wei ruling house was in fact quite wary of the elites who practiced talent appriasal independent of the state.[3] He convincingly established the case that the creation of the nine ranks system was an attempt to resist the aristocratic clans and reinforce the centralized control over the official selection process, despite its failure in actualizing this vision.[4]

In spite of their different emphases on the relation between the Han "pure discussions" and the nine ranks system, both Yang and Tang viewed the nine ranks system as a political institution that played a key role in cultivating the tradition of aristocratic politics (*menfa zhengzhi* 門閥政治) in early medieval times. This approach remains dominant in the study of the nine ranks system by historians in China and Japan.[5] It also left its mark in the Sinological study of early medieval Chinese history through, for example, works by David Johnson and Charles Holcombe.[6]

The nine ranks system's relationship with the Chinese bureaucracy (*guanliao zhi* 官僚制) of early medieval times was another focus of the twentieth-century scholarship in both China and Japan. Japanese historian Miyazaki Ichisada's 宮崎市定 ground-breaking monograph

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[2] Yang, *Jiupin Zhongzheng yu Liuchao menfa*, pp. 55-63.
[3] Tang Zhangru 唐長孺, "Jiupin zhongzheng zhidu shishi 九品中正制度試釋," *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi luncong* 魏晋南北朝史論叢 (Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), pp. 81-95.
[4] Tang, "Jiupin zhongzheng zhidu shishi"; Tang Zhangru 唐長孺, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao Sui Tang shi san lun* 魏晉南北朝隋唐史三論 (Wuchang: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1993). Also see: Hu Baoguo 胡寶國, "Biran de zouxiang: jiupin zhongzheng zhi 必然的走向—九品中正制," *Lishi zhishi* 歷史知識 (1998, no. 11).
[5] Li Yiting 李毅婷, "20 shiji yilai jiupin zhongzheng zhi yanjiu zongshu 20 世紀以來九品中正制研究綜述," *Zhongguo shi yanjiu dongtai* 中國史研究動態 (2011, no. 1), pp. 15-16, 19-20. For a review of Japanese scholarship on this theme, see: Nakamura Keiji 中村圭爾, "Rikucho kizokusei to kanryōsei 六朝貴族制と官僚制," *Gi Shin Nanbokuchō Zui Tō jidaishi no kihon mondai* 魏晉南北朝隋唐時代史の基本問題, pp. 203-227.
[6] See chapter 2 ("Office and Status") from: David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 19-31; also, chapter 4 ("The Institutional Machinery of Literati Ascendence") from: Charles Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 73-84.

remains a classical source on this topic. His biggest contribution lies in the theorization of how ranks obtained by individuals translated into actual employment as government officials in this period. Miyazaki argued that an official of this period usually started off at a bureaucratic rank (*guanpin* 官品) four ranks lower than the personal rank he was assigned (what he called a *xiangpin* 鄉品). He also pointed out that one's assigned rank determined the highest level of bureaucratic rank he could reach through future promotions.[7] While his four-rank difference theory does not seem to have held true in all cases throughout the early medieval time, as other historians have demonstrated, Miyazaki's work certainly brought this important issue—the dynamic relation between an official's personal rank and the bureaucratic rank at which he was employed—to the center of scholarship.[8]

Since Miyazaki, inquiries into the nine ranks system's relationship with bureaucratic systems and procedures of early medieval China has yielded a new wave of scholarship in recent decades, with Chen Changqi 陳長琦 and Zhang Xuhua 張旭華 being the most representative figures. Miyazaki famously adopted the term *kyūhin kanjinhō* 九品官人法 as opposed to the common usage *jiupin zhongzheng zhi* 九品中正制 by Chinese historians. Siding with Miyazaki's terminological choice, Chen's scholarship further established the nine ranks system (*jiupin zhi* 九品制) as the overarching framework for official selection, separating it from the system of unbiased arbiters (*zhongzheng zhi* 中正制) that served as one of the ranking mechanisms.[9] Another significant contribution of Chen's work is his discussion of the system of conferring higher ranks (*zengwei* 增位), which revealed the emperors' role in contributing to the

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[7] Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, *Kyūhin kanjinhō no kenkyū: Kakyo zenshi* 九品官人法の研究: 科擧前史 (Tokyo: Dōhōsha, 1956), pp. 100-19.
[8] See, for example: Hu Baoguo 胡寶國, "Wei Jin shidai de jiupin zhongzheng zhi 魏晉時代的九品中正制," *Beijing daxue xuebao zhexue shehui kexue ban* 北京大學學報哲學社會科學版 (1987), no. 1, pp. 83-93; Zhang Xuhua 張旭華, "Wei Jin shiqi de shangpin yu qijiaguanpin 魏晉時期的上品與起家官品," *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 (1994), no. 3, pp. 59-74.
[9] Chen Changqi 陳長琦, *Guanpin de qiyuan* 官品的起源 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2016), pp. 16-36.

decline of the nine ranks system in this period.[10] Zhang Xuhua's scholarship, on the other hand, pays special attention to the process that led to the separation between "pure (*qing* 清)" and "impure (*zhuo* 濁)" government roles under the nine ranks system.[11] His tendency is to treat the formation of "pure" paths, which offered fast-track promotion opportunities that were available exclusively to aristocratic candidates in the Jin dynasty, as the landmark change representing a full-fledged form of the nine ranks system, which Zhang characterizes as serving the interests of the privileged class. In contrast, Chen views the nine ranks system in a more flexible and dynamic way, emphasizing that the system was designed to advance merit-based selection of officials at the beginning. Their disagreements on specific aspects of the system are many, but primarily stem from the different definitions of the nine ranks system, reflected in their highly publicized debates on the terminology in major journals of Chinese history.[12] For my own research, I have benefited greatly from both of their works but found Chen's arguments to be more theoretically innovative and methodologically useful for tracing the evolution of the nine ranks system and the discourses about it.

On a fundamental level, under the nine ranks system the government selected officials through recommendations, a mechanism that relied on subjective judgments of one's character. This stood in contrast with what would become the dominant method after the end of the early medieval period, civil examinations, which tested an individual's ability to reason and

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[10] Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 192-219.

[11] Zhang Xuhua 張旭華, *Jiupin zhongzheng zhi yanjiu* 九品中正制研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), pp. 206-42; Zhang Xuhua 張旭華, *Zhonggu shiqi qingzhuo guanzhi yanjiu* 中古時期清濁官制研究 (Beijing: Renmin chuban she, 2017). Zhang's discussion of *qing* 清 focuses on the bureaucratic system. Alan Berkowitz's work offers an important context on the Chinese elites' pursuit of purity in the wider cultural-intellectual context of this period. See: Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), especially chapter 4 "Reclusion in Early Medieval China: Distinguishing Characteristics and the Delineation of Substantive Reclusion."

[12] See: Chen Changqi 陳長琦, "Wei Jin jiupin guanren fa zai tantao 魏晉九品官人法再探討," *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 (1995), no. 6, pp. 14-25; Zhang Xuhua 張旭華, "Wei Jin jiupin zhongzheng zhi mingli kaobian 魏晉九品中正制名例考辨," *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 (2001), no. 2, pp. 67-79; Chen Changqi 陳長琦, "Wei Jin jiupin guanren fa shiyi 魏晉九品官人法釋疑," *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 (2005), no. 4, pp. 59-72.

compose. The study of the nine ranks system, therefore, also pertains to answering the big question for the inquiry of history of education: how and why did the written-exam-based approach eventually prevail in Chinese history over recommendations? Yan Buke 閻步克's classic work on the tradition of "discovery and recommendation (*chaju* 察舉)" offered an important reference point on the undercurrents of exam-based systems while the nine ranks system was in operation. Yan argued that while the nine ranks system primarily served the interests of the aristocrats, the older Han *chaju* system transformed in early medieval time into a meritocratic institution that effectively opened promotion of official candidates from obscure backgrounds. At the end of the sixth century, it was the exam component of the *chaju* system that directly inspired the replacement of the nine ranks system by the new civil examination system.[13] The nine ranks system's linkage with *chaju* also constituted a central theme to Hu Shuyun 胡舒雲's monograph that approached this topic from the angle of educational reforms. Different from Yan, Hu argued that meritocracy was also present in the nine ranks system, especially seen in how the system incorporated checks and balances among different governmental bodies to promote fairness.[14] Hu's work, therefore, illuminated a path to trace the history of the nine ranks system without simply defining it as an aristocratic institution.

One of the most important advancements in the more recent study of the nine ranks system's history was the use of statistical methods to analyze historical data from early medieval China. Yan Buke's work pioneered the usage of data to shed light on the efficiency of *chaju* in promoting candidates from humble background.[15] The most systematic adoption of this methodology is Wang Zhenglu 汪徵魯's work that investigated the career trajectories of early

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[13] Yan Buke 閻步克, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao* 察舉制度變遷史稿 (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1991), pp. 152-196, 297-320.
[14] Hu Shuyun 胡舒雲, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun* 九品官人法考論 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2003), pp. 114-30.
[15] Yan, pp. 180-96.

medieval Chinese officials based on their biographical entries in dynastic histories. Wang's work went beyond verifying known trends of official employment of this period with data. Through comparing the familial backgrounds of court officials across different dynasties and regimes, Wang argued that we can only characterize the nine ranks system as an aristocratic institution after the early fourth century, with the start of the Eastern Jin dynasty.[16] Like Hu, Wang's study also shed light on the dynamic relationship between the nine ranks system and the interests of the aristocratic clans in this period.

English-language scholarly works on the nine ranks system are sporadic. Aside from Johnson and Holcombe, another relevant monograph was Patricia Ebrey's study of the Boling Cui 博陵崔氏 aristocratic clan, which touched upon the issue of official recruitment in her discussion of the center-local power dynamic of early medieval China.[17] The first and only thematic overview of the issue of official selection and meritocracy in early medieval China was a chapter by Dennis Grafflin on "Pseudobureaucracy" from the edited volume *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, where Griffin summarized a small selection of primary sources and concluded that more research on the early medieval Chinese bureaucracy was needed.[18] But since then, the importance of the nine ranks system has remained underappreciated in Sinology. For instance, in the recently completed volume two of the *Cambridge History of China* that covered the early medieval China period, there is only half a page that deals with "*jiupin zhongzheng zhi* 九品中正制."[19] This present dissertation seeks to fill this gap by reexamining key

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[16] Wang Zhenglu 汪徵魯, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu* 魏晉南北朝選官體制研究 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1995).
[17] Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Aristocratic Families in Early Imperial China: A Case Study of the Po-Ling Ts'ui Family* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), Ch. 1-2.
[18] Dennis Grafflin: "Reinventing China: Pseudobureaucracy in the Early Southern Dynasties," from: Albert Dien, ed., *State and Society in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 111-38.
[19] Rafe de Crespigny, "Wei," *Cambridge History of China, Volume Two: The Six Dynasties, 220-589* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 34.

primary sources on the nine ranks system and by presenting new ways to study this political institution through incorporating more recent scholarship in China.

2. Chapter Summaries

Like all political institutions, the nine ranks system was not created out of a vacuum. This dissertation begins from investigating both its institutional and intellectual origins. In chapter one, I start by examining the major existing pathways for an individual to obtain a government post in Eastern Han times. This part prepares our discussion of the nine ranks system's hybrid nature in the following chapters. The second half of chapter one is a discussion of the intellectual history of the "nine ranks" as a conceptual framework to categorize human beings, where I trace this idea back to *Lunyu* and then follow the evolvement of the idea that divides individuals into three ranks in the intellectual world of the Han dynasty.

Chapter two of this dissertation argues that the establishment of the nine ranks system should be viewed as a meritocratic reform by the Cao Wei government, as opposed to common scholarly misconceptions. I support this argument with the different sections of this chapter that investigate, respectively, the Cao Wei dynasty's founding figure Cao Cao's meritocratic philosophy, the mission of unbiased arbiters to advance fairness, the complex system of checks and balances on them to prevent abuse of their power, as well as the nine ranks system's relation to other efforts to promote meritocracy.

The nine ranks system was designed to be meritocratic, but it fell short of this expectation in practice especially after the fall of the Cao Wei dynasty. Chapter three investigates some of the major political drivers of the nine ranks system's shifting towards an aristocratic political order. I first discuss the issue of "ostentations" (*fuhua* 浮華) in the political context of the Cao Wei dynasty, which demonstrates the conflicts between the Cao Wei

emperors and the elite class who attempted to drive official selection in an opposite direction. Next, I discuss an important feature of the early medieval Chinese bureaucracy since the Jin dynasty, which was the existence of designated "pure" (*qing* 清) paths for official candidates from elite families. The last section of this chapter deals with the practice of Chinese emperors to "confer higher ranks" to their officials as a way to gather and maintain their support. Put together, this chapter seeks to explain the nine ranks system's failure as a meritocratic reform.

The fourth and final chapter of this dissertation offers a case study of one of the intellectual footprints of the nine ranks system on the history of Chinese religions. Through reading the texts by the Buddhist master Huiyuan and the textual and visual materials from the early medieval Pure Land Buddhist tradition, I connect the nine ranks system as a political idea with the spread of a new religious worldview by Chinese Buddhists.

3. Note on Translation

The primary sources referenced in this dissertation are mainly my own translations, upon consulting existing translations. I frequently reference Paul W. Kroll's *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) in determining the terminology I use. For translating classical Chinese names of bureaucratic offices and titles, I use Charles O. Hucker's *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1986) as the primary reference. I find Hucker's explanation of the history of different official posts to be extremely useful. Throughout the dissertation, the three levels of early medieval Chinese local governments—*zhou* 州, *jun* 郡, and *xian* 縣—has been translated as prefecture, commandery, and district.

Chapter 1: Institutional Continuity and Intellectual Foundations of the Nine Ranks System

The Nine Ranks System was formally established in the year 220 CE in the Cao Wei state (220-265 CE), which occupied the northern part of China, including the Eastern Han's capital city Luoyang. Cao Pi 曹丕 (r. 220-226), the son of the famous warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220 CE), named his late father the founding emperor of the Wei dynasty (Emperor Wu 魏武帝) posthumously and pledged to fulfill his father's ambition to conquer the entiry of the former Han territory, expelling their opponents who established Shu Han and Wu regimes in the west and south on the same year. Therefore, the nine ranks system came into being at this pivotal moment that marked the beginning of a new era later known as the Three Kingdoms period.

The proposal to establish the nine ranks system was submitted by a Cao Wei official named Chen Qun 陳群 (?-237 CE).[20] The eighth-century compendium *Tongdian* offers a first clue about his intention:

> On the first year of the Yankang era [220 CE], Chen Qun, the Minister of the Division of Officials, believed that the heavenly dynasty did not realize its full potential in terms of selecting and appointing the most talented, and therefore established the nine ranks system to appoint individuals with appropriate official posts.
> 延康元年，吏部尚書陳群以天朝選用不盡人才，乃立九品官人之法。[21]

[20] "It was Qun who established the institution of the nine ranks for recruiting individuals as officials 制九品官人之法，羣所建也." From the biography of Chen Qun in: *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 22, p. 635.
[21] "Xuanju er 選舉二," *Tongdian* 通典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), vol. 14, p. 326.

When Chen Qun said, "the heavenly dynasty did not realize its full potential in terms of selecting and appointing the most talented," he was referring to an important issue on the new emperor's mind. From the end of the second century, regimes led by powerful warlords began to take control over different Chinese regions, which in effect drastically weakened the Han imperial house's grip over China and halted the operation of the government's various functions including official recruitment. On the other hand, the warlord-led regimes were motivated to find the best talents in support of their military and political expansions. As one of three such regimes that prevailed in the early third century, the Cao Wei dynasty had been successful in recruiting and retaining many talents over their competitors. In this context, the nine ranks system can be viewed as a critical initiative for the Cao Wei dynasty to reflect on the best official recruitment practices and turn them into new arrangements for the regimes to replicate its past success.

This chapter investigates both the institutional and the intellectual origins of the nine ranks system. In the first half, I outline the four pathways for an individual to be employed by the Han government in second century CE. Since most of these channels remained active after the establishment of the nine ranks system, the discussion facilitates our understanding of the institutional continuity between Eastern Han and Cao Wei's recruitment systems. The second half of this chapter is devoted to tracing the intellectual resources for establishing the nine ranks system. In it, I highlight how the discursive practice of building a conceptual hierarchy for individuals emerged in the Eastern Han times through reinterpreting Confucius and his philosophy of education. Put together, the two halves of this chapter shows that the nine ranks system was in fact deeply rooted in the burgeoning political and intellectual discussions regarding order, authority, and hierarchy in second-century China.

1. Pathways of Employment in China in Second Century CE

At the end of second century, in China there were four major pathways to officialdom for official candidates. They embodied different traditional practices of official recruitment and their coexistence, in the context of Han dynasty, demonstrated the central government's efforts to negotiate contesting ideologies and interests involved in the ways in which government identified, filtered, and pooled official candidates before sending them down the appointment pipelines.

1.1. Appointing One's Offspring

Han Dynasty had a vibrant system of "Appointing One's Offspring (*ren zi* 任子)" that allowed one to enter officialdom as a perquisite of his father's official post. While similar designs that pass down official posts and privileges along the patrilineage have a long tradition in Chinese civilization[22], the "Appointing One's Offspring" method in Han uniquely served the purpose of retaining current officials and consolidating the emperor's control over his bureaucratic machine. One gets a glimpse of how this system worked through the following Han government code:

> When an official's pay rate is above two thousand *shi* (bushels of grain) and his employment exceeds three years, he becomes eligible for appointing one of his brothers or sons as an official at the level of *lang* gentleman.
>
> 吏二千石以上視事滿三年，得任同產若子一人為郎.[23]

[22] From the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties (twenty-first to third centuries BCE) of the ancient past on, hereditary employment for state officials had persisted despite been challenged all the time, as the periodic replacement of old aristocratic families by new ones took place.

[23] From Ying Shao's 應劭 (?~196 CE) *Hanshu* annotation. See: *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), vol. 11, p. 337.

The earliest example of this appointment practice was dated to Emperor Wen's era (180-157 BCE), but the exact year when this institution first came in effect is unclear.[24] Compared to the inception of this system, we know more about the pushbacks against it since the second half of the second century BCE. It appears that the standard of this practice became less and less strict over time. For example, multiple brothers and sons of an official were able to apply this privilege to themselves, as seen in the cases of Su Wu 蘇武 (140-60 BCE), Han Yanshou 韓延壽 (?-57 BCE), and Shi Dan 史丹 (?-13 BCE).[25] Moreover, some officials appointed their sons through this channel despite not meeting the pay threshold of two thousand *shi*. Imperial advisors like Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) and Wang Ji 王吉 (?-48 BCE) wrote that these appointed sons of officials were "not all capable 未必賢也,"[26] "by and large arrogant and cocky, and without a thorough understanding of the past and the present 率多驕驁，不通古今."[27] In the first century BCE, more Han officials joined Wang Ji in supporting a shift away from using pedigree as the standard for appointing officials.[28]

During Emperor Ai's era (26 BCE – 1CE), the "Appointment of One's Offspring" system ceased its operation, but the same concept was revived under a more ad-hoc fashion at the beginning of the Eastern Han era. Emperor Guangwu (r. 25–57 CE), the first emperor of the Eastern Han regime, announced to his subjects that "the offspring of dukes and marquises are destined to return to their origins. The descendants of worthy men are suitable to serve as

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[24] During Emperor Wen's reign, Yuan Ang 爰[袁]盎 was appointed a Palace Gentleman (*langzhong* 郎中) based on the appointment of his older brother Kuai 噲, according to Ru Chun 如淳's *Hanshu* annotation ("盎為兄所保任，故得為郎中也"). See: *Hanshu* 49, p. 2267.
[25] "At a young age, [Su Wu] was appointed a *lang* gentleman due to his father, so was his brother 少以父任，兄弟並為郎," *Hanshu* 54, p. 2459; "The three sons of [Han] were all appointed *lang* gentlemen 三子皆為郎吏," *Hanshu* 76, p. 3216; "The nine sons of Dan all gained employment through him, serving on 九男皆以丹任，為侍中、諸曹," *Hanshu* 82, p. 3379.
[26] *Hanshu* 56, p. 2512.
[27] *Hanshu* 72, p. 3065.
[28] *Hanshu* 72, p. 3065.

governors of cities and boroughs. 公侯子孙，必復其始，賢者之後，宜宰城邑."[29] This announcement came at a time when a strengthened alliance between the emperor and his officials became imperative for Emperor Guangwu to solidify his power, and it was continuously endorsed by his successors. As a result, high officials in first-century China continued to promise their sons[30] official careers, enjoying the same privilege as their Western Han counterparts. In 121 CE and then 185 CE, this practice was formally reinstitutionalized, first as a privilege of all high officials at the level of Duke (*gong* 公) or its equivalent, then extended to some mid-level officials such as the Gentlemen of the Palace Gate (*huangmen lang* 黃門郎). As a result, the latter title quickly became monopolized by the offspring of the Han political elites and became a marker for their pedigree.[31]

The next three pathways to officialdom in second-century China were accessible for a wider range of official aspirants with or without powerful fathers, uncles, and older brothers. However, those from a family of officials would still be in an advantaged position to advance through these channels.

1.2. Summoning

Terms including *bi* 辟 ("to ordain"), *chu* 除 ("to appoint"), or *zhao* 召 ("to summon") in the Han sources signal the commonplace practice for the central or local governments to directly recruit individuals. Using statistical analysis, Wang Zhenglu 汪徵魯 has shown that over 3/4 of the officials with biographical entries in the *History of the Later Han* (*Houhanshu* 後漢書) entered officialdom through summoning, attesting that this was the main channel for most

[29] From the biography of Du Lin 杜林 in: *Houhanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), vol. 27, p. 939.
[30] Nephews can also utilize this privilege in the case of no living son.
[31] See: Zhang Zhaokai 張兆凱, "Renzizhi xintan 任子制新探," *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* 中國史研究 (1996, no. 1): 62-72.

Eastern Han high officials to earn their first official post. Moreover, summoning to office was the primary pathway for individuals from non-elite backgrounds to access official posts, especially ones in local governments. Wang found that in the 117 cases of those who were summoned by the central government, 41% came from a commoner background; and in the 152 cases by the local government, around 60% of the summoned individuals were from a low-level official family or a family of commoners.[32] This shows that the system of summoning played a positive role in providing social mobility in this period.

	High-level Official	Low-level Official	Commoner
Central Government (n 117)	55.6%	3.4%	41%
Local Government (n 152)	40.1%	7.9%	52%

(This graph shows that around 41% and 52% of the recorded cases of individuals being summoned by the central and local government to serve as officials in the Eastern Han period were individuals coming from humble backgrounds. These data points were collected by Wang Zhenglu from biographical entries from dynastic histories such as *Houhanshu* and *Sanguozhi* and compiled into his *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu* (pages 440-51). On page 64 of the same publication, Wang defined someone from a high-level official background ("出身高官") as an individual enjoying any of the following privileges during the Eastern Han: having a father or grandfather who was a high-level court official, belonging to a clan with multiple high-level court officials, belonging to a clan that produced an empress or empress dowager, or belonging to a powerful local clan. In contrast, someone from a low-level official background was defined as an individual with a father or grandfather who worked as a low-level official ("低階官吏"), whereas those who did not meet any of the above criteria was called commoners ("平民"), which includes someone with a father or grandfather who worked as a petty official ("小吏"). I believe Wang's categorization is effective in drawing a clear distinction between officials and commoners, while the differences between high-level and low-level officials are less clearly defined.)

How did an individual get summoned? Informal personal networks were the key factor here. Making one's talent known to current officials was important, because the latter held the power to nominate individuals to work for themselves. Those candidates whose fame reached a wider circle stood a higher chance to be summoned to work at the central government; on the

[32] Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, pp. 34-39.

other hand, candidates with regional reputation were often first summoned by the local governors.[33] The first process was far more selective, partly because the autonomy of key central government units was under strict scrutiny by the Han emperors. For example, in 117 BCE, Emperor Wu stipulated that the top official of his state, Counselor-in-chief (丞相), must summon his associates exclusively from those who already held official posts of the same ranks. Moreover, they had to be outstanding in one of the "Four Subjects (四科)": morality, classical learning, jurisprudence, or administration. Finally, a candidate must complete a period of probation before officially taking on a key government position.[34] These measures all aimed "to widely select gentlemen of fame with extraordinary morality, and to weigh and measure their talents and capacities; those who are not suitable shall return to their previous posts. 以博選異德名士，稱才量能，不宜者還故官."[35] Later, in the Eastern Han, the "Four Subjects" applied to all summoning practices by central government offices as decreed by Emperor Guangwu.[36]

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[33] See: "In the Eastern Han, one could enter the officialdom via recommendation or summoning. An individual was first recommended by the local government, and then advanced level by level—this is called recommendation. An individual with extraordinary talent or reputation, which allowed them to skip levels in the advancement process—this is called summoning. This is why people at that time still took pride in being summoned. 蓋東漢時，選舉辟召皆可以入仕，以鄉舉里選循序而進者，選舉也；以高才重名躐等而升者，辟召也；故時人猶以召為榮焉." Ma Duanlin 馬端臨, "Xuanju kao shi'er 選舉考十二," *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), vol. 39, p. 1131.

[34] "On the sixth year of Emperor Wu's Yuanshou era, the Counselor-in-Chief had 382 staff members in his office…all of them were selected from government employees of equivalent ranks. They were measured against other candidates [prior to employment], to counteract fraudulent reports of their strengths. For this reason, [Emperor Wu] ordered the Counselor-in-Chief to establish a summoning process based on four subjects: …The first subject is 'high morality and complete fidelity.' The second subject is 'erudite scholarship and mastery in the Classics.' The third subject is 'mastery of laws and legislations and ability to exercise judicial authority.' The fourth subject is 'resolution, strategy, and remaining undeterred when issues arise.' Only those who were sharp enough to spot treacherous acts and brave enough to make decisions were permitted to serve as the three top officials. All candidates were first tested to evaluate their capacities. Official roles were assigned upon the passing of such tests. 武帝元狩六年，丞相吏員三百八十二人…皆從同秩補。以為有權衡之量，不可欺以輕重；有丈尺之度，不可欺以長短。故令丞相設四科之辟……第一科曰德行高妙，志節清白。第二科曰學通行修，經中博士。第三科曰明曉法令，足以決獄，能案章覆問，文中御史。第四科曰剛毅多略，遭事不惑。明足以照姦，勇足以決斷，才任三輔劇令。皆試以能，信然後官之," from: "Hanguan jiuyi juan shang 漢官舊儀卷上," *Hanguan liuzhong* 漢官六種 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 37.

[35] "Hanguan jiuyi juan shang," *Hanguan liuzhong*, p. 37.

[36] "Hanguan yi juan shang 漢官儀卷上," *Hanguan liuzhong*, p. 125. See also: Yan Buke 閻步克, "Handai xuanguan 'sike' biaozhun de xingzhi 漢代選官'四科'的性質," *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 社會科學研究 (1990), no. 5, pp. 51-56.

Selective as they were, these central government positions were offered a great opportunity to fast track one's career growth. Yuan Shao 袁紹 (154-202), for instance, started off as an "associate (*yuan* 掾)" to the General-in-chief (大將軍) and later became one of the most powerful Eastern Han warlords.[37] Cui Shi 崔寔 (?-170 CE), an Imperial Secretary (尚書) of the Eastern Han, observed that:

> The associates and assistants of the three top offices[38] held critical responsibilities despite their petty status. Many of them later obtained official posts of superior status. Some worked for merely several months before becoming leaders of a prefecture or commandery[39]; some worked for merely several years before moving up to the level of dukes and high officials."
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> 三府掾屬，位卑職重，及其取官，又多超卓，或期月而長州郡，或數年而至公卿。[40]

Compared to these opportunities at the central government that were highly selective and tightly regulated, opportunities at local governments were more easily accessed for candidates from various sociopolitical backgrounds. It was also not uncommon for officers at the local government to be later summoned by or recommended to serve at a central government office. The summoning to office mechanism in this era opened many different doors for official aspirants.

The Han emperors also occasionally summoned talented individuals from across the country to serve as their advisors. However, this was primarily a performative act directed at

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[37] *Houhanshu* 74, p. 2374.
[38] The three top offices of Han times were Counselor-in-chief (丞相), Defender-in-chief (太尉), and Censer-in-chief (御史大夫).
[39] Prefecture (*zhou* 州) and commandery (*xian* 郡) were the first and second tiers of Eastern Han's local administration in the second century CE. This period was marked by a transition from the Western Han two-tier structure, consisting of only commanderies and districts (*xian* 縣), to a three-tier one, adding prefecture as an administrative unit that oversaw multiple commanderies.
[40] *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔, vol. 68, in *Tangdai sida leishu* 唐代四大類書 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2003), vol. 1, p. 283.

the public (like an amnesty) and frequently took place following political omens such as palace fires and widespread natural disasters, which were widely perceived as warnings sent from heaven to the rulers. In practice, it was the central and local governments that carried out most of the summoning activities that filled the vacancies.

1.3. Recommendation

"Discovery and Recommendation (*cha ju* 察舉)" was an official recruitment system characteristic to the Han dynasty. The central government in Han times tasked its local governors to discover and recommend talented young men in their districts every year—called the "Annual Recommendation (*sui ju* 歲舉)" or the "Regular Subject (*chang ke* 常科)"; on top of that, there was the "Recommendation by Special Orders (*zhao ju* 詔舉)" or the "Special Subject (*te ke* 特科)," which provided additional quotas for candidates fulfilling specific requirements. The premise of it was that the best official candidates were those figures celebrated in local societies for their extraordinary moral, intellectual, or administrative capacities.

In the second century CE, four main categories were developed for an "Annual Recommendation" cycle: "students of Confucian classics (*zhusheng* 諸生)," "petty administrators with writing skills (*wenli* 文吏)," "filial piety and fraternal duty (*xiaoti* 孝悌)," and "ones capable of governing (*nengcongzhengzhe* 能從政者)."[41] These four categories were inspired by Emperor Wu's "Four Subjects" invented some three hundred years earlier.[42] They essentially divided the candidate pool into two halves: those learned in Confucian classics, and those with prior administrative experience. Titles such as "filial pious and incorruptible (*xiaolian*

[41] From the biography of Huang Qiong 黃瓊 (86-164) in: *Houhanshu* 61, p. 2035.
[42] Yan Buke, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, pp. 13-20.

孝廉)," "understanding the Classics (*mingjing* 明經)," and "extraordinarily talented (*maocai* 茂才)" primarily targeted the first group, many of whom were attending the imperial and regional academies. The central government evaluated their candidacy by testing their mastery of Confucian canonical texts (see my discussion of the examination method below) and considering their conformity to Confucian moral ideals.[43] For the second group, these candidates were mostly civil servants or assistants to central government officials.[44] Since 136 BCE, some familiarity with the Five Confucian Classics, "the official learning (*guanxue* 官學)," became a prerequisite for taking on most civil official positions.[45] The mastery of them would give candidates a competitive edge. As a result, candidates belonging to the first group were usually considered superior and more employable than their peers.

This emphasis on Confucian classical learning and morality also constituted one basis for the "Recommendation by Special Orders" in the second century. Some of the new categories created for this ad hoc method of official recruitment were "the ones learned in the arts of past sages (*xi xiansheng zhi shu zhe* 習先聖之術者)," [46] "the just and upright (*fang zheng* 方正)," and "the ones who illuminate morality (*ming de* 明德)," and they shared standards for candidacy with the "Annual Recommendation" practice. One unique aspect about the "Recommendation by Special Orders" was that it opened the candidate pool for more specialized talents. They

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[43] The last aspect was sometimes evidenced by extreme moral behavior such as starving oneself to extremity while mourning for one's deceased parents, which filled biographical accounts from this period.
[44] "On the second month of the first year of the Yongguang era, [Emperor Yuan] ordered the Counselor-in-chief and the Censer-in-chief to recruit individuals who were pure, genuine, modest, and with exemplary moral behaviors. The Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants adopted these subjects to array and select from court gentlemen and assistants 永光元年二月，詔丞相、御史舉質樸、敦厚、遜讓、有行者，光祿歲以此科第郎、從官." Yan Shigu 顏師古's annotation claims: "At first, [Emperor Yuan] ordered the Counselor-in-chief and the Censer-in-chief to recruit individuals based on these four subjects. Later, this was expanded to the court gentlemen and assistants, when he ordered the office of the Chamberlain for Attendants to test them annually according to the four subjects. This served to establish ranks among them and gain knowledge of their intellectual capacities 始令丞相、御史舉此四科人以擢用之。而見在郎及從官，又令光祿每歲依科考校，定其第高下，用知其人賢否也." See: *Hanshu* 9, p. 287. For a discussion of the Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants 光祿, see footnote 116.
[45] Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 33.
[46] *Hanshu* 6, p. 164.

included individuals with considerable experiences in diplomatic, military, and judicial matters, as well as scholars of technical fields of knowledge such as astrology, cartography, herbal medicine, and ancient musical instrument and ritual.

The "Discovery and Recommendation" activities of the Han times constituted a major pathway for individuals to enter officialdom alongside the summoning to office method. Among those who were successfully scouted from the local scenes in the Eastern Han period, around half of them (48.8%) come from families who were not political elites, meaning that it achieved a decent level of success to help the Han empire recruit undiscovered talents.[47]

	High-level Official	Low-level Official	Commoners
Discovery and Recommendation (n=86)	41.9%	9.3%	48.8%

(This graph shows that around half of the recorded cases of individuals being recommended to serve in the government during the Eastern Han era came from humble backgrounds. See: Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, pages 435-39.)

However, one must recognize that opportunities were not distributed equally across different categories. For instance, a study of the 128 individuals who achieved the highly reputed "filial pious and incorruptible (*xiaolian*)" title concluded that 69.6% of them came from families of officials and an additional 6% from families without officials but with significant amounts of wealth; those who were commoners constituted only less than one fourth.[48] This relates to the two major drawbacks of this system: the lack of checks on the power of local elites and the lack of consistent standards of evaluation.

[47] Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, pp. 34.
[48] Huang Liuzhu 黃留珠, *Qin Han shijin zhidu* 秦漢仕進制度 (Xi'an: Xibei daxue chubanshe, 1985), pp. 142-43. Also see: Yan Buke, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, pp. 24-25.

Towards the end of the second century, the "Discovery and Recommendation" system started to fall apart alongside the empire. Admittedly, the war disrupted the local networks upon which a lot of the recommendations relied. However, the system also drew criticisms of its fairness and was regarded to have encouraged local elites to monopolize a key function of the Han government. Local governors consulted local elites to come up with shortlists of local worthy men; but gradually the latter's knowledge of the local cultural scene enabled their authority and their abuse of that power, which remained largely unchecked by the central government until the end of the Han empire.[49] This led to widespread nepotism in the official selection process. In one instance, a second-century man who earned the *xiaolian* title named Yin Xun 尹勳 was said to come from "a clan with many members holding powerful positions (宗族多居貴位者)" in the central government, including a Minister of Education (司徒) and a Defender-in-chief (太尉), both eminent officials of the Han government.[50] Great families and powerful clans like Yin's dominated the court politics by placing their descendants, one after another, into the central government as well as into leadership roles in local governments. As the third century intellectual Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217-278) reflected:

> Emperor Wu of Han, at the beginning of his Yuanguang era [134-129 BCE], asked his commanderies and kingdoms to recommend the 'filial pious and incorruptible' every year. At the fifth year of the Yuanfeng era [106 BCE], he asked them to recommend

[49] This stands in contract with the situation in the third century, when the central governments (from Cao Wei to Eastern Jin) became significantly involved in the creation and preservation of local knowledge, especially those related to a region's famous people, as seen in the retrospective compilations of directories for political and cultural celebrities originated from a certain region, such as *Biographies of Past Sages from Runan* 汝南先賢傳 and *Records of Celebrities from Kuaiji* 會稽典錄, alongside other similar titles preserved in the *Suishu* bibliography 隋書·經籍志. See: Tanigawa Michio 谷川道雄, *Sekai teikoku no keisei: Gokan—Zui Tō* 世界帝国の形成: 後漢—隋・唐 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1977), pp. 65-66; Takuji Nagata 永田拓治, "*Shangji zhidu yu 'qijiuzhuan,' 'Xianxianzhuan' de bianzuan* 上計制度與'耆舊傳,' '先賢傳'的編纂," *Wuhan daxue xuebao* 武漢大學學報 65.4 (2012): 49-61.

[50] There are discrepancies regarding Xun's relationship with his family members who were high officials. See: from *Houhanshu* 57, p. 1857 and *Houhanshu* 67, p. 2208.

the "extraordinarily talented" as well. Throughout all dynasties that adopted this system, all the recommended called themselves 'old subjects' to these commanderies and kingdoms.

漢武元光初，郡國舉孝廉。元封五年，舉秀才。歷世相乘，皆向郡國稱故吏。[51]

Retrospectively, Fu Xuan condemned the Han system of recommendation for forging strong alliances between officials and the regional governments that recommended them, rather than strengthening their loyalty to the central government. As the former's "old subjects," these officials were less likely to stand with the emperors when conflicts of interests occurred between the local and the center. The localized practice of "Discovery and Recommendation" eventually restricted the Han emperors' grip of power over his government and his people and accelerated the collapse of the Han empire, which paved the way for early medieval emperors to completely overhaul the system of recruiting officials.

1.4. Examination

The practice of using examinations to evaluate candidates emerged out of the Han dynasty's education system. In the first century CE, examination already played a marginal role in the official recruitment process, but the scope and significance of this practice never reached the degree that it later would, as exemplified in the civil examination system. In the following discussion, I sketch out the discrete instances in which individuals who aspired to become officials would encounter examinations at the end of the second century CE.

In early second century BCE, the Imperial Academy (太學) began to incorporate an examination component into its classical education curriculum, where all students were tested

[51] Quoted in: Lu Ziliang 盧子諒, "Zeng Liu Kun yishou bing shu 贈劉琨一首並書," *Wenxuan* 文選 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), vol. 25, p. 545.

annually (一歲皆輒課) and those who scored high would receive official appointments.[52] This testing activity, "*ke* 課," is also called "drawing slips (*she ce* 射策)." It evaluated the depth of a scholar's knowledge of one of the Five Confucian Classics. Their answers would be rated by their advisors and factored by the Imperial Academy into their granting of prestigious titles such as "erudite scholar (博士)."[53] Top-rated answers could attract attention from the government and, as a result, lead to careers in government. Xiao Wangzhi 蕭望之 (114-47 BCE), for instance, "was appointed as a court attendant based on achieving the highest grade from 'drawing slips' 以射策甲科為郎."[54]

In the first century CE, examinations began to be used outside the educational context. Specifically, the "Discovery and Recommendation" system started to use examination to filter candidates for certain advisory or administrative roles. This practice, called "responding to slips (*dui ce* 對策)," required certain official candidates recommended by special orders to present their opinions on various practical issues of governance. Their answers were ranked by the emperors and high officials who, by doing so, not only evaluated candidates but also consulted their opinions.[55] Since Emperor Guangwu's time, for the lucrative Secretarial Court Gentlemen 尚書郎 positions, the court tested five candidates at a time on their ability to compose

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[52] Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (199?-121 BCE) proposed this method to Emperor Wu: "Hong, being the manager of the imperial academy, lamented the gloomy and stagnant state of the Way and subsequently proposed: …all students shall be tested annually. Those who achieved mastery in more than one Classic were eligible for being appointed a Clerk for the Study of Culture; those who ranked high were eligible for being appointed a Gentleman of the Interior 弘為學官，悼道之鬱滯，乃請曰：…一歲皆輒課，能通一藝以上，補文學掌故缺；其高第可以為郎中…" *Hanshu* 88, p. 3594. See: Yan Buke, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 66.

[53] The process was described in the text Hanshu yinyi 漢書音義 as "challenging questions were inscribed on bamboo slips, whichwere arrayed on the desk. Test takers randomly drew one and answered it. This is called 'drawing slips.' The top answers were rated 'first-tier,' while the lesser ones 'second-tier' 作簡策難問，列置案上，任試者意投試取而答之，謂之射策，上者為甲，次者為乙." See: Houhanshu 6, p. 260.

[54] *Hanshu* 78, p. 3272.

[55] "In responding to slips, [test takers] were asked about political affairs and meanings of the Classics. They were ordered to answer each question one by one. The examiners reviewed their answered and graded them 對策者，顯問以政事經義，令各對之，而觀其文辭定高下也," from Yan Shigu's annotation in: *Hanshu* 78, p. 3272.

government documents.[56] Hu Guang 胡廣 (91-172 CE), later a high official at the Eastern Han court for three decades, began his official career in this way:

> (Guang) was recommended a 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidate. After his arrival at the capital city, he was tested on his ability to compose government documents. Emperor An judged Guang's composition to be the best. Within a month, Guang was appointed a Secretarial Court Gentleman.
>
> 遂察孝廉，既到京師，試以章奏，安帝以廣為天下第一，旬月拜尚書郎。[57]

From this example, we can see how examination was utilized in conjunction with the recommendation system to help the central government recruit talented individuals.

The application of examination on a larger scale took place in the second century and was fueled by a series of reforms aiming at resolving nepotism epidemic in the recommendation system at that time. The movement began from a passionate proposal by Zuo Xiong 左雄 (?-138 CE), the Director of the Imperial Secretariat (尚書令), to the child Emperor Shun (r. 125-44):

> The 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidates of today are the equivalent to the 'recommended gentlemen' of ancient times. They come out to manage commoners and to assist in spreading civil behaviors. If they are ignorant, then there is no utility in appointing them as officials. Confucius said: 'I ceased to be confused at the age of forty.' *The Classics of Ritual* called [men over forty] 'strong enough to be civil servants.' I propose that now we shall not discover and recommend men under forty as 'filial pious and incorruptible.' Instead, all of them shall first visit the offices of the three

[56] "For every opening of Court Gentleman, five candidates were chosen and tested. The first test concerned their ability to compose commentaries and memorials 每一郎缺則試五人，先試箋奏," *Hanguan liuzhong*, p. 142.
[57] *Houhanshu* 44, p. 1505.

ministers. For students from the imperial and regional academies, they will be tested on the traditions of classics that they claim to specialize in; for petty officials assisting with government documents, they will be tested on the composition of official memorandums and proposals. A second round then takes place at the palace south gate. This serves to separate the qualified ones from those who are not, to make those with extraordinary talents visible, thus refining the culture. Those who fail to comply shall be punished by law. For individuals with extraordinary talent and outstanding behavior, the age limit can be waived.

今之孝廉，古之貢士。出則宰民，宣協風教。若其面墻，則無所施用。孔子曰：「四十不惑」，《禮》稱強仕。請自今孝廉年不滿四十，不得察舉。皆先謁公府，諸生試家法，文吏課箋奏，副之端門。練其虛實，以觀異能，以美風俗。有不承科令者，正其罪法。若有茂才異行，自可不拘年齒。[58]

While Zuo Xiong's proposal reinforced the pre-existing bifurcated tracks for scholars and petty officials to advance through the discovery and recommendation system, the new measures he introduce, including two rounds of examinations and a minimal age requirement, were radical. By design, these measures reduced the chance for candidates neither learned nor experienced to secure government positions solely based on favorable recommendations. Zuo's proposal was firstly approved in 132 and came into effect immediately in the following year.[59] In its first year of operation, this new system filtered out as many as 85% of the candidates and punished more than ten officials who abused the recommendation system.[60] This not only demonstrated how

[58] *Houhanshu* 61, pp. 2020.
[59] *Houhanshu* 61, pp. 2020.
[60] Huang Liuzhu estimated that since the late first century, on an average year, the Eastern Han government elected over two hundred and twenty 'filial pious and incorruptible" candidates. Against this number, in 133, the year following the approval of Zuo Xiong's proposal, only about thirty people received employment as Palace Gentlemen (郎中). See: Huang, *Qin Han shijin zhidu*, p. 112; Yan Buke, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 72.

corrupt the recommendation system was but also attested to the strictness of his reform, which unsurprisingly met with pushbacks from the elites of his time.[61] A decade later, Zuo's successor Huang Qiong 黃瓊 (86-164) was under significant pressure to defend the method:

> Implementing two rounds of examination serves to distinguish the clear from the muddy while washing away the latter, and to certify the qualified ones while expelling the unqualified and exaggerated ones. To remove it would be inappropriate. 復試之作，將以澄洗清濁，覆實虛濫，不宜改革。[62]

Huang successfully convinced Emperor Shun. The system continued into the following decades. During Emperor Ling's era (r. 168-189), Gao Biao 高彪 (?-184) first "was recommended as a 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidate by his commandery. He ranked number one in the examination of classical learning, and was employed as a Palace Gentleman 郡舉孝廉，試經第一，除郎中."[63] A scholar named Hua Xin 華歆 (157-232) was still defending its use during the Cao Wei dynasty, which shows that examination requirements persisted into the third century after the fall of the Han.[64]

Nevertheless, the second-century reform spearheaded by Zuo Xiong was unable to solve the bigger problem—the abuse of the power of recommendation by powerful local clans and

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[61] "Moreover, Xiong previously proposed that prior to employment, a candidate should have his ability tested at the offices of the three ministers, and then participated in a second round of examination inside the imperial palace. Later, the Director of the Imperial Secretariat Zhang Sheng successfully petitioned to abolish this subject 又雄前議舉吏先試之於公府，又覆之於端門，後尚書張盛奏除此科," *Houhanshu* 61, p. 2035.
[62] *Houhanshu* 61, p. 2035.
[63] *Houhanshu* 70, p. 2650.
[64] "The offices of the three ministers argued that in recommending the 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidates, the government should focus on their morality and not filter out candidates based on examining their knowledge of the Classcis. Xin argued: 'Since the military turmoil, the study of the Six Classics has fallen. We ought to preserve and re-establish them in order to honor the Way of the Sage Kings. Different legislations lead to the rise or the fall of the Classics. If we select the 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidates without testing them with the Classics, I fear that would result in the decline of the study of the Classics. If there are extraordinarily talented candidates, we can promote them with special orders. Our biggest worry is the lack of talented individuals. [Once the study of the Classics becomes elevated,] why do we worry about recruiting talented individuals?' The emperor followed his words 三府議：舉孝廉，本以德行，不復限以試經。歆以為：喪亂以來，六籍墮廢，當務存立，以崇王道。夫制法者，所以經盛衰。今聽孝廉不以經試，恐學業遂從此而廢。若有秀異，可特徵用。患於無其人，何患不得哉？帝從其言。" *Sanguozhi* 13, p. 403.

influential elite figures—that paralyzed the Eastern Han official selection process. Only those who had already secured recommendations were allowed to participate in these examinations, which means the examination method was secondary to the discovery and recommendation pipeline.

The four pathways discussed above were co-operating during the later Han dynasty, creating a complex institutional heritage for all the emerging political camps, including the Cao Wei and their two major competitors, Shu Han and Wu, and their renovations of the system of official recruitment in the third century. Such innovations should be understood as new ways to define the power dynamic between the emperor and his subjects, which already existed across the four pathways that we have introduced. Even in the case of Appointing One's Son 任子, which seemingly empowered the officials and the elite clans that they represented during the Han times, it provided a lever for the emperor to establish goodwill among the officials and thus solidify his political power. The way that this power dynamic played out in the context of the nine ranks system will be discussed in Chapter 2. Before we return to how this new system played out politically, I will briefly examine the intellectual resources that enabled the creation of the radical political idea that categorizes human beings into nine ranks in China.

2. The Intellectual Genesis of the Nine Ranks

Numbers are perceived as having cosmological and political implications in many cultures. For Chinese elites in the Han period, numbers not only carried other-worldly and this-worldly meanings but also served as a convenient tool for arguing how cosmological and political orders interact with each other. For instance, the cyclical working of our universe driven by the dynamics of five natural forces, as theorized in discussions of the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行) in

this period, was constantly likened to how political regimes replace one another, which allowed the elites to deem the fall of an old regime as inevitable and to celebrate the rising of a new one. However, besides cosmology, numbers also inspired *anthropological* understandings in early China. This latter strand of ideas was once noted by historian Dirk Bodde as an important manifestation of "Chinese categorical thinking."[65] In his discussion, Bodde was particularly intrigued by the use of numbers to classify human in the "Table of Men from Past to Present (*gujinren biao* 古今人表)" from *Hanshu* 漢書. The "Table" was first conceived by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) in the Eastern Han period as part of his monumental historiographic endeavor. Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–117 CE), one of the most influential scholars in the entire Chinese history, completed the Table after the passing of her brother.[66] It contains a total of 1,955 historical figure. But most notably, each is assigned to one of nine ranks based on their moral conduct.[67]

1	Upper Upper: Sages 上上聖人
2	Middle Upper: Humane Men 上中仁人
3	Lower Upper: Wise Men 上下智人
4	Upper Middle 中上
5	Middle Middle 中中
6	Lower Middle 中下
7	Upper Lower 下上
8	Middle Lower 下中
9	Lower Lower: Stupid Men 下下愚人

In this section, I investigate the history of this intellectual scheme to argue that it was an important yet often overlooked intellectual resources for the establishment of the nine ranks

[65] Derk Bodde, "Types of Chinese Categorical Thinking," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59.2 (1939), p. 200.
[66] Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A.D.: Background, Ancestry, Life, and Writings of the Most Celebrated Chinese Woman of Letter*s (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1932), pp. 61-69.
[67] *Hanshu* 20, p. 861; also see: Bodde, "Types of Chinese Categorical Thinking," p. 153.

system of official recruitment in the third century. This history is about the curious origin of this idea as much as it is about the attribution of this idea to Confucius at the Ban sibling's time. In the preface of the Table, the Ban siblings argued that the nine ranks were not their invention. Instead, they referenced the following saying from *Lunyu* as its source:

> The Master said: "Only the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform."
>
> 子曰：唯上知與下愚不移。[68]

This saying identifies two types of men that are not among the targets of the enterprise of moral education by Confucius. These two types, supplemented by a third category from the *Lunyu,* "the average man (*zhongren* 中人)," constitute a three-rank categorization of man, an idea that gained popularity during Han times, with the nine ranks in *Hanshu* being built upon the square of this Confucian three ranks.

In the following part, I examine the justification used to ascribe this three-rank categorization to Confucius and its function within the intellectual milieu of Eastern Han society. Specifically, I delineate the various ideas in which Eastern Han intellectuals, including the Ban siblings, applied this concept. My argument is that this Confucian categorical thinking gained currency beyond the context of classical learning at a time when individuals sought to express themselves through the act of re-ordering ideas and individuals. In the first part of this section, I establish the possibility that this saying came to be recognized as a Confucian idea around early Western Han period, the second century BCE. Following that, I examine two important ways in which Eastern Han scholars creatively reinterpreted this "Confucian" idea: first, as a dialectical principle to articulate philosophical ideas about human nature; second, as a

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[68] Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), pp. 1177-85. *Zhi* 知 and *zhi* 智 can be used interchangeably in classical Chinese.

method of syncretizing ideas and ranking people. Both traditions of interpreting this Confucian saying, I argue, paved the way for the nine-rank categorization of humans to inspire the inception of the political nine ranks system in third century CE.

2.1. Three-Rank Categorization of Humans in *Lunyu*

Should we consider the three-rank categorization of man an idea conceived by Confucius? If so, in what sense? To address this question, I will examine both the internal evidence (other sections of *Lunyu*) and the external evidence (linguistic or semantic parallels in other early texts) that are now available. I argue that the three-rank categorization of man was not attributed to Confucius until the second century BCE.

Internal Evidence

The received edition of *Lunyu* contains three paragraphs that address the issue of human differences with a ranking scheme. However, the three paragraphs do not seem to present a coherent view.

> ***Lunyu* 6**
>
> The Master said: "You can teach the above-average men the things above; you cannot teach the below-average men the things above."
>
> 子曰：中人以上，可以語上也。中人以下，不可以語上也。[69]

> ***Lunyu* 16**

[69] *Lunyu jishi*, p. 404.

Master Kong said: "Those who are born knowing are on top. Those who learn to know are inferior. Those who learn but are constrained by intellect are more inferior. Those who are constrained by intellect and do not learn are commoners at the bottom."

孔子曰：生而知之者，上也；學而知之者，次也；困而學之，又其次也；困而不學，民斯為下矣。[70]

***Lunyu* 17**

The Master said: "[Human beings] are alike in their nature, are far apart in their acquired qualities."

The Master said: "Only the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform."

子曰：性相近也，習相遠也。

子曰：唯上知與下愚不移。[71]

All three claim to represent ideas put forward by Confucius. Through the juxtaposition of "above (*shang* 上)" and "below (*xia* 下)," each establishes a hierarchal space. However, the specifics of the spatial arrangements are inconsistent. For instance, *Lunyu* 16 divides man into four categories instead of three and places them at four different levels. Nevertheless, the basic structure of this classification, which consists of an upper, a middle, and a lower part, is the same.

***Lunyu* 6**	***Lunyu* 16**	***Lunyu* 17**

[70] *Lunyu jishi*, pp. 1158-59.
[71] *Lunyu jishi,* pp. 1177-85.

Born knowing…top 生而知之，上也	Above-average men 中人以上	Wise men above 上智
…inferior …次也	[average men 中人]	?
…more inferior …又次也		
Constrained and do not learn…bottom 困而不學…下矣	Below-average men 中人以下	Stupid men below 下愚

Another inconsistency exists between the two sayings of Confucius in *Lunyu* 17. The master first claims that all men are alike, but then claims that certain men (the wise and the stupid) are different from the rest. Readers of the *Lunyu* may be perplexed: does Confucius believe all students are equal or not? Commentators have sought to resolve this tension by emphasizing that "the wise and the stupid" are the only exceptions to the general principle that education is more important than talent.[72] Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE), for example, argued that the second "The Master said" in *Lunyu* 17 should be deleted, as the second saying supplements the first and is incomplete on its own.[73] In other words, this inconsistency can be overcome if we interpret the texts in this way: "except for the wise men and the stupid men, everyone can be transformed through learning." But even if we accept this interpretation, it remains possible that the idea of a three-rank categorization of humans was conceived by the compiler(s) of the *Lunyu* rather than by Confucius himself.

External Evidence

[72] Thomas H. C. Lee, *Education in Traditional China: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 180-81.
[73] *Lunyu jishi*, p. 1195.

External evidence indicates that the three-rank categorization of humans was not exclusively seen in *Lunyu* or texts associated with Confucius, thus further casting doubt on the Confucian origin of this idea. For instance, the pairing of "the wise" and "the stupid" exist in other texts from the late Warring States period:

> ***Heguanzi* 8**
>
> The worthy and the unworthy differ in their capacity. This is why the sages above cannot be confused and the stupid men below cannot be persuaded.
>
> 賢不肖殊能，故上聖不可亂也，下愚不可辯也。[74]

> ***Lüshi Chunqiu* 2**
>
> Emotion is our ears' desire for the five sounds, our eyes' desire for the five colors, and our mouths' desire for the five flavors. All men desire things through these three channels, regardless of noble or humble, stupid or wise, worthy or unworthy. Even Shennong and Huangdi are the same as Jie and Zhou [in this regard].
>
> 故耳之欲五聲，目之欲五色，口之欲五味，情也。此三者，貴賤愚智賢不肖欲之若一，雖神農、黃帝，其與桀、紂同。[75]

Both *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 and *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 were compiled at the end of the third century BCE.[76] They pair the wise men with the stupid men to make arguments different from the one

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[74] *Heguanzi jiaozhu* 鶡冠子校註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), pp. 129-33.
[75] *Lüshi Chunqiu jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), p. 42.
[76] Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master (He guan zi): A Rhetorical Reading* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 30; John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, "Introduction," *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 12-20.

in *Lunyu* 17. Confucius is also absent from the two quotes. One can speculate that the idea of "the wise and the stupid" had not yet been associated with the figure of Confucius in the third century BCE. In fact, little evidence can be found from before the reign of Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) to suggest the existence of a widely circulated textual corpus of the sayings of Confucius, such as *Lunyu*.[77] While Confucius might have been related to this idea before the third century BCE, it is highly plausible that this relation only became widely acknowledged by the intellectuals after the compilation of the *Lunyu*. This hypothesis is supported by intertextual evidence. The second statement in *Lunyu* 17 resembles the sentence in *Heguanzi* 8 in meaning. Similarly, the first statement in *Lunyu* 17 has a non-verbatim parallel from one of the Guodian texts from the fourth century BCE.[78]

***Xingzimingchu* 性自命出**	***Heguanzi* 8**
Within the four seas, the nature [of mankind] is the same. That they use their minds in different ways is a result of education. 四海之內，其性一也。其用心各異，教使然也。[79]	The worthy and the unworthy differ in their capacity. This is why the sages above cannot be confused and the stupide men below cannot be persuaded. 賢不肖殊能，故上聖不可亂也，下愚不可辯也。
***Lunyu* 17**	
The Master said: "[Human beings] are alike in nature, are not alike in their acquired qualities. 子曰：性相近也，習相遠也。	The Master said: "Only the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform." 子曰：唯上知與下愚不移。

These textual parallels show that the claims in *Lunyu* 17 are not necessarily "Confucian." They help us further appreciate *Lunyu* as a compilation that consists of pre-existing ideas from a wide

[77] Michael Hunter, *Confucius Beyond the* Lunyu (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 207-45.
[78] Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation* (New York: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2012), pp. 3-9.
[79] *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹简 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), p. 179.

range of texts beyond what Han dynasty historiographers identified as part of "Confucianism."[80]

In sum, the internal and external evidence pertaining to the intellectual and textual identity of *Lunyu* 17 supports the following thesis: the three-rank categorization of human came to be recognized as an idea conceived by Confucius's after the third century BCE, and possibly thanks to the compilation of *Lunyu*.

2.2. The Three-Rank Categorization as a Critical Framework

Lunyu became an influential text in the mid-second century BCE. Scholars have noted its principal function as a primer used to educate the minors of the Han imperial house as well as students of the Confucian classics.[81] At an imperial conference held at the Stone Canal Pavilion (*Shiqu ge* 石渠閣) in 51 BCE, it was thoroughly discussed and annotated by the leading scholars of the time.[82] Though not part of the Five Classics sanctioned by the Western Han court, *Lunyu* enjoyed unmatched popularity and was considered an important part of classical learning.

In the following discussions, I trace how the three-rank categorization of human—being part of that textual artifact—functioned as a form of categorical thinking that was useful to intellectuals in the Eastern Han time beyond the context of the interpretation of the classics. I

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[80] See: Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, "Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China," *T'oung Pao* 89.1/3 (2003): 59-99; Kidder Smith, "Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, "Legalism," *et cetera*," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62.1 (2003): 129-56.

[81] Wang Guowei 王國維 first mentioned that *The Lunyu* (with *The Classics of Filial Piety*) was widely read during the Western Han due to its function as a primer. See: Wang Guowei, "Han Wei boshi kao 漢魏博士考," *Guantang ji lin* 觀堂集林 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), p.88. This thesis has been more closely examined in: Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Confucius and the *Lunyu* in the Han," from: Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., *Confucius and the* Lunyu*: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 144-49.

[82] According to the *Hanshu* bibliography, the imperial conference in 51 BCE produced eighteen *juan* of commentaries on *The Lunyu*. As reference points, commentaries produced for *The Classics of Rituals* and *The Chunqiu*, which are among the Five Classics and are much longer texts, amount to only thirty-eight and thirty-nine *juan*, respectively. See: *Hanshu* 30, p. 1718.

examine three cases in which intellectuals adopted this idea as a critical framework for responding to pressing theoretical issues, in particular: **are human beings good or evil by nature?** I argue that this three-rank categorization of humans, when employed as a critical framework, is elastic and serves divergent discursive purposes.

Moral Development

I first discuss how the three-rank categorization was adopted in *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露 as an inspiration for its argument on the social mechanism of moral development. *Chunqiu Fanlu* is traditionally ascribed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (?179–?104 BCE), yet the two paragraphs I investigate below may be from the Eastern Han period.[83] The first paragraph reads:

> ***Chunqiu Fanlu* 35**
>
> **"Deeply Examine Names and Designations (深察名號)"**
>
> We name "human nature" not after the upper nor the lower [people]. We name it after the middle [people]. Human nature is like a silk cocoon or an egg. An egg awaits incubation to become a chicken. A silk cocoon awaits unwinding to become silk. And human nature awaits education to become good. This is called authenticating Heaven ['s endowment].

[83] A recent study by Loewe challenged the assumption of a single authorship of this text and favored an accretion model of textual formation. In particular, the two chapters I discuss below, according to Loewe, might reflect the views of a group of Eastern Han scholars who were marginalized in the imperial conference held at the White Tiger Hall [*Baihuguan* 白虎觀] in 79 CE. The grounds for his argument include the quoting of *The Mencius* in these two chapters, which is rarely seen elsewhere in *Chunqiu Fanlu*, as well as the similarities and differences between the two chapters and the first chapter of *Baihutong* 白虎通, the conference report compiled by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE). However, Loewe admitted that the exact dating of these two chapters remains debatable. I have accepted Loewe's theory and use *Chunqiu Fanlu* 35 and 36 as examples of the adoption of the three-rank categorical thinking in this period. Naturally, this means that I do not consider them to be the authentic works by Dong Zhongshu. On the authenticity of *Chunqiu Fanlu*, see: Steve Davidson and Michael Loewe, "Ch'un ch'iu fan lu 春秋繁露," in: Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (The Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), pp. 80-82. On Loewe's dating of *Chunqiu Fanlu* 35 and 36, see: Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu: A 'Confucian' Heritage and the* Chunqiu Fanlu (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 221-22, 229, 240.

> Heaven provides the commoners with a nature that possesses a good substance, but [this nature] is not yet capable of being good. Consequently, [the Heaven] establishes a king to make it good. Such is Heaven's intention.…Now those who investigate the true character of the basic substance and claim that people's nature is inherently good [as the *Mengzi* does] negate Heaven's intention and disregard the king's duty. If the nature of the myriad commoners were inherently good, what responsibilities would the king shoulder when receiving Heaven's Mandate?[84]
>
> 名性，不以上，不以下，以其中名之。性如繭如卵。卵待覆而成雛，繭待繅而為絲，性待教而為善。此之謂真天。
>
> 天生民性有善質，而未能善，於是為之立王以善之，此天意也。……今案其真質而謂民性已善者，是失天意而去王任也。萬民之性苟已善，則王者受命尚何任也？[85]

Chunqiu Fanlu 35 argues that we need to discuss human nature within the context of moral development in an idealized society. First, the author emphasizes the transformative effect of education, which resembles the message in *Lunyu* 17 (although not directly quoting Confucius). Second, the author describes his political ideal: Heaven appoints a king to rule and educate his subjects and, thus, activate their good nature. Consistent with this political design, human nature is defined as the nature of "the middle (people)," likened to a silk cocoon or an egg with potentials yet to be realized. Those who belong to "the upper or the lower" are deemed irrelevant to the discussion of human nature.

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[84] Sarah A. Queen and John S. Major, eds. and trans., *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 350. With modifications.
[85] *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 春秋繁露義證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), pp. 300-02.

Using the same structure, as well as the same analogies of a silk cocoon and an egg, *Chunqiu Fanlu* 36 states:

> ***Chunqiu Fanlu* 36**
>
> **"Substantiate Human Nature (實性)"**
>
> The nature of sages cannot be named the nature [of all humans]. The nature of those who are mere utensils cannot be named the nature [of all humans], either. The nature of the average people is like a cocoon or an egg. An egg awaits incubation for twenty days before becoming a chick. A cocoon waits to be unwound in boiling water before becoming a silk thread. The nature [of all humans] waits to be gradually steeped in education and admonition before becoming good. Goodness is the result of education and admonition. It cannot be achieved by the unadorned substance. Accordingly, one cannot say [goodness] is the nature [of all humans].[86]
>
> 聖人之性不可以名性，斗筲之性又不可以名性。中民之性如繭如卵。卵待覆二十日而後能為雛，繭待繰以湆湯而後能為絲，性待漸於教訓而後能為善。善，教訓之所然也，非質樸之所能至也，故不謂性。[87]

Both chapters endorse a view that external intervention is necessary for people to realize their innate moral potential. In both cases, the author is inspired by the three-rank categorization from *Lunyu* to argue that the human nature of commoners—in the middle of a three-rank hierarchy—demands moral guidance provided by a king. Without directly quoting Confucius, the author of these two *Chunqiu Fanlu* passages leveraged the Confucian idea to refute the idea

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[86] *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, pp. 354-55. With modifications.
[87] *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng*, pp. 311-12.

that morality lies in the innate quality of an individuals It also enables him to justify and legitimize his Confucian moral–political blueprint.

The Impossibility of Moral Development

Wang Chong 王充 (27–97 CE) also adopts the Confucian three-rank categorization to comment on the issue of human nature, but his argument takes a different direction. In *Lunheng* 論衡, he devotes a whole chapter to respond to this matter, noting that "scholars in the past and learned individuals in old times all have written prose and essays about it, yet none of them could substantially settle this issue (昔儒舊生，著作篇章，莫不論說，莫能實定)."[88] His goal is, therefore, to draw a definitive conclusion on the issue of human nature through critiquing theories from the past.

One of the theorists that Wang Chong takes issue with is Gaozi 告子, who believed: "Just like water runs neither inherently eastward nor westward, human nature is neither inherently good nor evil (夫水無分於東西，猶人無分於善惡也)."[89] To refute this idea, Wang Chong quotes *Lunyu* to affirm the existence of people who are indeed inherently good or evil. Next, I summarize the three ways in which Wang Chong makes use of the three-rank categorization of humans to prove Gaozi wrong. First, Wong Chong explicitly leverages the authority of Confucius and the *Lunyu* to denounce Gaozi's view:

> ***Lunheng* 13**
>
> **"Human Nature (本性)"**

[88] *Lunheng jiaozhu* 論衡校註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 132.
[89] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 136.

> Confucius is the ancestor of the virtue of the way. He is the most exceptional one among the masters. Given what Confucius says, "the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform," we know that Gaozi's words are not true.
> 孔子，道德之祖、諸子之中最卓者也，而曰「上智下愚不移」，故知告子之言，未得實也。[90]

Second, Wang Chong interprets Confucius's two categories—the "wise men" and "stupid men"—as the "extremely good men (極善)" and the "extremely evil men (極惡)." In doing so, he makes clear that the issue at stake is not simply learning (as in the case of the *Lunyu*) but also achieving moral integrity. This reinterpretation helps Wang Chong criticize Gaozi for his failure to address the full spectrum of human nature, as the following excerpt shows:

> ***Lunheng* 13**
>
> **"Human Nature (本性)"**
>
> If the nature of someone is neither inherently good nor evil, or, if the nature of someone evolves over time, then this person is an average man. An average man is neither good nor evil and awaits education to complete himself. Thus, Confucius said: "You can teach the above-average men the things above; you cannot teach the below-average men the things above." Gaozi's water analogy applies to the average men only. The extremely good and extremely evil men do not apply. Confucius said: "[Human beings] are alike in their natures, are not alike in their acquired qualities."

[90] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 137.

The nature of an average man relies on the qualities he acquires. It becomes good when he acquires good qualities, and becomes evil when he acquires evil qualities. The extremely good and extremely evil men no longer acquire anything. Thus, Confucius said: "Only the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform." The good human nature and the not-good human nature cannot be transformed by the influence of sages and the admonition of worthy men.
無分於善惡，可推移者，謂中人也，不善不惡，須教成者也。故孔子曰：「中人以上，可以語上也；中人以下，不可以語上也。」告子之以決水喻者，徒謂中人，不指極善極惡也。孔子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」夫中人之性，在所習焉，習善而為善，習惡而為惡也。至於極善極惡，非復在習，故孔子曰：「惟上智與下愚不移。」性有善不善，聖化賢教，不能復移易也。[91]

Third, Wang Chong uses historical examples of "the extremely evil" to demonstrate the limitation of a moral education conducted by the sage kings. This stance is in sharp contrast with *Chunqiu Fanlu* 35 and 36:

***Lunheng* 13**

"Human Nature (本性)"

However, Gaozi's statement is not completely unfounded. *The Classics of Poetry* reads: "What is a desirable man like?" Its tradition reads: "He is like boiled silk. Boiled silk becomes blue if dyed with indigo, and becomes red if dyed with cinnabar." The running water goes eastward or westward depending on where it is led to, just like

[91] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 137.

the silk is blue or red depending on what it is dyed with. Danzhu and Shangjun were both "dyed" by the civilizing influences of Tang and Yu. Yet, Danzhu remained arrogant; Shangjun remained cruel. Their extremely evil nature cannot be changed by "indigo" and "cinnabar."

夫告子之言，亦有緣也。《詩》曰：「彼姝之子，何以與之。」其傳曰：「譬猶練絲，染之藍則青，染之朱則赤。」夫決水使之東西，猶染絲令之青赤也。丹朱、商均已染於唐、虞之化矣，然而丹朱慠而商均虐者，至惡之質，不受藍、朱變也。[92]

Elsewhere in *Lunheng*, Wang Chong holds a more optimistic view on the effectiveness of this "dyeing" process, stating that it is entirely possible for a person with a wicked nature to become virtuous.[93] However, in this paragraph, the three-rank categorization of Confucius allows him to refute Gaozi based on the extreme cases of Danzhu and Shangjun.

The overall strategy that Wang Chong employs is to underscore the diversity of our innate moral inclinations. In other words, human beings are born different. This is consistent with his concept of "fate (*ming* 命)." He argues that fate and contingency play a decisive role in our lives. In fact, he believes that various privileges, including class and wealth, are distributed among members of a society based on fate instead of virtue.[94] Thus, Confucius's three-rank categorization of human, which presumes unequal innate qualities, not only proves his view on fate but also supports his cynical attitude toward society and politics at large. Compared to *Chunqiu Fanlu* 35 and 36, in which the author proposes that human nature will be refined by an

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[92] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, pp. 137-38.
[93] See: Anne Behnke Kinney, "Dyed Silk: Han Notions of the Moral Development of Children," in Anne B. Kinney, ed., *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), pp. 30-31, footnote 72.
[94] "Nobility is distinguished from peasantry by fate, not by whether we are wise or stupid; the poor are distinguished from the rich by [the lack of] good fortune, not by whether we are dumb or smart (貴賤在命，不在智愚；貧富在祿，不在頑慧)." *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 22.

idealized political order, Wang Chong highlights the cold reality of the social world in which he lives.

Education and Punishment

Last, I discuss a passage from *Shenjian* 申鑒, a five-part proposal on how to run a government, authored by Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209 CE). Xun Yue had intimate knowledge of the ugly political rivalries that existed within the Han court in the second century CE, which greatly influenced the lives of several members of his clan.[95] It was to Liu Xie 劉協 (r. 189–220 CE), who would eventually become the last emperor of the Eastern Han dynasty, that Xun Yue dedicated this book. For our purpose it is enough to note that, in contrast to Wang Chong's cynical approach to politics, Xun Yue's hope to facilitate change in the Eastern Han government led him to draft *Shenjian* for the young emperor. The following passage shows how he approaches the issue of human nature in conjunction with his view on what constitutes good governance:

> ***Shenjian* 5**
>
> **"Miscellaneous Dialogues, Part Two 雜言下"**
>
> Someone said: "If goodness and evilness are both human natures, how can law and education be applied?"
>
> I said: "Even if human nature can be considered good, it awaits education to achieve its goodness. Even if human nature can be considered bad, it awaits law to remove its evilness. Only the wise men above and the stupid men below do not transform. Everyone else experiences the conflict between goodness and evilness. Thus,

[95] *Houhanshu* 62, pp. 2049-63; Chi-yun Chen, *Hsun Yueh (A.D. 148-209): The Life and Reflections of an Early Medieval Confucian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 19-30.

education enhances one's goodness, and law suppresses one's evilness. They can be applied to the nine ranks. Half of them follow education. Three-fourths of the remaining fear punishment. Therefore, roughly one-ninth cannot be transformed. Of this fraction, there remains a small portion that can be slightly transformed. Accordingly, law and education have a civilizing effect on almost all men. When law and education are lost, similarly, there will be chaos everywhere."

或曰：善惡皆性也，則法教何施？

曰：性雖善，待教而成。性雖惡，待法而消。唯上智下愚不移，其次善惡交爭，於是教扶其善，法抑其惡。得施之九品，從教者半，畏刑者四分之三，其不移大數九分之一也。一分之中，又有微移者矣。然則法教之於化民也，幾盡之矣。及法教之失也，其為亂亦如之。[96]

Xun Yue argues that the use of education (*jiao* 教) and punishment (*xing* 刑) together will foster a civil and orderly society. This approach can be understood as a reconciliation between Confucian and Legalist approaches. He reasons that a ruler needs to govern with both methods because each accommodates only half of the population. Then, he quotes the Confucian saying on the "wise men above" and "stupid men below" from *Lunyu*, to show that education does not solve all problems. "The nine ranks (*jiupin* 九品)" in this paragraph quite possibly refers to the "Table of Men from Past to Present" in *Hanshu*. Xun Yue was ordered by the last emperor Liu Xie to compile *Hanji* 漢紀, an abridged version of *Hanshu*.[97] Therefore, he must have been familiar with the Table as well as with the methodology of the Ban siblings. However, Xun Yue

[96] *Shenjian zhu jiaobu* 申鑒注校補 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), p. 210
[97] Chi-yun Chen, *Hsun Yueh*, pp. 84-86.

also reinterprets the nine-rank categorization of man to advocated for utilizing both Confucian and Legalist methods in governance.

1	[Wise Men Above 上智]
2	Those Who Follow Education 從教者
3	
4	
5	
6	Those Who Fear Punishment 畏刑者
7	
8	
9	Not to Be Transformed 不移

The three Eastern Han texts analyzed thus far make use of the Confucian three-rank categorical thinking in very different ways. In particular, in the debates on human nature, intellectuals leveraged the three-rank categorization to justify contradicting outlooks on politics: the Confucian utopia (*Chunqiu Fanlu*), the realist politics (*Lunheng*), and the ideological hybrid (*Shenjian*). This shows that this Confucian idea as a critical framework offers both authority and elasticity, thus explaining its popularity among the intellectuals.

2.3. The Three-Rank Categorization as a Synthetizing Principle

Intellectuals of the Eastern Han period adopted the Confucian three-rank categorization also as a synthetizing principle by which they established new conceptual and political orders. I argue in this section that this practice generated new syntheses of ideas, new criteria for understanding the past, and justifications for a new type of social hierarchy in the Eastern Han society, which prepared the adoption of this idea as a system of official recruitment, namely, the nine ranks system. In the following, I use examples to demonstrate the logic behind each of

these three intellectual pursuits. I argue that the three types of practice unite in the desire of these Eastern Han intellectuals to articulate their individuality in order to rise above their predecessors and peers.

Moderating Ideas

Weighing others' ideas before offering their own conclusion was a useful strategy for Eastern Han intellectuals when engaging in intellectual debates, such as those pertaining to human nature, as illustrated in the examples that follow. In these excerpts, the three-rank categorical thinking provides a theoretical framework for contrasting different viewpoints:

> ***Chunqiu Fanlu* 35**
>
> **"Deeply Examine Names and Designations (深察名號)"**
>
> The way I investigate what is called the nature [of all humans] is different from that of Mencius. Mencius looked below to investigate the actions of birds and beasts. Consequently, he said human nature is already good. I look above to investigate the actions of sages. Consequently, I say human nature is not yet good.
>
> 吾質之命性者異孟子。孟子下質於禽獸之所為，故曰性已善；吾上質於聖人之所為，故謂性未善。[98]

> ***Lunheng* 13**
>
> **"Human Nature (本性)"**

[98] *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng*, pp. 304-05.

Gaozi's water analogy applies to the average men only.…The good human nature and the not-good human nature cannot be transformed by the influence of sages and the admonition of worthy men.

告子之以決水喻者，徒謂中人，不指極善極惡也。……性有善不善，聖化賢教，不能復移易也。[99]

The authors of *Chunqiu Fanlu* and *Lunheng* both contrast their own approach with that of an earlier theorist (Mencius and Gaozi, respectively). In doing so, they delineate the fundamental difference that underlies the debate. Sometimes, this moderation of various ideas may not involve explicitly stating one's own opinion, as demonstrated in the following:

***Lunheng* 13**

"Human Nature (本性)"

Therefore, I believe Mencius's claim that "human nature is good" corresponds to the above-average men; Xunzi's claim that "human nature is evil" corresponds to the below-average men; Yang Xiong's claim that "human nature is a mixture of goodness and evilness" corresponds to the average men.

余固以孟軻言人性善者，中人以上者也；孫卿言人性惡者，中人以下者也；楊雄言人性善惡混者，中人也。[100]

In this paragraph, Wang Chong moderates the three theories from a higher level. His intention is to not only point out the insights of each one but also to limit their validity by placing them

[99] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, pp. 137-38.
[100] *Hanshu* 20, p. 861.

into one of the three Confucian categories from *Lunyu* 16. In doing so, Wang Chong provides a bird's eye view of different ideas and, thus, positions himself above the old views on human nature.

Judging Historical Figures

This bird's eye view perspective permeates the "Table of Men from Past to Present." The Ban siblings describe their workflow in the preface by explaining that they "arrayed a set of nine ranks, exhausted records from the classics and the traditions, arranged them in chronological order, and thus comprehensively assembled a brief outline of figures of past and present (列九等之序，究極經傳，繼世相次，總備古今之略要云)."[101] Compiling the Table was like making an encyclopedia.[102] But the goal was beyond simply registering names. The historiographers made it clear that the nine ranks come first and foremost in their compiling process. In this way, presenting a framework of evaluation and moral judgement becomes their fundamental task:

> ***Hanshu* 20**
>
> **"Table of Men from Past to Present (古今人表)"**
>
> Since the creation of writings, it is possible to know ancient people. Based on the classics and the traditions, we know the posthumous titles of those monarchs and kings before Tang and Shun. While we are not able to name their ministers, the latter have been discussed by the masters. While not all of them have been verified by

[101] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, pp. 142-43.
[102] Nylan cites Wang Liqi 王利器's idea that the whole chart might have been created as a dictionary prepared for historians to make the politically correct remarks on past figures. See: Michael Nylan, "Mapping Time in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* Tables (表)," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 43 (2016), pp. 92-93.

Confucius, their deeds are written in chapters and books. These writings all serve the purpose of manifesting the good and illuminating the evil, thus admonishing people after them. It is for this purpose that I have extensively collected them.

自書契之作，先民可得而聞者。經傳所稱，唐虞以上帝王有號謚。輔佐不可得而稱矣，而諸子頗言之。雖不考虙孔氏，然猶著在篇籍，歸乎顯善昭惡，勸戒後人，故博采焉。[103]

The Ban siblings claimed, thus, an astounding level of authority over even the most revered rulers in their past when they assigned ranks to each of the 1,955 figures. To be sure, evaluating the rights and wrongs of historical figures has long been an essential part of historical writing since Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (?135–?90 BCE) *Shiji* 史記. However, this effort almost always results in comments that appear in a highly subjective manner (for instance, the famous "the Grand Historian says 太史公曰") attached to biographical writings. A systematic evaluation of historical figures such as the one contained in the Table, governed by seemingly objective ranking criteria, is highly idiosyncratic within the Chinese tradition.[104] This daring project was made possible by the way the Ban siblings linked their criterion of judgment back to the authoritative ideas of Confucius, as the following quote shows:

***Hanshu* 20**

"Table of Men from Past to Present (古今人表)"

A certain tradition says:

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[103] *Hanshu* 20, p. 861.
[104] Yuanxin Chen, *Writing History through the Biographical Genre in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE)*, PhD dissertation (Princeton University, 2020), pp. 86-90.

"Think of Yao and Shun: When Yu, Ji and Qi advised them to do good deeds, [Yu, Ji and Qi] were followed; when Gun and Huandou advised them to do evil deeds, [Gun and Huandou] were killed. Those who can be advised to do good yet cannot be advised to do evil, they are 'the wise men above.'

For Zhou and Jie: When Longfeng and Bigan attempted to lead them to do good deeds, [Bigan and Longfeng] were killed; when Yushen and Duke Chong advised them to do evil deeds, [Yushen and Duke Chong] were followed. Those who can be advised to do evil yet cannot be advised to do good, they are 'the stupid men below.'

For Duke Huan of Qi: When Guan Zhong served as his minister, [his state] prevailed; when Shudiao served as his advisor, [his state] fell into chaos. Those who can be advised to do good and do evil, they are 'the average man.'"

傳曰：

「譬如堯、舜，禹、稷、卨與之爲善則行，鯀、讙兜欲與爲惡則誅。可與爲善，不可與爲惡，是謂上智。

桀、紂，龍逢、比干欲與之爲善則誅，于莘、崇侯與之爲惡則行。可與爲惡，不可與爲善，是謂下愚。

齊桓公，管仲相之則霸，豎貂輔之則亂。可與爲善，可與爲惡，是謂中人。」[105]

The Table is traditional in a sense. Producing history to uphold moral values is not an uncommon objective in the tradition of Chinese historiography. However, the Table is unique in this genre of writing, for it is systematically arranged by clear-cut principles and criteria. Although the Ban siblings obtained these principles from their past—the saying of Confucius—

[105] *Hanshu* 20, p. 861.

their new emphasis on producing general criteria doubtlessly put themselves above not only the historical figures but also the historians before them.

Theorizing a Talent-Based Social Hierarchy

The third application of the three-rank categorization of men as a synthetizing principle lies in the theorization of a social hierarchy based on talent.

Eastern Han elites faced harsh competition to get employment under the system of "discovery and recommendation (*cha ju* 察舉)" introduced by Emperor Wu in the late second century BCE. This system operated under a decentralizing, meritocratic principle: to be nominated for an official post, a candidate needed to have recommendations; and to have recommendations, a candidate needed to accumulate local reputation and support. As a result, for an individual to achieve upward social mobility, he had to display certain character traits that fell into categories such as "filial piety and incorruptibility (*xiaolian* 孝廉)" and "prudence and virtue (*xianliang* 賢良)" as prescribed by the government. Physiognomy, the technique of judging one's internal characters based on external features, became popular in this context.[106]

How did talent become a central concern to Eastern Han intellectuals? Throughout the Han dynasty, many holders of official titles did not, in fact, possess the extraordinary qualities required for their titles. As our previous discussion of the Han recommendation system has shown: it rewarded people with strong pre-existing ties to the local authority, while failing to hold the recommenders accountable, making nepotism a prevalent issue to the government.

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[106] An earlier text, the "Wenwang guanren 文王官人" chapter from *Dadai liji* 大戴禮記, already combined systematic descriptions of a variety of human characteristics with a six-point practical guide on how to identify them based on the visible traits of an individual. These characteristics were further matched with various duties in the Zhou government, showing that the technique of physiognomy carried pragmatic value. Another version of this text called "Guanren jie 官人解" appears in the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書. See: Matthias Richter, "Self-Cultivation or Evaluation of Others?: A Form Critical Approach to *Zengzi li shi*" *Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques* LVI, 4 (2002): 879-917.

Talent theories emerged, thus, in the Eastern Han period, as many official candidates became disillusioned with the fairness of this system. This drove them towards supporting a talent-based social hierarchy. Towards the end of the chapter on human nature in *Lunheng*, Wang Chong introduced a curious analogy into his argument:

> ***Lunheng* 13**
>
> **"Human Nature (本性)"**
>
> The truth is: the nature of some is good and the nature of some is evil. This is just like the talent of some is superior and the talent of some is inferior. What is superior cannot be inferior. What is inferior cannot be superior. To say human nature is neither good nor evil is to say there is no distinction between superior talents and inferior talents.
>
> 實者，人性有善有惡，猶人才有高有下也，高不可下，下不可高。謂性無善惡，是謂人才無高下也。[107]

Pay attention to his logic here: presuming that human nature is like talent, those who accept that "individuals differ in talent" must also accept that "individuals differ in human nature." If Wang Chong believed this was a powerful argument to make, then he must have been convinced that his audience would find it easier to accept the premise that "individuals differ in talent." Therefore, this quote shows that individual differences in talent had become a widely accepted concept in Wang Chong's time. Talent is but one of the many aspects—moral disposition, demeanor, personality, facial feature, and body shape—that Wang Chong theorizes

[107] *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 142.

as the "heavenly endowed natures (*tianxing* 天性)" that come with significant individual variation. This variation, he argued, is a result of the diverse conditions of soil, water, and geography on earth.[108] In upholding human differences, Wang Chong also justifies social hierarchy.

In *Lunheng*, Wang Chong devotes an entire chapter to provide anecdotal evidence that justifies physiognomy. However, with the idea of "fate" governing his view on politics, Wang Chong was never concerned with making physiognomy a fair practice. He was satisfied with it being a mystified kind of prognostic knowing.[109] Xun Yue, on the other hand, introduced the three-rank categorization of humans into physiognomy. To him, the personality traits of an individual could be registered to one of the three ranks and, thus, evaluated in a fairer way:

> ***Shenjian* 3**
>
> **"Common Superstitions (俗嫌)"**
>
> Someone inquired about physiognomy.
>
> I said: "There is probably some truth in it. The spirit and *qi* of a person are naturally interconnected with their physical appearance and facial expression. The conduct of a person and the timing of things may provide for each other as much as they may constrain each other. There are a variety of possible combinations. There are many

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[108] "Of the Nine Provinces, the natures of the soils are unequal in terms of their good and evil qualities. This results in the difference in the yellow, red, and black colors, and the difference in the superior, average, and inferior fertility. The courses of water are different. This results in the difference in the clean or muddy streams and the difference in the directions of east, west, south and northward. Human beings are endowed with the nature of heaven and earth. We are imbued with the *qi* of the Five Constants such as humanity or justice. People differ in the exact makeup of their nature. The way we move, behave, run, and rush can be sedate or brisk. People differ in nature. The color of our face can be pale or dark. The shape of our body can be long or short. As we age, until we die, these features cannot be changed. This is due to our heavenly endowed nature 九州田土之性，善惡不均，故有黃、赤、黑之別，上、中、下之差；水潦不同，故有清濁之流，東西南北之趨。人稟天地之性，懷五常之氣，或仁或義，性術乖也；動作趨翔，或重或輕，性識詭也。面色或白或黑，身形或長或短，至老極死，不可變易，天性然也." *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 142.

[109] See: *Lunheng* 11, "On Physiognomy (骨相),". *Lunheng jiaozhu*, p. 120.

variations. However, they [the traits] can all be divided into three ranks: upper, middle, and lower."

或問人形有相。曰：「蓋有之焉。夫神氣形容之相包也，自然矣。貳之於行，參之於時，相成也，亦參相敗也。其數眾矣，其變多矣，亦有上、中、下品云爾。」[110]

Xun Yue shared a common Han belief that the inner and outer selves of an individual are connected with each other, so much so that we can understand the true character of a person through his external traits, which include not only bodily and facial features, but also the way a person talks, performs, and carries himself or herself.[111] The three-rank categorical thinking is adopted to show that physiognomy can be justified by the words of Confucius.

Xun Yue's new theory of physiognomy is only one step away from the emergence of the nine ranks system. A decade after Xun Yue's passing in 209, Chen Qun proposed to the Cao Wei regime in 220 CE that the government should establish a nine-rank system to rank all the official candidates based on their talent and then appoint those who rank high, regardless of their family backgrounds.[112] This adoption of the nine-rank diagram into the recruitment of officials was made possible by the earlier intellectual ventures, such as the Table in *Hanshu* as well as the theory by Xun Yue described previously.[113] Writing in the mid- to late-third century CE, Sun Chu 孙楚 (?–293 CE), an official in the Jin dynasty, recorded the following:

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[110] "Common Superstitions 俗嫌," *Shenjian* 3; *Shenjian zhu jiaobu*, pp. 120-21.
[111] Chu Ping-Yi 祝平一, *Handai de xiangrenshu* 漢代的相人術 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1990); Wang Jen-hsiang 王仁祥, *Renlun jianzhi qiyuan de xueshushi kaocha (Wei Jin yiqian)* 人倫鑒識起源的學術史考察（魏晉以前）(Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 303-26; Yiqun Zhou, "Men's Appearance and Political Career in Han China," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2018): 34-65.
[112] Shen Yue 沈約, *Songshu* 宋書 94 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), p. 2301; Tang, "Jiupin zhongzheng zhidu shishi."
[113] The Chen clan and the Xun clan were both from Yingchuan 潁川. Chen Qun's wife was the daughter of Xun Yu, a close relative of Xun Yue. See: *Hou han shu* 62, pp. 2049-63; Yan Buke 閻步克, *Pinwei yu zhiwei: Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao guanjie zhidu yanjiu* 品位与职位：秦汉魏晋南北朝官阶制度研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), pp. 306-07.

> At first, there was no nine-rank system in place in the Han dynasty. In compiling *Hanshu*, Ban Gu first organized the wise men and the intelligent men of the past according to nine categories. This was intended only to register and rank the deceased. Nevertheless, Chen Qun made use of it to evaluate living ones.
> 九品漢氏本無。班固著《漢書》序先往代賢智，以為九條。此蓋記鬼錄次第耳，而陳群依之以品生人。[114]

Therefore, the Eastern Han intellectuals and their adoption of the Confucian three-rank categorical thinking had a significant and lasting influence on the political system for centuries to come through the nine ranks system.

The three ways in which these intellectuals devised principles and structures to synthetize ideas on a higher level required a higher degree of authority in the process of knowledge making. For this reason, quoting and expanding on the ideas of Confucius became a popular way to strengthen one's point and authority. The three-rank categorization of human from the *Lunyu* allowed Eastern Han thinkers to navigate the new realities of the Eastern Han through rereading the old sayings of Confucius.

3. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have outlined the institutional and intellectual soils in which the nine ranks system grew to be the guiding principles of official recruitment for the new Cao Wei regime.

The four pre-existing pathways in Eastern Han times—appointing one's sons, summoning, recommendations, and examinations—existed cooperatively to respond to a wide

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[114] *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), vol. 265, p. 1243a.

array of needs and concerns of the various parties involved in the government's hiring process. The list included: rewarding current officials for their loyalty, selecting and training promising young men to fulfill key governmental duties, helping the government to find reliable candidates through the personal networks of its officials, inculcating the educational ideals and values associated with the Confucian canon, and so on. These complicated intentions and dynamics drove the practice of official recruitment sometimes in a meritocratic direction, and sometimes to its complete opposite.

Chen Qun's design of the nine ranks system, as this chapter has demonstrated, closely followed a long-standing intellectual tradition of categorizing human beings into nine ranks. This discursive practice appeared in various intellectual contexts and served different discursive purposes. It gained popularity among Han intellectuals primarily due to the flexibility of this framework and the common attribution of this idea to Confucius since the late Warring States period. This infectious concept found its utmost political utility in the nine ranks system at the beginning of the third century.

These institutional and intellectual underpinnings of the nine ranks system made it possible for the nine ranks system to supersede the Eastern Han hybrid system of official selection and appointment. As I will show in the next chapter, the establishment of the nine ranks system represents the Cao Wei regime's attempt to, in a more consistent fashion, pull the recruitment practice in a meritocratic direction. For ones who study the social and political transitions from early to medieval China, it is crucial that we acknowledge the original intention of the nine ranks system being meritocratic, figure out the reasons why such a meritocratic experiment failed, and holistically understand its many impacts and heritages.

Chapter 2: A Meritocratic Experiment: Implementing the Nine Ranks System under Cao Wei (220-249)

Houhanshu records a popular rhyme that circulated in Luoyang, Eastern Han's capital city, in the second half of second century CE. It criticized the unfair practice of official recruitment:

> At that time[115], descendants of the powerful and wealthy clans were recommended to office based on personal networks, whereas the ones who were impoverished, modest, and true to their aspirations were left out due to poverty and low profile. [Residents at] the capital city had a ditty: "Here are the things you can wish for but could never get / Official posts like *Guanglu* (*Dafu*) and *Maocai*."
>
> 時權富子弟多以人事得舉，而貧約守志者以窮退見遺，京師為之謠曰：「欲得不能，光祿茂才。」[116]

The ditty evidently describes the clash between the hereditary and meritocratic principles within the official recruitment system at China's second century. This was a time when the intellectuals became acutely aware of and frustrated by the "powerful and wealthy clans 權富," who enjoyed significant advantage in securing prestigious government jobs for their members, depriving the talented yet underprivileged youths of their deserved opportunities. In part, this phenomenon was the result of the system of official recruitment of Han dynasty, as I have

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[115] This text is part of the biography of an official named Huang Wan 黃琬 (141-192), who gained fame among his peers for advocating the fair selection of official candidates. See: *Houhanshu* 61, p. 2040.

[116] *Houhanshu* 61, p. 2040. The Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants 光祿 is an office within the central government that oversaw all the Court Gentlemen 郎. During Han times, it primarily took charge of internal affairs within the imperial palace and was named after its manager, the Chamberlain for Attendants 光祿勳 . It was often used as a shorthand for Grand Master of the Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants 光祿大夫, a mid-level manager role inside the Office that came with a high salary but not much actual everyday duties, making it an ideal position for the elites. See: "The Grand Master of the Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants was ranked at the level of two-thousand bushels 光祿大夫，秩比二千石," from: *Hanshu* 19, p. 272.

described in Chapter 1, in which the central government relied heavily on recommendations provided by local clans and influential figures. It was against this background that the Cao Wei dynasty, which replaced the Han, instituted a more merit-based system of electing officials, the nine ranks system (*jiupin* 九品), in 220 CE.

The eventual establishment of the nine ranks system by the Cao Wei government, as I argue in this chapter, materialized a continued commitment to reviving meritocracy by several generations of political leaders of the Cao Wei ruling house. Several elements of this system, from its founding principle to the power balance it seeks to create among different government organs reflects meritocratic principles. But this project also took on political meanings for them. In making official employment meritocratic, the Cao Wei leaders embarked on a mission to reclaim power back from the local elite clans, the biggest beneficiaries of a hereditary system of official selection that prevailed in the Han dynasty.

Traditionally, historians have regarded the nine ranks system as another triumph of the hereditary tradition in Chinese politics, namely, any system that allocated the privilege to serve in the government according to one's family background.[117] But this view fails to distinguish between early and later forms of the nine ranks system and, as a result, to evaluate the rise and fall of the nine ranks system as a dynamic process in the early medieval period. I take inspiration from the following testimony of a third-century Chinese official named Wei Guan 衛瓘 (220-291):

> The Wei Dynasty established the Nine Ranks System…Initially, villages and districts were able to provide spotless judgments [over their candidates], which were not

[117] This perception of the nine rank follows the traditional criticisms of the nine ranks system from third century on, which emphasize how the nine ranks system contributed to the rising power of aristocracy in early medieval Chinese society. For more discussion on this historiographical tradition in China, see my discussion in chapter 3.

> restricted by one's privilege and status. These judgments included praises and criticisms that served to uplift people and encourage self-improvement, which still maintained the spirit of the ancient "village judgment" system. Gradually, it became tainted, and eventually slid into a practice of determining one's rank solely based on family status. In turn, this encouraged people who observed the practice to also appreciate people solely based on their political status. People abandoned their pursuit of moral integrity and adherence to the Way; instead, they competed with one another over issues of minor significance. It greatly damaged their customs. Its shortcomings were not trivial.
>
> 故立九品之制…其始造也，鄉邑清議，不拘爵位，褒貶所加，足為勸勵，猶有鄉論餘風。中間漸染，遂計資定品，使天下觀望，唯以居位為貴，人棄德而忽道業，爭多少於錐刀之末，傷損風俗，其弊不細。[118]

Wei Guan separated the early form of the nine ranks system from its later state, and described the former approvingly as a meritocratic institution that was "not restricted by one's privilege and status 不拘爵位." Built upon his observation, my discussion below further expands on how the Cao Wei emperors carried out a meritocratic reform by replacing the Han official recruitment system with the nine ranks system. My focus is on the operation of the nine ranks system in its first three decades (220-249). I take 249 as the end point of this period, since the infamous "coup at the Gaoping mausoleum 高平陵之變" took place that year, allowing Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179-251), a minister of the Cao Wei dynasty representing the interests of the elite clans, to take de facto control of the government and to steer the nine ranks system away from its meritocratic orientation. By focusing on the period from 220 to 249, I hope to add more nuance

[118] *Jinshu* 36, p. 1058.

to our understanding of the nine ranks system in its first thirty years, which reflects the troubled relationship between meritocracy and aristocracy in the Chinese political realm during the early medieval era.

By "meritocracy," I refer to a political institution whose legitimacy relies primarily upon the effective distribution of opportunity and socioeconomic resources according to individual merits and achievements, rather than one's family background.[119] Speaking of meritocracy in the context of Chinese history, most historians would cite *keju* 科舉, or the civil examinations system, as the most widely acknowledge embodiment of its principles. *Keju* was instituted at the end of the sixth century by the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and formalized at the beginning of the seventh century by the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It had an enduring impact on how Chinese government elected officials up to this day, as standardized tests sponsored and moderated by the state—for colleges, *gaokao* 高考; for graduate schools, *kaoyan* 考研; and for civil services, *kaogong* 考公—remain to be pivotal mechanisms for the Chinese government to promote upward social mobility for its people and establish the its political legitimacy.[120] Understanding the meritocratic elements of the nine ranks system, which preceded *keju*, will help us appreciate the political tradition that has shaped the Chinese obsession with examinations. Moreover, by outlining the struggle to establish and uphold a meritocratic institution in early medieval China, this chapter, together with the next, also advances our understanding of the sociopolitical forces that drove the historical development of the Chinese system of official selection towards *keju*.

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[119] For critical discussions on meritocracy in modern societies, see: Robert K. Miller and Stephen J. McNamee, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power, and Myths of Mobility* (London: Routledge, 2017); Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

[120] See, for example: Benjamin Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Zachery M. Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

My main argument of this chapter that the early form of the nine ranks system instituted by the Cao Wei regime was meritocratic.[121] Firstly, it embodied Cao Cao 曹操's radical meritocratic vision for politics, which defined the Cao Wei regime's ongoing political initiative to centralize the official selection process even after his passing. Secondly, the nine ranks system, in its initial form, incorporated various checks and balances to ensure fairness and reduce biases in the process of discovering, appointing, and evaluating government officials, which is in sharp contrast to the Han-dynasty *chaju* system. In the following sections, I first zoom in on its founding-father figure, Cao Cao, and contextualize his radical meritocratic vision in relation to the political situation of early third-century China. Then, I discuss the true innovation of the nine ranks system by clarifying on what it was *not*, based on a discussion of the meaning of "rank (*pin* 品)" in the context of the nine ranks system. The next three sections, put together, show that the nine ranks system should be viewed as a syncretic system of official recruitment that incorporated new factors and old traditions. The third and fourth sections focus the new factors, especially changes to official recruitment that were brought about by the establishment of unbiased arbiters. I outline the responsibilities of the unbiased arbiters, the criteria they used to assign ranks, the roles they played in the workflow of Cao Wei's official selection process, as well as the limits of their power. The fifth and last section looks at the transformations of old traditions of official recruitment, especially how Cao Wei emperors reformed the Han recommendation system with the same meritocratic consideration that underpinned the establishment of the nine ranks system.

[121] Hu Shuyun's discussion of the "progressive nature of the nine ranks system 九品官人法的進步性" has served as an inspiration to me. See: Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 207-10.

1. The Radical Meritocracy of Cao Cao

When Chen Qun 陳群 (?-237 CE) proposed to establish the nine rank system as a replacement of the chaotic Han system, it was only a few months after Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220)'s passing. Having just formally declared itself the dynastic successor of the Han imperial house, the Cao Wei regime attempted to actualize the political vision of its former leader Cao Cao. A significant part of his vision centered on redefining talent and advocating for a more meritocratic way of recruiting talented individuals into the government. Cao Cao's view is quite radical and nontraditional, as this section seeks to explain.

It is important to note that Cao Cao was quite knowledgeable about the old, Han system of official selection as a former official aspirant in Eastern Han. In particular, he had intimate knowledge of the dynamics of the "Discovery and Recommendation"(*chaju* 察舉) system. According to *Houhanshu*, Cao Cao in his youth sought out a famous literary elite named Xu Shao 許劭 (150-195) in pursuit of the latter's recommendation to little success.[122] As my last chapter has touched upon, the Eastern Han local elites enjoyed a very strong say in the government's recruitment process. Individuals like Xu Shao invented their own standards for recommending official candidates without much guidance by the central government. An essay by Cao Cao's son Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226, r. 220-26), the founding emperor of the Cao Wei dynasty, argued that the weakening of the centralized control over the recommendation process contributed to severe political chaos in the second century:

> During the reigns of Emperor Huan (r. 146-168) and Emperor Ling (r. 168-189), eunuchs abused the imperial power above, while commoners below held unruly

[122] *Houhanshu* 68, p. 2234.

discussions among themselves. Individuals pursuing fortune exhausted their wealth to fawn on those in power, whereas individuals pursuing fame served those with influence. Political ranks were established by private interests; reputations were decided by talk in the streets. Consequently, households and individuals all held varied judgments and viewpoints. Viewpoints were not standardized; the values of things were not settled. This fostered the use of personal preferences and gave rise to sectarianism.

桓、靈之際，閹寺專命于上，布衣橫議于下。干祿者殫貨以奉貴，要名者傾身以事勢。位成乎私門，名定乎橫巷，由是戶異議，人殊論，論無常檢，事無定價，長愛惡，興朋黨。[123]

Cao Pi's observation that "individuals pursuing fame served those with influence" reveals a critical problem in the recommendation system. Namely, much of these recommendations emphasized a candidate's moral character; but since morality is abstract and subjective, these evaluations were easily feigned and impossible for the government to verify. The lack of concrete and objective standards resulted in the recommenders' in-groups receiving recommendations over individuals outside of these networks, who were significantly disadvantaged, either due to not knowing these recommenders' personal preferences or not having the opportunity to mingle with them. Fixing the epidemic issues of favoritism and nepotism in the recruitment process was, as this essay suggests, for Cao Pi a matter of reinstituting centralized control over local society. He took this idea from his father Cao Cao, who before him had vocally criticized the old system of *chaju*.

[123] This paragraph comes from *Dianlun* 典論, a collection of literary critiques by Cao Pi (now lost). It is quoted by the eighth-century text *Yilin* 意林. See: *Yilin jiaoshi* 意林校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), p. 505.

The *chaju* system's emphasis on a candidate's morality over potential for service was a central theme in Cao Cao's critiques. I argue that his stance could be described philosophically as *radical meritocracy*, or in his own words, "using talent as the only metric for recommendation (*wei cai shi ju* 唯才是舉)." He expounded on his complete disdain for the predominant discourse that emphasized the importance of a candidate's morality in his edict issued in 210:

> For monarchs who established new regimes or inherited old ones since ancient time, who did not desire talented advisors and gentlemen to join him in governing all under heaven together! When he found a talented man, the latter almost always came from among the commoners. How is it even possible to find them by mere chance? It takes a dedicated effort of searching from the person sitting on top, but that was seldom the case.
>
> This land has not yet been stabilized. Therefore, it is urgent to seek out talented people…If chances of employment are only given to the "incorruptible" ones, then Duke Huan of Qi would never have dominated those warring states! Is there someone with talent out there who only gets to wear rough clothes and spend his day fishing by the river? Is there someone who is not considered for opportunities because he has once committed adultery with his brother's wife or accepted bribes? I hereby beg all of you to help me shed light on these talented individuals hidden in the dark, and use talent as the only metric for recommendation, so that I can have them appointed as my officers.
>
> 自古受命及中興之君，曷嘗不得賢人君子與之共治天下者乎！及其得賢也，曾不出閭巷，豈幸相遇哉？上之人不求之耳。

今天下尚未定，此特求賢之急時也。……若必廉士而後可用，則齊桓其何以霸世！今天下得無有被褐懷玉而釣於渭濱者乎？又得無有盜嫂受金而未遇無知者乎？二三子其佐我明揚仄陋，唯才是舉，吾得而用之。[124]

In this paragraph, Cao Cao connected the challenge of discovering talented men to the problem of social class, when he argued that the most talented advisors and politicians in the past came from among the commoners (出閭巷, which literally means 'out of streets and alleys'). Then, he emphasized the urgency of finding talented individuals during a time of disunity and warfare. Cao Cao went on to approvingly invoke several past figures, including the hegemonic leader Duke Huan of Qi (?-643 BCE), the fisherman-turned-prime-minister Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 (c. 11th century BCE), and the controversial commander-in-chief Chen Ping 陳平 (?-178 BCE) who was accused of adultery and corruption by his opponents.[125] All of these figures deviated from the moral ideals of an official for the elites who controlled the *chaju* system during Cao Cao's early years as an official aspirant.

Judging individuals based on their moral behavior, including vetoing candidates based on past moral transgressions, was a critical component of the old system, whose practitioners embraced the dominant Confucian morality of the Han empire. In another edict issued in 217 CE, Cao Cao further emphasized his radical meritocratic viewpoint by dismissing the core Confucian values of "humanity (仁)" and "filial piety (孝)" when it comes to selecting officials:

> Are there not extraordinary talents among the commoners nowadays? Some of them are daring and reckless, but also capable of fighting enemies face to face in a battle. Some of them only hold humble official posts, despite carrying extreme talents and

[124] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 32.
[125] *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 56, pp. 2051-2063.

> unusual endowments. They can be commanders and governors too. Some of them have a tainted reputation, or their actions are laughed at. Some of them are neither humane nor filial pious yet know how to manage a state or command an army. I ask you to recommend everyone you know who is like that, and do not leave out any one of such individuals.
>
> 今天下得無有至德之人放在民間？及果勇不顧，臨敵力戰，若文俗之吏，高才異質，或堪為將守；負污辱之名，見笑之行，或不仁不孝而有治國用兵之術。其各舉所知，勿有所遺。[126]

I argue that we must examine Cao Cao's disregard of the value of Confucian moralist discourse under the light of the waning political legitimacy of the Han empire since the second half of the second century CE. In fact, Cao Cao himself viewed his criticisms of mainstream Confucian moralist discourse and practice, which underpinned the *chaju* system, through the lens of wartime necessity. In an edict published in 203 CE, Cao Cao claimed that morality was no longer relevant precisely due to the wartime situation: "to govern in an age of peace, one must reward people with moral character and actions; to govern in an age of upheaval, one must rewards people with achievements and capacities 治平尚德行，有事賞功能."[127] As evidenced in these edicts by Cao Cao, to centralize his control over the state and the people, he made sure that the selection of new officials would be fully based on one's concrete achievements and competencies, instead of the ethereal moral qualities and behaviors valued by the elite class of his time.

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[126] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 49.
[127] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 24.

In fact, Cao Cao recognized the importance of morality in the broader context of statecraft. In his "Edict on Reestablishing Schools (*Xiuxue ling* 修學令)" issued in 203 CE, Cao Cao endorsed the reestablishing of a school system focused on cultivating moral values:

> It has been fifteen years since the fall of the Han and the beginning of wartime chaos. I am deeply saddened by the demise of the culture of humaneness, propriety, obedience to ritual, and modesty, which is nowhere to be found among the newer generations. I order all the commanderies and principalities to reestablish the learning. For every district with over five hundred families, an official of the school district will be appointed. He will select the talented individuals from the townships and educate them, so that the way of the ancient sage kings will not be neglected and all under heaven will benefit from it.
>
> 喪亂已來，十有五年，後生者不見仁義禮讓之風，吾甚傷之。其令郡國各修文學，縣滿五百戶置校官，選其鄉之俊造而教學之，庶幾先王之道不廢，而有以益於天下。[128]

"Humaneness, propriety, obedience to ritual, and modesty (仁義禮讓)" were all characteristic ethical terms that repeatedly appear in Confucian canons; and "the way of the ancient sage (先王之道)" was a concept that generations of Confucian intellectuals up to Cao's time frequently invoked. This edict made it clear that Cao Cao acknowledged the political stake of moral education, and that he did not intend to challenge the status of Confucianism as a state ideology established since Emperor Wu of Han times.

One should, therefore, interpret Cao Cao's seeming disdain for morality as a dissatisfaction towards the evaluation of morality practiced by the Confucian elites of his time, who judged the morality of one another without external checks and balances on their biases. In

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[128] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 24.

yet another edict published in the same period (205 CE), Cao Cao criticized the elites for "clinging to partisanships 阿黨比周" and "painting black as white, cheating heaven and disregarding their lord 以白為黑，欺天罔君"[129] in the official recruitment process. He appointed an official Mao Jie 毛玠 (?-216 CE) to take charge of official appointments. Mao Jie was famous for his ability to distinguish the real talents from the clout-chasers: "the ones he appointed were all gentlemen with clarity and principles. Those who enjoyed reputations that were not matched by their conducts eventually were not employed as officials under Jie's oversight. 其所舉用，皆清正之士，雖於時有盛名而行不由本者，終莫得進."[130]

Despite Cao Cao's outspoken critiques of the local elites' integrity in the selection process, in practice his reforms were still based upon a collaborative relationship with them. In fact, Cao Cao's true innovation lay not in eliminating the roles that local elites played in the official recruitment system, but in subordinating these elites to central government's oversight. This was done through the central government's hands-on appointments of officials to evaluate the candidates in a certain region, as opposed to leaving that to the local governments like in Han times.

For instance, Cao Cao appointed Han Song 韓嵩, a captured official previously working for Cao Cao's rival Liu Biao 劉表 (142-208) who had governed the Jingzhou region, to take charge of "ranking the prefecture's talented individuals and reviewing their good and bad deeds 條品州人優劣."[131] It was based on the rankings and reviews compiled by Han Song that Cao Cao appointed officials from this region. This was part of a larger initiative that Cao Cao

[129] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 27.
[130] *Sanguozhi* 12, p. 375.
[131] *Houhanshu* 74, p. 2424.

spearheaded at the beginning of third century. The key here was to create partnerships with the local elites while giving the center more control.

As we can see from this example of Han Song, who was appointed by Cao Cao in 208, this initiative had been ongoing prior to the formal establishment of the Cao Wei regime in 220, the same year that the nine ranks system was established. A testimony made by Lu Su 魯肅 (172-217), a high-rank official working for Cao Cao's competitor at the regime in Wu in southeast China, corroborates that Cao Cao was widely known to have recruited local elites to help with discovering talents for him at almost every place that he conquered:

> Now even if I, Su, was subordinated by Cao, Cao will send me back to my region to take charge of reviewing the titles and ranks of the official candidates there. That way, I will not sacrifice my opportunity to be employed by the government, to ride chariots designated for their officials, to have lower-rank officials and guards as assistants, to enjoy the company of my gentleman acquaintances, and to accumulate seniority to eventually lead a prefecture or a commandery.
>
> 今肅迎操，操當以肅還付鄉黨，品其名位，猶不失下曹從事，乘犢車，從吏卒，交遊士林，累官故不失州郡也。[132]

Therefore, Cao Cao's radical meritocracy combined two threads of reforms: on the one hand, shifting the selection criteria from morality to the more concrete standard of talent, which was primarily to prevent the elites from manipulating the recommendations; on the other hand, selecting and appointing people who would take charge of local recommendations to make the process under the central government's oversight.

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[132] *Sanguozhi* 54, p. 1270.

Cao Cao justified his radical meritocracy with reference to the wartime context, one that invoked both the urgency to attract talents with greater efficiency and the denial of the Confucian moralist discourse. It was in this way, I argue, that Cao Cao paved the way for the Cao Wei's subsequent establishment of the nine ranks system. The nine ranks system was a continuation of Cao Cao's two threads of reforms. Chen Qun adopted the nine-rank diagram from the Ban siblings to provide structure and clarity to the criteria of selection; and the appointment of "unbiased arbiters (*zhongzheng* 中正)" by the central government was instituted to strengthen centralized control over the selection process. At the same time, just like Cao Cao's reform, the nine ranks system in practice did not fully depart from the previous channels and dynamics of official selections. Instead, it adopted and incorporated most of them to form a complex structure that sought to balance the existing pathways and the regime's renewed craving for meritocracy.

To tease out how the nine ranks system embodied the radical meritocratic principles promoted by Cao Cao, we need to first understand its initial design and implementation in the Cao Wei dynasty during its first thirty years. The next three sections answer three questions based on historical depictions of how individuals interacted with the nine ranks system:

- What was a "rank (pin 品)"?
- How were ranks assigned to individuals?
- How did ranks translate into employment?

Unlike my above discussion of Cao Cao, which focuses on the ideology behind the nine ranks system, the next three sections evaluate its implementation. The question is, namely, how did the nine ranks system enable the Cao Wei dynasty to create a more meritocratic dynamic for official recruitment from 220 to 249?

2. The Meaning of "Rank (*Pin* 品)"

One common misunderstanding of the nine ranks system is to confuse it with the nine ranks by which *guan jie* 官阶 (the bureaucratic hierarchy) was structured. The *guan jie* system created a bureaucratic hierarchy within the government by structuring official titles according to nine ranks in a hierarchy. The appropriate pay, status, and privileges for holders of these titles were partially determined by the ranks.[133] Although the *guan jie* system is also technically a system with "nine ranks," it is important for us to differentiate it from the nine ranks system of question here. *Pin* 品 refers to the ranks of those individuals deemed employable by the Chinese state, whereas *guan pin* 官品 refers to the ranks of official titles and to some extent roles. Individuals serving under the nine ranks system aspired to achieve a higher *pin* rank, which would qualify them for official posts of a higher *guan pin* rank. A modern parallel to this is the difference between individuals' education levels (such as Ph.D.) versus jobs that require certain degrees (such as the professoriate, which typically requires a Ph.D. or its equivalent). Although the two things are never completely detached from each other, they have different purposes and histories: the nine ranks system institutionalized by the Cao Wei dynasty was an attempt to structuralize the merit-based process of recognizing and ranking potential individual candidates in preparation for future employment. Below, I look at some of the early usages of *pin* and argue that it acquired the meaning of the "rank" of an individual in Eastern Han times.

While *pin* means "rank" in the context of "九品 (*jiu pin*)," its meaning in early Chinese texts was something else. In the fifth-century-BCE political treatise "Discourse of the Zhou

[133] In fact, as early as the Tang dynasty, scholars like Du You had already mixed up the two and used the nine ranks to describe the bureaucratic ranks of Wei Dynasty: "The bureaucratic hierarchy in the Wei dynasty was adapted from the Han-dynasty system. In addition, the nine ranks were established 魏秩次多因漢制, 更置九品," from: *Tongdian* 19, p. 481.

Dynasty (*Zhouyu* 周語),"[134] which was later compiled into the *Guoyu* 國語, the term "*jiu pin* 九品" appeared in the discussion of the political institutions of Zhou dynasty but carried the meaning of "kind" instead of "rank":

> There were no more than nine kinds of female attendants for his inner court. There were no more than nine kinds of officials for his outer court.
>
> 內官不過九御，外官不過九品。[135]

This quotation prescribes a paralleled structure between the female and the male companions of a Zhou king. The character *pin* should be interpreted as "kind," "type," or "category": the Zhou kings had "*jiu pin* 九品," meaning that nine kinds of male officials took charge of varied areas of responsibilities, just like the kings' nine kinds of female attendants.[136] Leaders of these nine kinds of male officials were called "*jiu qing* 九卿." In *The Rituals of Zhou Dynasty* (*Zhouli* 周禮), the following passage contained the same paralleled structure but replaced "*jiu pin* 九品" with "*jiu qing* 九卿":

> In the inner court, there were nine chambers, where the nine female head attendants resided; in the outer court, there were nine chambers, where the nine high officials attended meetings with the king.
>
> 內有九室，九嬪居之；外有九室，九卿朝焉。[137]

In this original form, *pin* does not imply a hierarchy among individuals as in its later usage in the nine ranks system of the third century CE. Instead, according to *The Classics of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮

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[134] Wei Juxian 衛聚賢 argued that, even though the compilation of *Guoyu* could be as late as after 310 BCE, *Zhouyu* was created in 431 BCE by students with direct link to both the historical Confucius and the descendent of Zuo Qiuming 左丘明 in the kingdom of Qi 齊. See: Wei Juxian, "Guoyu de yanjiu 國語的研究," *Gushi yanjiu* 古史研究 (Shanghai: Xinyue Shudian, 1928), pp. 211-26, 244-55.
[135] *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), vol. 2, p. 52.
[136] See: Wei Zhao 韋昭 (201-273 CE)'s commentary, from: *Guoyu jijie* 2, p. 52.
[137] *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p. 3467.

記), these officials all belonged to the same rank, the second highest on Zhou dynasty's bureaucratic ladder.[138]

The non-hierarchal usage of *pin* was also seen outside the bureaucratic context. For instance, the Han-dynasty *Shangshu* 尚書 annotator Kong An'guo 孔安國 (?-c. 100 BCE) interpreted the five *pin* in the phrase "五品不遜 (the five *pin* were not widespread)" as "五常 (the five constants)," i.e., the five kinds of universally recognized virtues.[139] Written records from the White Tiger Hall Conference held in 79 CE contains a discussion in which *pin* was used as a synonym for *zhong* 種, meaning "type."[140] Philologist Xu Shen 許慎 (55-149 CE) derived from its visual pattern which includes three "口 (months)" to explain *pin* 品 as "the myriad commoners 眾庶也" in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字.[141] In all these three cases, this character refers to a collective of individual human beings or things without implying a hierarchy within them, similar to that in the "Discourse of the Zhou Dynasty."

The earliest example where *pin* gained a hierarchal connotation as "rank" appeared in the writing of Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE). In the introductory summary of his *Exemplary Figures* (*Fayan* 法言)'s eleventh chapter, Yang Xiong wrote:

> From the time of Zhongni [=Confucius] on down to the Han times, there were exemplary men whose virtues and conducts resembled those of Yan Yuan and Min

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[138] "The son of heaven employed three dukes, nine chamberlains, twenty-seven grand masters, and eighty-one paramount servicemen 天子，有三公、九卿、二十七大夫、八十一元士." from: *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, vol. 11, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben* 十三經註疏清嘉慶刊本 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), p. 2869. The prefix "paramount (*yuan* 元)" was added to specify their elevated status as servicemen to the sons of heaven, as feudal lords also employed their own *shi* in Zhou times. The translation of *shi* 士 as "serviceman" is based on: Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 421.
[139] *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), vol. 3, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben* 十三經註疏清嘉慶刊本 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), p. 274.
[140] "All water and fire are of one kind, whereas metal and wood are of multiple kinds. Why is that? This is because the south and the north are the two poles of yin and yang. [Water and fire] belong to the poles and therefore are of one kind. On the other hand, the east and the west are not poles. [Metal and wood] belong to these non-poles and therefore are not of one kind. 水、火獨一種，金、木多品何？以為南北陰陽之極也，得其極故一也；東西非其極也，故非一也." See: *Baihutong shuzheng* 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), vol. 4, p. 191.
[141] *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), vol. 2, p. 70.

> Ziqian, as well as exemplary men whose capabilities to assist their lords resembled those of Xiao He and Cao Shen, not to mention famous generals. In arraying these individuals according to the sequence from the most eminent down to the lowliest, I weigh and expound on their types and qualities. Thus, I have compiled this chapter titled "(Yan) Yuan and (Min Zi-)Qian."
>
> 仲尼之後，訖于漢道，德行顏、閔，股肱蕭、曹，爰及名將。尊卑之條，稱述品藻。譔《淵騫》。[142]

Yang Xiong's usage of *pin* preserved its original meaning, "type," specifically as it refers someone's personality trait. At the same time, he related the word to verbs such as "arraying (*tiao* 條)" and "weighing (*cheng* 稱)," that have to do with generating ranks, orders, and priorities. This had to do with his endeavor of mapping distinctive personality traits onto a conceptual and political hierarchy, as expressed in this *Fayan* chapter.

In early medieval times, authors widely adopted Yang Xiong's term *pinzao* (品藻, "types and qualities") as an action verb to refer to the popular practice of judging and evaluating individuals, a key component of the nine ranks system. *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱樸子) by Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) contained several occurrences of *pinzao*. In one of those passages, Ge Hong blamed for the demise of the ancient kingdom of Wu 吳 (circa. 12th century—473 BCE) its officials, calling them out for being "incapable of distinguishing the refined men from the coarse men, yet granted the political duty of ranking and judging official candidates 不辨人物之精粗，而委以品藻之政."[143] In *A New Account of the Tales of the World*

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[142] See: Yang Xiong, *Exemplary Figures / Fayan*, trans. Michael Nylan (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press: 2013), p. 183. With modifications.
[143] *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 抱樸子外篇校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), vol. 34, p. 149.

(*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語) by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403-444), *pinzao* served as the title of a chapter that contained eighty-eight anecdotal episodes on ranking and scouting talented young men.[144]

The practice of assigning ranks to individuals, which contextualized Yang Xiong's usage of *pin*, offered a semantic underpinning for the nine ranks system. Different ranks under this system served as credentials to individuals, indicating their suitability for employments at different levels of the government. Various mechanisms guided the granting of ranks to individuals, but ultimately, they served the same function of pooling candidates for different types of government jobs based on their varied degrees of capability. Because of this, it is easy to confuse the nine ranks as a system for organizing the bureaucratic hierarchy. But if we inspect what the latter looked like when the Cao Wei regime first instituted its nine ranks system, we find several instances in which the nine ranks did not reflect the hierarchy of certain official posts. This shows that the Cao Wei court had no intention to manipulate the official ranks, namely, the *guan pin* system, when they instituted the nine ranks system.

Let us take a look at the example of officials of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省) and their respective rank requirements, according to the bureaucratic ranks of the Cao Wei regime preserved in *Tongdian*.[145] The Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu puye* 尚書僕射) required third-rank candidates, but his direct manager—Director of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu ling* 尚書令)—and his subordinates—Directors of the Five Sections of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshucao shangshu* 尚書曹尚書)—also

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[144] For example, the chapter began from the tale of "People gathered to discuss the accomplishments and virtues of two individuals: Chen Zhongju from Runan and Li Yuanli from Yingchuan. They were unable to settle who was superior and who was inferior. 汝南陳仲舉，潁川李元禮二人，共論其功德，不能定先後." See: *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋 (Beijiing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), vol. 9, p. 272.

[145] Historians recently began to question whether this list reflected the historical situation of Cao Wei dynasty's bureaucratic hierarchy. See: Zhang Jinlong 張金龍, "'Wei Guanpin,' 'Jin Guanpin' Xianyi 魏官品、晉官品獻疑惑," *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 361 (2017): 25-43.

required third-rank candidates.[146] On the other hand, the Left Aides of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu zuocheng* 尚書左丞), another set of Vice Directors' direct subordinates[147], were set to require only candidates at the sixth rank. In this case, the rankings did not reflect the hierarchy between these three official posts—that was simply not its intended purpose.

Required Rank	**Official Title**—all within the Department of State Affairs (尚書省)[148]
3	Director (尚書令) Vice Directors (尚書左右僕射) Section Directors (尚書曹尚書)
4-5	*no corresponding titles*
6	Aides (尚書左右丞) Court Gentlemen (尚書郎中)
7	Section Servants (尚書曹典事)
8	Clerks (尚書令史)

If the intention for the Cao Wei regime to adopt the nine ranks system was to structure the rankings of their official posts, then the Vice Directors and Section Directors positions would have been listed as requiring fourth-rank or fifth-rank candidates to indicate the Director role's superiority over them. Despite the space between the third rank and the sixth rank, the Cao Wei did not use the nine ranks to lay out the hierarchy among these three bureaucratic roles.[149]

Instead, this arrangement indicates that in aligning the recruitment process with the newly adopted nine ranks system, the Cao Wei regime decided that the Director, Vice Directors, and Section Directors of the Department of State Affairs were equally important leadership roles; as a result, the selection criteria and recruitment processes for these three roles were

[146] *Tongdian* 36, p. 991.
[147] They also inspected the Director and the Vice Directors and reported on their misconducts.
[148] See: *Zhongguo lidai guanzhi dacidian* 中國歷代官制大辭典 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2015), pp. 944-45.
[149] Also see: Chen: *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 75-79.

equally selective, as reflected by their shared requirement of third-rank candidates.[150] The primary function of the nine ranks system was, therefore, not to array official ranks, but to array individuals to be appointed as officials.

This fundamental difference have been summarized by scholars with varying terms, including "personal rank (*ren pin* 人品)," [151] "rank as credential (*zi pin* 資品)," [152] "rank assigned by unbiased arbiters (*zhongzheng pin* 中正品)," [153] or "rank assigned at one's village (*xiang pin* 鄉品)," [154] all of which served to capture the essence of *pin* as the credential attached to an individual, as opposed to the bureaucratic rank of an individual's government post. These scholarly neologisms emphasize different aspects of this nuanced yet critical difference between rankings of individuals versus rankings of official posts: "personal rank" and "rank as credential" highlight the fact that the ranks under discussion had to do with the person and his qualifications; "rank assigned by an unbiased arbiter" and "rank assigned at one's village," on the other hand, point to one of the unique processes through which many individuals received their "rank" under the nine ranks system—through the "unbiased arbiters (*zhongzheng* 中正)" who were in charge of conferring ranks to individuals coming from different places.

Using terms like "rank assigned by an unbiased arbiter" and "rank assigned at one's hometown" in discussing the history of the nine ranks system, reflects the popular assumption that the operation of the nine ranks system hinged on the working of unbiased arbiters. The conflation of these two is further seen in the widely adopted term "*jiupin zhongzheng zhi* 九品中

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[150] In fact, the Vice Director role later evolved into the de facto top official of the Department of State Affairs during the Sui-Tang era, whereas the Director position remained not filled and eventually abandoned. This Cao Wei arrangement that put the two roles at the equal level in part explained why these two positions eventually became one.
[151] Yue Ke 岳珂, *Kuitanlu* 愧郯錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), vol. 10, p. 125.
[152] Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 94-101.
[153] Tang, "Jiupin zhongzheng zhidu shishi."
[154] Miyazaki, *Kyūhin kanjinhō no kenkyū*, pp. 105-10.

正制." In the remaining part of this chapter, I will combat this misunderstanding of the nine ranks system by arguing that while the "unbiased arbiters" category was a significant addition to the many old pathways to officialdom, it in fact was not a replacement of the latter, but rather co-existed with them under the nine ranks system framework. Therefore, it is beneficial to view the nine ranks system as a political institution of syncretic nature, one that combined the newly established system of unbiased arbiters alongside renovated older methods of selecting individuals, such as recommendations. My argument is that the official recruitment process in early medieval China accommodated diverse traditions for individuals to obtain *pin* ranks before landing employment opportunities in the government. Its novelty was in this synthesis of these multiple pipelines.

Next, I will first delineate the role of the unbiased arbiters within the nine ranks system, and then describe how the older traditions, such as recommendations and examinations, transformed under the nine ranks system during the Cao Wei dynasty.

3. The Design of Unbiased Arbiters

Zhongzheng 中正, or the "unbiased arbiter," was a newly introduced role in the recruitment procedure in the third century by the Cao Wei regime. The following discussion outlines their responsibilities in relation to the nine ranks system, with an emphasis on how they were designed to ensure the meritocratic process of official recruitment. I also discuss the criteria by which they ranked individuals for their suitability for office, and the challenging nature of their work.

An unbiased arbiter's primary responsibility was to visit a local scene, collect information about individuals from the region who had potential in working for the government, and assign ranks to these individuals by thoroughly evaluating their family

backgrounds, characters, and aspirations. A third-century scholar Fu Xuan summarized the role of an unbiased arbiter as follows:

> At every commandery, unbiased arbiters were appointed to lay out the superior and inferior talents in order, placing each one of them into the right place within a hierarchy and into a category appropriate to him.
>
> 郡置中正，平次人才之高下，各為輩目。[155]

The Tang-dynasty compendium *Tongdian* made the following explanation of the identity and responsibility of the unbiased arbiters:

> Following the change of mandate under the Wei dynasty, at each prefecture, commandery, and district, one "superior unbiased arbiter" and one "inferior unbiased arbiter" were installed. From the dukes and high officials to the gentlemen and clerical officials working at the various central government units, those with outstanding moral characters and abilities were appointed as unbiased arbiters, who served to distinguish people coming from their respective places of origin and to assign ranks to these individuals according to nine grades.
>
> 魏氏革命，州郡縣俱置大小中正，各以本處人任諸府公卿及台省郎吏有德充才盛者為之，區別所管人物，定為九等。[156]

The unbiased arbiters were by and large current employees at the central government, who took on this role as unpaid volunteers and fulfilled their duties by utilizing their knowledge of their hometowns.[157] The voluntary nature of this role served the purpose of upholding the

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[155] *Taiping yulan* 265, p. 1243a.
[156] *Tongdian* 14, p. 327.
[157] As Chen Changqi has pointed out, there are cases in which the unbiased arbiters were neither a current employee at the central government nor taking charge of visiting and interviewing candidates from their hometown. However, most of the examples Chen listed are from the Western of Eastern Jin dynasties, which could represent a later, less meritocratic version of the system. See: Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 60-61; Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 80-82.

integrity of their selection, as it separated their role as unbiased arbiters from their paid governmental roles, thus allowing them to evaluate the candidates more objectively. People usually took on the role of an unbiased arbiter through recommendations or summoning, and received oversight by the Ministry of Education (*situ fu* 司徒府) and, ultimately, the emperor who made final verdicts over the candidates' suitability for serving in governmental roles. Initially, these roles were only created at the commandery and district levels; since 249, unbiased arbiters had been added to the prefectural level as well. This means that for each candidate, his rank assigned by the prefecture-level unbiased arbiter would be certified by at least two more unbiased arbiters (at the respective commandery and prefecture seats) before being presented to the central government.[158]

Meritocracy and fairness were at the core of the design of the system of unbiased arbiters. To perform their duty, unbiased arbiters were required to be extremely knowledgeable about the region they took charge of[159] and evaluate the local candidates in person—this is called "visiting and recommending 訪舉."[160] When the system was first instituted, the evaluation process covered current officials[161], whose personal ranks were assigned or reassigned every three years.[162] These unbiased arbiters were initially appointed to fairly evaluate all individuals, regardless of their social status, before assigning ranks to them. This

[158] See: Tang, *Weijin Nanbeichao shi lun cong*, p. 97.
[159] "The unbiased arbiters were representatives of local places. They evaluated individuals and knew the origins of the wise and unwise people in towns 中正，鄉曲之表也。藻別人物，知其鄉中賢愚出處," from: *Tang yulin jiaozheng* 唐語林校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), vol. 2, p. 141.
[160] "Each prefecture appointed its own unbiased arbiters, who would follow the tradition by visiting and recommending [local candidates] 諸州各置中正，依舊訪舉," from: *Liangshu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), vol. 6, p. 147.
[161] "Low ranks were assigned to individuals despite their high official ranks; high ranks were assigned to individuals who accomplished little as officials 雖職之高，還附卑品；無績于官，而或高敘," from: *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 45, p. 1276.
[162] "Wei first established the nine ranks system. [Ranks] were determined every three years. 魏始建九品之制，三年一清定之," from: *Jinshu* 106, p. 2764.

point can be illustrated by the following example surrounding the Sima Yan 司馬炎 (236-290)'s experience with the Jin dynasty nine ranks system as a young man from privileged background:

> At first, the emperor [=Sima Yan] gained his rank based on his privileged family background. No peers from his hometown dared to join his cohort. Therefore, a search was conducted within the district. The unbiased arbiters from all twelve commanderies [under the district] agreed on recommending [Zheng] Mo. Emperor Wen [=Sima Zhao] wrote the following to [Zheng] Mao: "My petty son has joined the class of your wise son. I feel ashamed that he burdened a wise man by sneaking into his peers."
>
> 初，帝以貴公子當品，鄉里莫敢與為輩，求之州內，於是十二郡中正僉共舉默。文帝與袤書曰：「小兒得廁賢子之流，愧有竊賢之累。」[163]

Sima Yan later claimed himself the first emperor of Jin dynasty (266-420). When this episode took place, his father Sima Zhao was already a powerful political figure. Because of that, Yan in fact received his rank through the status of his father instead of personal merit. However, both Zhao and Yan felt the urge to show respect to the meritocratic principle embedded in the election process. Sima Yan's peer Zheng Mo embodied the meritocratic principle in this episode. He was selected based on a collective acknowledgement of his personal merits by the unbiased arbiters at the commandery level. Sima Zhao paid honor to this principle by writing to Zheng Mo's father, Zheng Mao, to express the sentiment that his own son, Yan, was in fact not as qualified as Mo. This same sentiment was expressed by Sima Yan himself, after he became the emperor of Jin dynasty:

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[163] *Jinshu* 44, p. 1251.

> When Emperor Wu [=Sima Yan] left his palace to perform sacrificial rituals at the altar at the southern suburbs, he ordered [Zheng] Mo to serve as his travel companion and told him: "My subject, do you know why I appointed you as the companion of this trip? In the past, the district recommended you to join as my peer. I constantly felt ashamed of myself for tainting the 'pure discussions.'"
>
> 及武帝出祀南郊，詔使默驂乘，因謂默曰：「卿知何以得驂乘乎？昔州里舉卿相輩，常愧有累清談。」[164]

This episode illustrates the extent to which merit was honored as the highest principle of official recruitment, even as the nine ranks system began to give way to corrupt practices. "Pure discussions (*qing tan* 清談)" refers to the popular activities of the non-office-holding intellectuals of this period, who gathered in groups to appraise talented individuals.[165] By acknowledging how he was guilty of cheating the system, Sima Yan made a gesture of honoring the meritocratic ideals as embodied by pure discussions, which also defined the highest standards for the work of unbiased arbiters: despite being government employees, they were expected to evaluate official candidates in the fairest way possible, as if they were completely detached from the politics.[166]

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[164] *Jinshu* 44, p. 1251.

[165] For example, when Liu Shao was recommended to office, his recommender highlighted and praised his mastery of conducting pure discussions. See: *Sanguozhi* 21, p. 619.

[166] I will get into more details about the heightened cultural awareness for "purity" among Chinese elites in the third century in the next chapter. On the dynamic between scholars who held office and those who did not in this period, see: Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement*. One thing to note is that this "pure discussions" were different from the general meaning of pureness (*qing* 清) in this period's bureaucratic system. The later represented the state after the nine ranks system became predominantly hereditary. This will be discussed in chapter 3. See: "Beginning in the era of N-S Division very soon after the fall of Han, a term meaning **pure** used as an at least quasi-official designation for officials of esteemed genealogical status, who advanced through sequences of positions also designated 'pure' into the top echelon of government; in contrast to the label 'impure' (*zhuo* 濁) for officials of less genealogical distinction and the less prestigious positions reserved for them. Such distinctions persisted into Sui times, when the label 'high expectations' (*qing wang* 清望) was used for the most elite group of 'pure' officials; and there were echoes of these distinctions in later times…" (Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 173).

Curbing local influences on the recruitment process constituted another primary motivation for the Cao Wei central government to institute the system of unbiased arbiters. As demonstrated by their emphasis on fairness, unbiased arbiters helped the central government in early third century China to develop an accurate understanding of the candidate pool of its government officials in various regions, a function previously monopolized by the local elites in the "discovery and recommendation" system in Han times. One controversy surrounding the responsibility of unbiased arbiters in 249 reflected this objective. This was the year that Sima Yi and his clan in effect usurped the power of the Cao Wei imperial house. Sima Yi announced to his officials that he planned to abolish the nine ranks system, while keeping the unbiased arbiters in place, "in hope of verifying the essence or the lack of essence [of each official candidate] 欲檢虛實."[167] This was met with the strong opposition from an official named Cao Xi 曹羲 (?-249):

> Because each prefecture contains a vast region, the provincial unbiased arbiters may not find talented people during their visits to the areas unfamiliar to them. In that case, they can only turn to the wise and capable folks of the commandery. For this reason, the investigations carried out by the prefectural unbiased arbiters will still be in fact determined by residents of the commandery.
>
> 一州闊遠，略不相識，訪不得知，會復轉訪本郡先達者耳，此為問州中正而實決於郡人。[168]

Cao Xi pointed out a likely consequence of Sima Yi's proposal: removing the nine ranks system would allow the local elites to corrupt the official recruitment process just as they did in Han times, which would render the unbiased arbiters ineffective and meaningless. The purpose of

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[167] *Taiping yulan* 265, p. 1243a.
[168] *Taiping yulan* 265, p. 1243a.

having unbiased arbiters in the first place, as Cao Xi argued, was to strengthen central government's control over the recruitment process. It was in his opposition that we see how the Cao Wei regime envisioned the unbiased arbiters to share the spirit of and complement the nine ranks system in ways that strengthened its centralized control over the elections of officials.

When unbiased arbiters decided on what rank to assign to an individual, personal merit and familial background constituted the two main criteria in this period. This is reflected in the following standard procedure for evaluation: after investigating a candidate's merits and remarkable activities, the unbiased arbiter would composed a "*zhuang* 狀" report, detailing his findings. Alongside the report, he also conducted a background check on his family, which was documented separately. At the beginning, personal merits were the dominant factor in the process, and one's rank was not determined by the prestige of his family. According to Wei Guan 衛瓘 (220-291), an official of Jin dynasty and a critic of the nine ranks system:

> The nine ranks system…when it was first established, the pure discussions from villages and boroughs were not restricted by a candidate's nobility rank nor family status. The system was capable of fairly complimenting or critiquing individuals, and motivating them to engage in self improvement. At that time, it still carried the positive elements of the ancient system of local appraisal.
>
> 九品之制……其始造也，鄉邑清議，不拘爵位，褒貶所加，足為勸勵，猶有鄉論餘風。[169]

[169] *Jinshu* 36, p. 1058.

However, as time went on, the relationship between personal merits and family status as selection criteria became increasingly strained. Considerations for one's family background became the dominant factor, as Wei Guan explained:

> Gradually, it deteriorated into a system that assigns ranks to individuals based on family prestige. This has impacted all under heaven who observe the system, making them value status over morality and the pursuit of the Way, and compete against each other over marginal things. The extent to which local customs were damaged by it shows the tremendous shortcomings of this system.
>
> 中間漸染，遂計資定品，使天下觀望，唯以居位為貴，人棄德而忽道業，爭多少於錐刀之末，傷損風俗，其弊不細。[170]

Wei Guan's statement served as his critique of the nine ranks system practiced during the Jin dynasty. Specific to the role and responsibility of the unbiased arbiters, this tension between evaluating personal merit and merely allocating ranks according to someone's family status was particularly visible in the following writing by Liu Yi 劉毅 (216-285), another official of Jin dynasty and a critic of the nine ranks system:

> Nowadays, one's rank (*pin* 品) fails to appropriately represent his degree of talent. It instead follows the nine grades. When we rely on one's rank [based on family prestige] to elect officials, we could not identify the strengths of these individual candidates; when we rely on the report of one's personal merits (*zhuang* 狀), we would find the ranking practice to be restrictive.

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[170] *Jinshu* 36, p. 1058.

今品不狀才能之所宜，而以九等為例。以品取人，或非才能之所長；以狀取人，則為本品之所限。[171]

Liu Yi already understood the *pin* (品) rank to represent one's family status in this statement. His criticism of the nine ranks was in fact a call to revive the meritocratic principle this system initially embodied in the Cao Wei era. Although the *zhuang* reports created by the unbiased arbiters at Liu Yi's time still offered valuable testimony on the personal merits of official candidates, they became much less important than one's family background.

As a logical consequence of that, the role that unbiased arbiters played in the recruitment process changed, too, from evaluating both "merit" and "family background" to solely verifying "family background." In the second half of the third century, the inquiry of a candidate's family background was institutionalized as a formal duty of the unbiased arbiters: "when a candidate was elected by the Division of Officials, the latter would initiate a request to the unbiased arbiters, sending them to inquire about their affiliation with the government as well as employment histories of the candidate's father and grandfather 若吏部選用，猶下中正，問人事所在、父祖位狀."[172] This transformation was part of the larger process for the entire recruitment system to deviate from its meritocratic root, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Cao Cao once criticized the idea of using morality as the singular evaluation criterion for recruiting officials; but he also agreed that morality can be a useful standard to have during peaceful times. For unbiased arbiters in third century, they actually paid most attention to a person's moral character and behavior when investigating personal merit. According to *Tongdian*, morality served to guide the judgment of an individual's rank:

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[171] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1276.
[172] *Taiping yulan* 265, p. 1242b.

> If a candidate spoke or behaved in a way that is refined and extraordinary, he would be promoted, either from the fifth rank to the fourth, or from the sixth to the fifth. If a candidate was lacking in his adherence to the Way and to propriety, he would be demoted, either from the fifth to the sixth, or from the sixth to the seventh. Since the Division of Officials were unable to inspect and verify all talented gentlemen and commoners under heaven, unbiased arbiters were appointed to ascertain and assign rankings to them, based on which official posts were given to the right candidates. This served to avoid unwanted outcomes and shortcomings in the recruitment system.
>
> 其有言行修著，則升進之，或以五升四，以六升五。儻或道義虧缺，則降下之，或自五退六，自六退七矣。是以吏部不能審定覈天下人才士庶，故委中正銓第等級，憑之授受。謂免乖戾及法弊也。[173]

From this one can see how unbiased arbiters were asked to ground their ranking activities in moral behavior. Therefore, the individual ranks of the nine ranks system were purposefully designed to reward moral behavior and punish immoral ones in local society.

One may ask here: if morality was the guiding principle, then what was *really* new about this system of unbiased arbiters, different from the old Han-dynasty recommendation made by the local elites? Aside from the fact that these unbiased arbiters were appointed by the central government, there was also a significant development of what one may call the "techniques of behavior analysis" that undergirded the practice of assigning ranks.

Renwuzhi 人物志, or *The Treatise on Human Characters*, represents the most systemic and sophisticated form of knowledge in this domain in third-century China. Liu Shao 劉劭 (170s-

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[173] *Tongdian* 14, p. 328.

240s), an official at the Cao Wei regime, composed the text between 220 and 236. He specialized in matters of official recruitment and personnel management, as evidenced by the title of another text by him, *On Examining and Evaluating Officials at the Capital* (*Duguang kaoke* 都官考課).[174] Though we know very little about whether or how the book *Renwuzhi* was adopted by unbiased arbiters, many of the discourses presented in it can be viewed as reflections of the expectations and best practices for evaluating official candidates at his time, since its publication coincided with the establishment of the nine ranks system and the system of unbiased arbiters by the Cao Wei government.[175] In relation to the practice of assigning ranks to official candidates, the text highlights three important aspects of the work undertaken by the unbiased arbiters:

Firstly, *Renwuzhi* provides invaluable information on a key area of responsibility of the unbiased arbiters: *fang* 訪, namely, visiting candidates from one's jurisdiction to decide the appropriate ranks for them. Throughout the text, Liu Shao offered numerous epistemological frameworks for investigating an individual candidate's characters, merits, and potentials in order to create an unbiased judgement. One prime example is the chapter "The Seven Mistakes (*qi miu* 七謬)," which starts by acknowledging the difficulty in fairly evaluating people, and then provides a list of seven common pitfalls for practitioners:

> First: the mistake of developing bias due to hearsay about an individual's reputation.
>
> Second: the confusion of introducing personal preferences into the interaction with an individual.
>
> Third: the error of mistaking the ambition of an individual as his actual talent.

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[174] The text is now lost. The system of examination and evaluation (*kaoke* 考課) will be discussed in the last section of this chapter and the first section of Chapter 3.
[175] Wang Xiaoyi 王曉毅, *Zhirenzhezhi: Renwuzhi jiedu* 知人者智：人物志解讀 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), pp. 19.

Fourth, the doubt arising from the early or late development of an individual's talent.

Fifth, the suspicion of overrating individuals who are like oneself.

Sixth, the trap of being unable to fairly evaluate a person's character based on his advantaged or disadvantaged situation.

Seventh, the falsehood led by not being able to distinguish the truly extraordinary talents from the fake.

一曰察譽有偏頗之繆，

二曰接物有愛惡之惑，

三曰度心有大小之誤，

四曰品質有早晚之疑，

五曰變類有同體之嫌，

六曰論材有申壓之詭，

七曰觀奇有二尤之失。[176]

Liu Shao certainly cared deeply about the fairness of the *fang* process. He included in the rest of this chapter specific examples of each one of these mistakes, tackling problems that hindered the operation of *fang* in his time: class divide, partisanship, the obsession with precocity, as well as the faking of someone's celebrity status. By combining prototypes of common mistakes with granular examples, *Renwuzhi* offered both a theoretical framework and a practical guidance for the unbiased arbiters to perform their primary duty of visiting and evaluating talented individuals on the local scene.

Secondly, decades after Cao Cao's radical rejection of morality as the primary criterion, *Renwuzhi* reflects a new intellectual trend that sought to balance and combine administrative (or

[176] *Renwuzhi* 人物志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol. 10, pp. 154-55.

military) talent and Confucian morality as the standards of selection. This is seen in the opening chapter of the text, where Liu Shao provided a typology of three kinds of talents to honor the ideal that the superior candidates to serve in government should be both talented and morally good:

> There are individuals with talent in one specific category. They achieved reputation solely based on their specific talents. There are individuals with well-rounded talent. They should aim at developing morality. There are individuals with both talent and morality. Their fame is far more superior.
>
> 故偏至之材，以材自名；兼材之人，以德為目；兼德之人，更為美號。[177]

By prioritizing morality in his typology of talented individuals, Liu Shao reintroduced the moralistic view into the theory of official selection, thus representing a shift away from Cao Cao's radical emphasis on talent without morality.

Thirdly, on a linguistic level, *Renwuzhi* provides a complex set of concepts and vocabularies that were built into the selection process, especially in the close investigation of individual candidates. In its opening chapter "Nine Traces (*jiu zheng* 九徵)," Liu Shao categorically laid out nine aspects of an individual for an observer to pay close attention to: vitality (*shen* 神), essence (*jing* 精), muscle (*jin* 筋), skeleton (*gu* 骨), spirit (*qi* 氣), complexion (*se* 色), manner (*yi* 儀), expression (*rong* 容), and speech (*yan* 言). These nine traces offered an example of the extremely nuanced techniques developed in early third century by intellectuals and politicians who studied ways to identify, describe, and appraise a person's unique characters. Practically, this vocabulary also potentially served as a glossary for the composition of official documents such as "*zhuang* 狀," the evaluation reports that unbiased arbiters

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[177] *Renwuzhi* 1, p. 29.

submitted for every official candidate, as well as literary works focused on "registering humans (*zhi ren* 志人)."[178]

The contents, intellectual orientation, and linguistic style of *Renwuzhi* reveals to us the complexity of an unbiased arbiter's duty and the high expectations for him in third century. Their job involved interacting with different types of people: official candidates, local elites, and the people who oversaw the process for the central government; and they always needed to juggle multiple tasks: adapting to the ever-evolving criteria for talent, producing written documents in support of the selection process, and most likely staying on top of their own official duties, since almost all of them took on this role alongside a full-time job serving in the government. The demanding nature of the job of an unbiased arbiter, unsurprisingly, pushed them to turn to the local elites for help, thus undermining the initial purpose of this system, which sought to enable central government to tighten its control and to curb the influence of local elites over the official recruitment process.

Despite the challenging nature of their work, the Cao Wei court instituted unbiased arbiters to ensure that the nine ranks system could overcome the shortcomings of the old Han way of evaluating and recruiting government officials. The meritocratic principles are embodied not only in the creation of this role but also in their relation to the larger organizational structure and process of official recruitment in which they were situated. In the next section, I will elaborate on the limits of their power by looking into how *pin* ranks turned into actual job offers for the candidates.

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[178] Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi de bianqian* 中國小說的歷史的變遷 (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1956), pp. 7-12; Li Yufen 李玉芬, *Liuchao zhiren xiaoshuo yanjiu* 六朝志人小說研究 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1998).

4. The Limits of Unbiased Arbiters' Power

Under the nine ranks system, every official or official candidate obtained a ranking that represented his own level of employability for a government job. This section explains what happened after that, namely, the mechanism for a person's rank to translate into actual employment. My discussion focuses on three important aspects of this mechanism that demonstrate efforts to both promote meritocracy and to centralize the process of official selection at the Cao Wei court. First, unbiased arbiters were centrally administrated by the Ministry of Education (*situ fu* 司徒府). Second, the power of the Ministry of Education over official selection was limited by other government organs, such as the Division of Officials (*libu* 吏部) within the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省) and the Department of Palace Secretaries (*zhongshu fu* 中書省). Third, individuals from this period could obtain a *pin* rank and become eligible for employment in government in many ways, not limited to being selected by the unbiased arbiters (which will be addressed in the next section). Put together, I argue that the Cao Wei government rigorously defined and carefully limited the power of the unbiased arbiters, seeking to prevent them from abusing power and corrupting the meritocratic process.

In simple terms, an individual's personal rank—his standing within the nine ranks system—determined two things in this period: his "initial appointment to office (*qijia guan* 起家官)" and the highest level of jobs he would be eligible for in the future. Japanese historian Miyazaki first raised the point that an officer's initial appointment was usually four ranks down from his personal rank. For instance, an official named Li Han 李含 was once certified as a

person of the fifth rank, and was later appointed a minor official of the ninth rank.[179] However, the examples that Miyazaki used to support his thesis come exclusively from the Jin dynasty.[180] As Chen Changqi pointed out, during the Cao Wei dynasty an official candidate usually started from the level that is three (not four) ranks lower from his personal rank.[181] Some examples include Cao Shuang 曹爽 (?-249), Zhong Yu 鐘毓 (?-263), and Hua Biao 華表 (the son of Hua Xin), all of whom entered the officialdom as a fifth-rank official Cavalier Attendant (*sanqi shilang* 散騎侍郎)[182], an idle position mostly reserved for the sons of high-rank officials who directly served the emperor as his companions, after obtaining the (highest possible) second rank.[183] Chen also argued that the difference between one's personal rank and initial appointment was not a fixed number throughout early medieval times. Other historians like Hu Baoguo 胡保國 and Yan Buke argued that the gap between the two ranks was not universal even during one given dynasty, as holders of certain official posts—such as Cavalier Attendant—tended to receive faster promotions, which in turn made these positions demanding higher personal ranks than other jobs of the same rank.[184] Despite these different theories, historians seem to agree that the personal rank of an official candidate held both short-term and long-term effects on his career. It may be most helpful to understand one's personal rank as a qualification of his "future potential" for promotion, which in turn defines where his entry position was on the ladder of the bureaucratic system.

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[179] "含遂被貶，退割為五品。歸長安，歲餘，光祿差含為壽城邸閣督 Han was subsequently demoted, with his rank reassigned to the fifth. He returned to Chang'an. Several years later, the Office of the Chamberlain for Attendants appointed him as the manager of the barn at Shoucheng.," from: *Jinshu* 60, p. 1643.
[180] Miyazaki, pp. 105-111.
[181] Chen Changqi 陳長琦, "Wei Jin Nanchao de zipin yu guanpin 魏晉南朝的資品與官品," *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 (1990), no. 6, pp. 39-50.
[182] *Sanguozhi* 9, p. 282; *Sanguozhi* 13, p. 399, 406.
[183] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, pp. 395-96.
[184] Hu, "Wei Jin shidai de jiupin Zhongzheng zhi," pp. 83-93; Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, pp. 167-75.

Because of the way the nine ranks system defines a person's initial appointment, it is understandable we have no mention of individuals with a personal rank lower than the sixth. For someone who started from the bottom of the bureaucratic system—the ninth rank—he needed to be assigned the sixth rank to take up the position. Another rank that was rarely assigned to individuals was the top rank, as it was reserved for sages, according to Ban Gu's chart. As a result, the nine ranks system only had five ranks that could be assigned to individuals: from the second to the sixth.[185]

The nine ranks system led to important changes in the organizational structure of early medieval Chinese government. It introduced new roles, areas of responsibilities, and hierarchies, and led to a reshuffling of power between the central and the local, and among different government functions. The implementation of the system of unbiased arbiters, in particular, likely necessitated new forms of coordination among the various governmental organs to ensure the smooth operation of the nine ranks system. Due to the scarcity of materials directly speaking to the situation of the Cao Wei government, my discussion below utilizes sources on the Jin-dynasty government in the second half of the third century, which represents a more developed version of the bureaucratic procedures in the nine ranks system. Nevertheless, the goal here is to investigate how the meritocratic principles of the Cao Wei nine ranks system translated into bureaucratic systems and procedures that upheld fairness in the process of official recruitment, while advancing the agenda for the central government to further assert its power through recruitment activities.

The Jin dynasty's implementation of the nine ranks system was designed to ensure the fairness of selection and to reduce nepotism that was endemic in the Han *chaju* system. This is

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[185] Zhang, *Jiupin zhongzhengzhi yanjiu*, pp. 508-09.

reflected by the arduous process of verification and documentation carried out by multiple actors, including officials of various ranks inside the Ministry of Education and the unbiased arbiters working at various administrative levels, as I explain below.

The Ministry of Education was the central government organ that managed the operation of the nine ranks systems, including all human actors involved in this new form of official recruitment. The emergence of this institution took place in the Han dynasty, which was inspired by ancient records of an official title named "*situ* 司徒," who supported the ancient sage kings in "leading his subjects and promoting education throughout the state 帥其屬而掌邦教."[186] The "Kingly Institutions" chapter of the *Classic of Ritual* more explicitly situated *situ* in the official selection process, taking charge of it at various administrative levels from the local "village (*xiang* 鄉)" to the central "academy (*xue* 學)."[187] The usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE—23 CE) first introduced the title *situ* into the Han bureaucracy as a top official in 1 BCE. The prime minister of Wang Mang's government was renamed "Grand Minister of Education (*da situ* 大司徒)," and this title was carried into early medieval time. During the first and second centuries CE, the Ministry of Education was one of the three highest offices in the Eastern Han central government. Its primary area of responsibility was loosely defined as "overseeing domestic affairs 掌民事."[188] Alongside the rollout of the nine ranks system in the third century, the Ministry of Education found a more specialized meaning of this role.

The nine ranks system was a key area of responsibility for the head of the Ministry of Education in Jin dynasty. On the second year of his rule, Emperor Wu of Jin (r. 266-290) introduced into the Ministry of Education a role named Administrator of the Left (左長史),

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[186] *Zhouli zhengyi*, p. 641.
[187] This design was largely a fictitious one that did not correspond to institutional reality during the Zhou dynasty.
[188] *Songshu* 39, p. 1219.

whose primary responsibility was defined as "taking charge of differentiating [official candidates according to] the nine ranks 掌差次九品."[189] The *Jinshu* recorded that Wei Shu 魏舒 (209-290), the head of the Ministry of Education, had "managed a wide range of areas, including leading the nine ranks system, and verifying the reviews of candidates submitted from the sixteen prefectures. 所統殷廣，兼執九品，銓十六州論議."[190] A court official named Li Chong 李重 (253-300) argued in 290 that: "the Ministry of Education is overseeing the selection of officials, and in fact promotes education throughout the state. It must apply a rigorous and accurate standard to review all official candidates so as to standardize the customs everywhere. 司徒總御人倫，實掌邦教，當務峻準評，以一風流."[191] This shows that by the end of the third century, the Ministry of Education had become closely tied to the official selection function of the central government.

In this period, the Ministry of Education hosted a number of bureaucratic staff involved in the nine ranks system. They were organized into five levels: (1) one Head of the Ministry 司徒公; (2) one Secretary of the Ministry 司徒舍人; (3) two Administrators 左右長史; (4) several Associates to the West Office of the Administrator 左西曹掾; and (5) several Assistants to the West Office of the Administrator 左西曹屬.[192] The Upper Administrator (司徒左長史) led the nine ranks process under the direct supervision of the Secretary. He was further assisted by the other Administrator and officers at the Associate and the Assistant levels. In the preface of a poem written for his friend, Pan Ni 潘尼 (250-311) mentioned that Fu Xian 傅咸 (239-294) was

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[189] "On the third year of the Taishi era…The Ministry of Education added the Administrator of the Left to its roster, who took charge of differentiating [official candidates according to] the nine ranks 太始三年…司徒加置左長史，掌差次九品," from: *Tongdian* 20, p. 522.
[190] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1278. This was between 282 and 286, when the Jin Dynasty organized its many regions into sixteen prefectures.
[191] *Jinshu* 46, p. 1311.
[192] "When there was no Head appointed at the Ministry of Eduction, and there was only the Secretary. The Ministry existed as a standing office, whose roster differed from others. There were two Administrators, each supported by two Associates and two Assistants 司徒若無公, 唯省舍人, 其府常置. 其職僚異於餘府, 有左右長史, 左右曹掾屬各一人," from: *Songshu* 39, p. 1223. See: Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 49-50; Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 57-60.

about to take on the position as the Upper Administrator at the Ministry of Education and his primary responsibility would be "certifying the nine ranks 會定九品."[193] Another official named Zhou Fu 周馥 first entered the Ministry of Education at the Assistant level. He was praised for his role in "taking charge of settling the nine ranks, and being masterful and accurate in verifying and summarizing [the ranks of candidates] 主定九品，檢括精詳."[194] Fu was later promoted to become the Upper Administrator, before moving to serve in the Division of Officials (*libu* 吏部) at the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省) after accumulating years of experience in overseeing the official selection process.

The Ministry of Education appointed and managed the unbiased arbiters. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the unbiased arbiters were expected to draw on local networks to solicit recommendations and to assign ranks to individuals. However, the information collected by them at the local scene was not directly submitted to the Ministry of Education at the central government. Instead, it first went through the local head unbiased arbiter, a position appointed to every commandery 郡 and at every prefecture 州.[195] The Chinese historian Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814) summarized the workflow as:

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[193] "Da Fu Xian shi xu 答傅咸詩序," from: *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), vol. 31, pp. 549-50.
[194] *Jinshu* 61, p. 1663.
[195] Unbiased arbiters were being appointed at both prefecture 州 and commandry 郡 levels during the Cao Wei dynasty. See: "It has been years since unbiased arbiters at prefectures and commanderies began evaluating official candidates 自州郡中正品度官才之來, 有年載矣," from: *Sanguozhi* 9, p. 295; "Unbiased arbiters were appointed at both the prefecture level and the commandery level, in order to verify the candidates they selected 州郡皆置中正, 以定其選," from: *Tongdian* 14, p. 326; "The Jin dynasty perpetuated the nine ranks system of the Wei family…in each prefecture there were head unbiased arbiters, in each commandery there were subordinate unbiased arbiters 晉依魏氏九品之制…外官州有大中正, 郡國有小中正" from: *Tongdian* 14, p. 328; "When the nine ranks system was first established, unbiased arbiters were appointed at every commandery…at the prefecture level, their commanders were appointed at the prefectural level to summarize their opinions 始立九品之制, 郡置中正…州置都而總其議," from: *Taiping yulan* 265, p. 1243a. However, there are scholarly disagreement on whether these two levels were established from the very beginning. Both Miyazaki and Tang believed that at the beginning there were only unbiased arbiters at the commandry level. According to their reading of a *Tongdian* paragraph, it was Sima Yi who introduced unbiased arbiters at the prefecture level in 249. See: "Emperor Xuan of Jin added head unbiased arbiters. As a result, there were head and subordinate unbiased arbiters 晉宣帝加置大中正, 故有大小中正," from: *Tongdian* 32, p. 891. However, other historians have provided alternative interpretations of this line, arguing either that he added a third level in addition to the two existing levels, or that "head unbiased arbiters 大中正" was simply a new title invented for the preexisting unbiased arbiters at the prefecture level. On the debates regarding this topic, see: Li, "20 shiji yilai jiupin zhongzheng zhi yanjiu zongshu," p. 17.

> A subordinate unbiased arbiter assigned ranks to individuals and submitted them to the head unbiased arbiter. The head verified these ranks and submitted them to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education conducted another round of verification, then recommended these individuals to the Department of State Affairs, which selected of them and offered employment.
>
> 由小中正品第人品，以上大中正。大中正核實，以上司徒。司徒再核，然後送尚書省選用。[196]

This system ensured that any individual's name had to pass through one round of screening by the unbiased arbiters themselves before arriving at the desk of the Ministry of Education at the central government. There, before recommending a person for employment, the Ministry of Education conducted a second round of verification, thoroughly examining his ranking based on his portfolio, which served as proof of his candidacy. Such portfolios typically consisted of a short biography, a genealogical chart with his family members' employment histories, and an evaluation report by the unbiased arbiter detailing his character, noteworthy deeds, and testimonies from others.[197] Therefore, the Ministry of Education moderated the process of official appointment under the nine ranks system by verifying and establishing a person's candidacy in preparation of the appointment process. In addition, it archived materials submitted by them for later use, because in some cases officials would appeal to the Ministry of Education to have their rankings revisited at a later point of their official careers.

The Ministry of Education collaborated with the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省), in particular its Division of Officials (*libu* 吏部), to complete the cycle of recruitment. The Department of Recruitment matched individual candidates with the available

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[196] Zhao Yi 趙翼, *Nian er shi zhaji jiaozheng* 廿二史劄記校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), vol. 8, p. 165.
[197] See: Tang, "Jiupin zhongzheng zhidu shishi," pp. 106-08.

posts in the government, and the materials submitted by the unbiased arbiters via the Ministry of Education were critical references for their work.[198] In *Weishu*, an official named Cui Liang 崔亮 (459-521) recalled the procedure as follows: "in the past there were unbiased arbiters, who ranked individuals based on their levels of talent and submitted to the Department of State Affairs. The Department of State Affairs then, based on the proofs, granted individuals the appropriate official posts. 昔有中正，品其才第，上之尚書，尚書據狀，量人授職."[199] This shows the important role played by the Division of Officials in the nine ranks system.

The entire process of certifying a candidate's rank (by the Ministry of Education) and matching him with appropriate employment (by the Division of Officials) was overseen by the Department of Palace Secretaries (*zhongshu fu* 中書省), which since the third century became increasingly powerful due to the intimate assistance it provided to the emperor.[200] One can get a glimpse of its role in the nine ranks system from the following discussion that took place at the court of the Later Zhao dynasty (319-351), a regime in north China, in the fourth century:

> In terms of the selection of officials undertaken by the Division of Officials, it should model after the nine ranks system of selection of the Jin dynasty as a constant principle. Once the selection is complete, the results should pass through the Department of Palace Secretaries and the Chancellery to become subject to public objections from the three top government departments before going into effect. 吏部選舉，可依晉氏九班選制，永為揆法。選畢，經中書、門下宣示三省，然後行之。[201]

[198] Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 60-63.
[199] *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 66, p. 1480.
[200] Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 124-26, 130.
[201] *Jinshu* 106, p. 2764.

This "public announcement" process prior to the actual appointment was one of the Department of Palace Secretaries' duties. Moreover, when conflicts arose between the parties involved in the process, the Department of Palace Secretaries served as the mediator. The following example demonstrated the mediation played out in a case of conflict over an individual's candidacy at the Jin court in 290:

> At that time, Liu Shen, an unbiased arbiter from the Kingdom of Yan, recommended Huo Yuan, from an impoverished background, as a candidate. The Ministry of Education rejected his recommendation. Shen then appealed to the Department of Palace Secretaries and explained the situation; the Department of Palace Secretaries ordered the Ministry of Education to probe into this matter.
>
> Xun Zu, Upper Administrator at the Ministry of Education argued: "…[Huo Yuan] was not eligible for the subject of impoverished candidates."
>
> [Li] Chong addressed the court: "…We should follow the recommendation laid out in the proposal and assigned the second rank [to Huo Yuan]" The emperor agreed to it.
>
> 時燕國中正劉沈舉霍原為寒素，司徒府不從。沈又抗詣中書奏原，而中書復下司徒參論。
>
> 司徒左長史荀組以為：「……不應寒素之目。」
>
> 重奏曰：「……如詔書所求之旨，應為二品。」詔從之[202]

The Department of Palace Secretaries offered a channel for unbiased arbiters who worked under the Ministry of Education to make appeals over decisions made by the latter regarding someone's rank and candidacy. In the case of Liu Shen, his appeal on behalf of Huo Yuan was successful in spite of the persistent pushbacks from the Ministry of Education; and this success

[202] *Jinshu* 46, p. 1312.

was in part due to the assistance from Li Chong, who was affiliated with the Division of Officials.

The Department of State Affairs and the Department of Palace Secretaries held the power to overturn the decisions made by the Ministry of Education, which sometimes went against the unbiased arbiter's initial verdicts. In this sense, the Ministry of Education, while taking charge of the entry point of the nine ranks system of official recruitment, was prevented from holding absolute control over the entire recruitment process. The bureaucratic procedure of official selection under the nine ranks system built into itself multiple checks and balances that prevented any party from single-handedly manipulating a candidate's career path, which reinforced its underlying meritocratic principle and its goal of centralizing power.

5. Transforming the Recommendation System

This section establishes that new and old ways of electing officials co-existed under the nine ranks system by looking at the Cao Wei government's promotion of examination methods within the recommendation system. I argue that the reform undertaken by the Cao Wei emperors over the recommendation system was in fact consistent with the nine ranks system in its ideology, which was to foster meritocracy in the official selection process.[203]

While the unbiased arbiters served as the common way for an individual to obtain his personal rank in this period, the old recommendation system continued to function and those who were discovered through this may also have received their personal ranks. For instance:

[203] My argument here is different from the Hu Shuyun's thesis on the relationship between the nine ranks system and the recommendation system during the Cao Wei period. Hu argued that Cao Pi and Cao Rui's reforms over the recommendations served to expedite the recruitment of talented individuals and to remedy the slow process of implementing the nine ranks system. See: Hu, *Jiupin guanrenfa kaolun*, pp. 170-72.

> Zhao Junping from the Ji commandery was thirty-seven years old. He was not employed by the government after being recommended four times. In the second year of the Yuankang era [292 CE] …he was selected through the annual recommendation procedure …[and] was granted the third rank.
>
> 汲郡趙君平，年三十七，四薦之宰府不就。元康二年……以光歲貢……宜進品三。[204]

The "annual recommendation procedure" mentioned in Zhao Junping's story led to the granting of the third rank to him. Prior to this, Zhao either had never been assigned a rank by the unbiased arbiters or had been assigned one lower than the third. Therefore, he obtained his third rank through the recommended system and finally became employable by the government.

Zhao Junping's case was not unique in third-century China. During this time, individuals continued to access opportunities to become officials through pre-existing processes including inheritance, summoning, and recommendation.[205] Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1245-1340) made the following comment on the official selection system from third to sixth centuries:

> Since Wei and Jin times, although the nine ranks system and the system of unbiased arbiters were established, the pathways to officialdom remained the same as the Western and Eastern Han times. Officials were summoned by the government, or advanced based on years of experience working as local civil servants or assistants, or employed by inheriting the posts from powerful clans with generations of officials. There were no more than these three or four pathways.

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[204] *Beitang shuchao* 33, in *Tangdai sida leishu* 1, p. 111.
[205] For a more detailed examination of these pathways during the Wei-Jin period, see: Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 108-89.

按魏晉以來，雖立九品中正之法，然仕進之門則與兩漢一而已，或公府辟召，或有曹掾積累而升，或由世胄承襲而用，大率不外此三四塗轍。[206]

A similar statement is found in Du You 杜佑 (735-812)'s *Tongdian*:

> The Wei and Jin dynasties established the nine ranks system and instituted the unbiased arbiters...The regional inspectors and governors of every prefecture or commandery, as well as the chamberlains, governors, and grand masters at the inner court, were all appointed by the Division of Officials (following the nine ranks procedure). On the other hand, summoning and recommendations from townships and villages continued to take place in old ways, which were not replaced.
>
> 魏晉設九品，置中正……州郡之刺史、太守，內官之卿、尹、大夫，咸吏部所署。而辟召及鄉里之舉，舊式不替。[207]

Both Ma and Du noticed the continuation of the old systems of selecting officials after the establishment of the nine ranks system. But how did these old ways coexist with the newly instituted nine ranks system and the system of unbiased arbiters? The transformation of the recommendation system under the Cao Wei rule, which served to reinforce the value of the nine ranks system as a new framework for official selection, provides the answer to this question.

The central government of Cao Wei continued to host both the "Annual Recommendation" cycles and the ad-hoc "Recommendations by Special Orders" like their Han predecessor. From the very beginning of the Wei era, there was a renewed interest in promoting social mobility through the recommendation system. This was expressed by a series of imperial edicts that Cao Pi issued from 221 to 223:

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[206] *Wenxian tongkao* 28, p. 815.
[207] *Tongdian* 18, p. 454.

> [He) first mandated that commanderies and principalities with over one hundred thousand population must recommend one "filial pious and incorruptible" candidate annually. Candidates who are extraordinarily talented did not need to be restricted by [the population thresholds of] their places of origin.
>
> 初令郡國口滿十萬者，歲察孝廉一人；其有秀異，無拘戶口。[208]

This edict was published on the second month of the second year of the Huangchu era (221), only four months after Cao Pi claimed the throne, announcing the replacement of the Han dynasty by his Wei dynasty—this shows the urgency to re-establish the recommendation system. Cao Pi first announced the "Annual Recommendation" to be restored. Compared to the system in place since the second century, he also lowered the threshold for a commandery or principality to participate in the annual cycle (from two hundred thousand population to one hundred thousand) and created a special channel for extremely talented individuals, both of which served to boost the number of recommended official candidates. The following year, Cao Pi removed the age limit that was added to the recommendation criteria in 132, which further demonstrates his commitment to expand the Cao Wei regime's talent pool:

> The edict says: "…you shall not be restricted by the age when recommending candidates from the commanderies and principalities.
>
> 詔曰：「……其令郡國所選，勿拘老幼。」[209]

Although the age limit proposed by Zuo Xiong was rebuked, Cao Pi's edict in 222 kept other aspects of his proposal, including the bifurcated tracks for *shi* 士 scholars and *li* 吏 public servants, and the adoption of probation system. This shows that Cao Pi attempted to reshape the old Han recommendation system by improving its rigidity:

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[208] *Sanguozhi* 2, p. 77.
[209] *Sanguozhi* 2, p. 79.

> From Confucian scholars who master the techniques of classical learning, to clerical staff who specialize in the principles of composing official documents, all must begin their employment with a probation period upon arrival. Government officials will investigate those cases where an appointee's fame fails to match his substance.
>
> 儒通經術，吏達文法，到皆試用。有司糾故不以實者。[210]

Cao Pi also restored the "Recommendations by Special Orders" practice. An anecdote from the *Weishu* narrates how his first special order for recommendation came about:

> It was summertime, the fifth month [of the fourth year of the Huangchu era [223]], there were pelicans assembled at the *lingzhi* pond 靈芝池. [Emperor Wen] made the following edict: "This is what ancient poets called a dirty pond. One poem collected from the Cao region in *Classics of Poetry* criticized Duke Gong for distancing men of noble character and drawing close men of petty character. Are there not accomplished and knowledgeable gentlemen remaining in low positions nowadays? Otherwise, what message could these birds have come here to deliver? You shall widely recommend candidates for the 'extraordinarily talented with immense morality' and the 'one-of-a-kind gentlemen' categories, so that I could answer the criticisms [like those made] by the Cao people."
>
> 夏五月，有鵜鶘鳥集靈芝池，詔曰：「此詩人所謂污澤也。曹詩刺恭公遠君子而近小人，今豈有賢智之士處于下位乎？否則斯鳥何為而至？其博舉天下儁德茂才、獨行君子，以荅曹人之刺。」[211]

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[210] *Sanguozhi* 2, p. 79.
[211] *Sanguozhi* 2, p. 83.

The poem that Cao Pi cited here is titled "*Hou ren* 侯人," from the "Odes of Cao (曹風)" section of the *Classics of Poetry*. "*Hou ren* 侯人" referred to a type of petty officials whose main responsibilities involved guarding the borders and escorting guests and visitors. The poem contrasted their lifestyle with that of high-rank court officials who enjoyed lavish garments and entertainments, just like "a pelican on the dam (維鵜在梁)" that "will not wet his wings (不濡其翼)" and "will not wet his beak (不濡其咮)." This sharp contrast between the two groups of officials constituted the poet's criticism of a political institution that does not value individual merits demonstrated through hard work and dedication. According to the anecdote, Cao Pi spotted pelicans on the water and was immediately reminded of the message carried by this poetry. This episode portrays him as someone well-versed in the Confucian classical tradition. In a more implicit way, the line "Are there not accomplished and knowledgeable gentlemen remaining in low positions nowadays? (今豈有賢智之士處于下位乎)" also echoed Cao Cao's edict issued in 217, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter: "Are there not extraordinary talents among the commoners nowadays? (今天下得無有至德之人放在民間)"[212]

One important initiative that was put in place during Cao Pi's era was the affirmation of examinations as a key element of the recommendation system. As I have explained in Chapter 1, the government in the first century CE began to make use of examinations not only as an important check for Confucian scholars enrolled in the Imperial Academy, but also as a tool to filter out undeserving candidates recommended for crucial positions at the central government. During Cao Pi's time, some court officials argued that examinations should be eliminated from the recommendation process in order to uphold morality as the only principle for selection and to expand the candidate pool. They contended: "when we recommend the 'filial pious and

[212] *Sanguozhi* 1, p. 49.

incorruptible' ones, we ought to use moral conduct as the essential criterion, and not limit our selection by examinations (舉孝廉，本以德行，不復限以試經)."[213] However, Cao Pi was eventually persuaded by Hua Xin, a seasoned official who maintained the importance of reviving the examination process alongside the Han system of recommendations :

> Since the fall of the Han and the beginning of wartime chaos, the study of the six canons has become obsolete. It is imperative now to preserve and reestablish them to honor the Way of the Sage Kings. Once a principle is established, it shall be upheld through the highs and the lows. If we do not institute examinations to inspect the 'filial pious and incorruptible' candidates, we may risk abolishing the pursuit of learning. If candidates with exceptional and extraordinary talents appear, we can still recruit them through special orders. We should fear not raising enough people with true talents. [Once we have enough talents,] why should we fear not being able to select them [to work for us]?
>
> 喪亂以來，六籍墮廢。當務存立，以崇王道。夫制法者，所以經盛衰。今聽孝廉不以經試，恐學業遂從此而廢。若有秀異，可特徵用。患於無其人，何患不得哉？[214]

According to Hua Xin, examinations had long played an essential role in the project of encouraging learning as preparation for appointment. Moreover, he defended the use of examinations in conjunction with the "Recommendations by Special Orders" system, which would allow for "exceptional and extraordinary talents (*xiu yi* 秀異)" to enter the government. Whereas some officials criticized the examination for its failure in encouraging moral behaviors among candidates, its supporters who successfully convinced Cao Pi viewed it as an increasingly crucial component of the recommendation system.

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[213] *Sanguozhi* 13, p. 403.
[214] *Sanguozhi* 13, p. 403.

After Cao Pi's passing in 226, the examination system was further reinvigorated and incorporated into the recommendation system by Cao Rui 曹叡 (Emperor Ming, r. 226-239). This was part of the Wei government's larger plan to promote social mobility and fairness. Cao Rui explicitly denounced the consideration of social class in the popular recommendation practice. In an edict issued in 236, for instance, he demanded a "Recommendations by Special Order" with complete disregard of one's age and class:

> "All officials above the rank of *qing* and *jiao* must recommend one individual, regardless of this person's age, regardless of this person being noble or base. 無限年齒，勿拘貴賤，卿校以上各舉一人."[215]

In his study on the efficiency of the recommendation system on a wider scale during the Cao Wei dynasty, Yan Buke concluded that "among those who [became officials by] treading the path of recommendations in the Cao Wei dynasty, there were both people who came from the clans of high officials and great families and people who were just ordinary *shi* scholars. [The recommendation system] widely included individuals from a variety of social classes."[216] Furthermore, Yan supported his statement with a statistical analysis based on 46 records from the dynastic history and biographies of this period. He found that only 43.5% of them were from a clan that had produced any officials during Han dynasty, and only 32.6% of them had relatives who were also high officials or imperial relatives.[217] While the sample size is small, Yan's analysis shows that for individuals not coming from a significant aristocratic family, the recommendation system in this period possibly still left open a way to achieve upward social mobility through office holding.

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[215] *Sanguozhi* 27, p. 748.
[216] Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 181.
[217] See: figures on *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 181.

The elevated status of examinations during the Cao Rui's era demonstrated the continued encouragement of meritocracy, a common factor in this reform and the continuation of the nine ranks system. Cao Rui highly valued scholars who excelled at the examinations at the Imperial Academy, especially those who scored high and achieved the prestigious title of "erudite scholars (博士)," and preferred to assign key advisory roles to them. In general, he showed great appreciation for young candidates with high achievements in the study of Confucian classics. In 228, Cao Rui reiterated the importance of Confucian classical education and explicitly related this matter to two traditional pathways for individuals to enter the government: through the Imperial Academy and recommendations.

> Honoring and valuing Confucian leaning is the core of how a ruler cultivates his people…I demand that we appoint 'erudite scholars' with extraordinary talent to serve in advisory roles such as Palace Attendant Supervisor and Attendant-in-Ordinary. I also order every commandery and kingdom to prioritize individuals who are learned in Confucian classics when they submit recommendations.
>
> 尊儒貴學，王教之本也。……其高選博士才任侍中常侍者。申敕郡國，貢士以經學為先。[218]

Cao Rui required an additional round of examination for "erudite scholars" in 230 to further verify their knowledge of and adherence to Confucian classics. In addition, he praised those excelled at the exams and mocked people who failed the exams as "ostentatious (*fuhua* 浮華)":

> Since the warfare and chaos, classical learning has almost become extinct. The younger generation seek to advance their career but do not follow the Classics. Is this not because of the lack of such instruction, that our official candidates are not

[218] *Sanguozhi* 3, p. 94.

distinguished in their virtues? I demand that our gentlemen and clerical officials must first study to become proficient in one of the classical texts prior to taking up their roles in managing people. We must test all erudite scholars and elect only those who score among the highest to be officials. On the other hand, we must dismiss all who turn out to be ostentatious and not devoted to the fundamentals.

兵亂以來，經學廢絕。後生進趣，不由典謨。豈訓導未洽，將進用者不以德顯乎？其郎吏學通一經，才任牧民。博士課試，擢其高第者，亟用；其浮華不務本者，皆罷退之。[219]

Literary sources from this period attest to how candidates who had already secured recommendations by the local governments had to take written examinations before acquiring actual government employment opportunities. A scholar named Ying Qu 應璩 (190-252) once wrote a poem on the following scene:

Rushing through this colorful capital city are a lot of carriages and horses. /If you ask someone: "What are you here for?" "I want to become an official." /They are already "filial pious and incorruptible" and have mastered the meanings of the Classics, yet they still wonder: "Who will pass this examination?"[220]

京師何繽紛，車馬相奔起 / 借問爾乃為，將欲要其仕 / 孝廉經義通，誰能應此舉。

Ying Qu's poem revealed that some of the exam takers came with the most prestigious title of "filial pious and incorruptible" through recommendations. However, they still needed to pass the examination.[221] That all the candidates had to migrate to the capital city Luoyang to take the examination also symbolizes the central government's oversight over the recommendation

[219] *Sanguozhi* 3, p. 97.
[220] *Beitang shuchao* 79, in *Tangdai sida leishu* 1, p. 328.
[221] Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 101.

process in this period, in fear that the this will be abused by the local elites as it had been in the Han dynasty.

Nonetheless, this application of examination methods to the recommendation system is not to be confused with the civil examination system (*keju*). One important difference is that official candidates could not nominate themselves for participation in the exams in this period. The eligibility to take such exams was given solely based on recommendations from the local officials, instead of one's performance in local-level examinations, as in the later eras. The primary focus of this reform was, therefore, for Cao Pi and his central government to audit local candidates, instead of promoting social mobility by way of opening up the candidate pool.

In short, Cao Pi and Cao Rui, the two Cao Wei emperors that immediately followed Cao Cao, undertook a reform to introduce examination mechanisms into the recommendation system. Their incentives included: one, to enforce Confucian classical learning as a state ideology and as a moral code for the government officials; two, to mobilize the old recommendation system to bring more talented individuals to join the Cao Wei regime, while carefully preventing nepotism from undermining the meritocratic process. The intense reckoning on an official candidate's knowledge of Confucian classics through examinations coincided with the Cao Wei regime's distrust in allowing local governments to take charge of electing government officials, a concern that was also behind the instituting of the nine ranks system, as well as the system of unbiased arbiters.

On the other hand, in this period, Cao Cao's radical vision of meritocracy receded to a more moderate and synthetic approach to official recruitment, as reflected by the coexistence of the new and old methods of electing officials, and the reintroduction of morality as one of the central criteria in the evaluation process. This moderate version of meritocracy reflects the new social reality facing Cao Pi and Cao Rui. As leaders of a newly established dynasty, unlike Cao

Cao, they had to transform the recruitment system to form a government run by bureaucrats who, as Liu Shao defined it, "combined [talent and] morality (兼德之人)."[222]

6. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have considered several facets of what made the nine ranks system a meritocratic institution, as opposed to one that was designed to serve the aristocratic families. Cao Cao's radical ideas of meritocracy was the conceptual starting point of this new institution to be actualized by his descendants Cao Pi and Cao Rui during their reigns as emperors. The nine ranks system was hybrid in nature, in the sense that it blended old and new traditions for selecting officials for the imperial government. The unbiased arbiter, one of the most visible innovations of this system, served the purpose of advancing meritocracy in the selection process. On the other hand, it participated in a complex bureaucratic system and process so that its power would remain under control of the Cao Wei central government. It was in these ways that the nine ranks system must be understood as a meritocratic reform, as it embodied meritocracy in both theory and practice. In fact, as the last section has shown, the nine ranks system was but one of the several measures (alongside reforms on the recommendation system) taken by the Cao Wei emperors to not only reduce biases and promote fairness in the selection of government officials but also limit the power of the great local clans.

[222] For a discussion on the turn towards Confucian state ideology during the era of Cao Pi and Cao Rui, see: Qiu Luming 仇鹿鳴, *Wei Jin zhiji de zhengzhi quanli yu jiazu wangluo* 魏晉之際的政治權力與家族網絡 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), pp. 291-294.

Chapter 3: The Divergence of the Nine Ranks System from Meritocratic Ideal

The nine ranks system began to deviate from its meritocratic root not long after its establishment in 220 CE. Expressions of discontent over the nine ranks system are frequently seen in historical texts and political treatises since its inception. Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄 (209-254), a high official at the Cao Wei court, stated during the Zhengshi era (240-249) that the nine ranks system failed to realize its meritocratic potential and led to the weakening of the central government's control over the local scenes[223]:

> It has been several years since the unbiased arbiters at the prefecture and the commandery levels started to evaluate the talents of officials. I have heard that the practice has been muddled and flustered, as opposed to being neat and orderly. Was this not a result of the disordering of roles [between the local and the center], which led to both missing their critical goals?
>
> 自州郡中正品度官才之來，有年載矣，緬緬紛紛，未聞整齊。豈非分敍參錯，各失其要之所由哉。[224]

His statement supports my argument in the last chapter that the nine ranks system was initially designed to serve a meritocratic purpose—to value talent over family background. But it also reveals the disappointing outcome of the nine ranks system when put into practice. What

[223] Xiahou Xuan came from the most privileged Cao-Xiahou clan in the Cao Wei era. His father Xiahou Shang 夏侯尚 (?-226) was a general under Cao Pi. During the Zhengshi era, Xiahou Xuan served as a high official as the cousin of Cao Shuang 曹爽 (?-249), who was at that time the Grand General. See: *Sanguozhi* 9, pp. 295-305.
[224] *Sanguozhi* 9, p. 295.

exactly did Xiahou Xuan meant by the "disordering of roles (*fenxu cancuo* 分敍參錯)"? In plain words, he criticized the nine ranks system for granting too much unchecked power to the local unbiased arbiters, as seen in the following quote:

> Why must we allow the local unbiased arbiters to meddle with the crucial procedure of recruiting officials, while forcing the central government officials in charge to rely on them? Was this encroachment by the local on the center, and by the center on the local, not the leading cause of the disordering of roles?
>
> 奚必使中正干銓衡之機於下，而執機柄者有所委仗於上，上下交侵，以生紛錯哉？[225]

Xiahou Xuan then proposed that the central government should hold the power to directly assign ranks for official candidates. According to him, the central government officials should assign ranks primarily based on recommendations coming from the local governments, instead of the unbiased arbiters. While this looks like a call to revive the Han system of recommendations, it was more than a rollback to the old way. Xiahou Xuan in fact wanted to keep the unbiased arbiters while reducing their role to simply fulfilling clerical tasks, such as composing documents and collating information to assist the central government officials in their decision-making:

> Is it not better to let each party specialize in their own role? Local government officials should recommend their subjects based on their talents to the central government. Central government officials should assign rank to individuals based on these recommendations by local government officials, while also consulting their placements in the prefectural arrays of virtuous individuals [collated by the unbiased arbiters]. They must not allow personal biases. The unbiased arbiters should only

[225] *Sanguozhi* 9, p. 295.

> investigate their past deeds, array these individuals, and verify their eligibilities to respective categories. They must not control the elevation or demotion of their ranks. 豈若使各帥其分，官長則各以其屬能否獻之臺閣，臺閣則據官長能否之第，參以鄉閭德行之次，擬其倫比，勿使偏頗。中正則唯考其行迹，別其高下，審定輩類，勿使升降。[226]

At the core of Xiahou Xuan's proposal was his intent to eradicate the grounds for arbitrariness of all the officials involved in the nine ranks system, in the identification and employment of talented individuals. To him, the system is at its best when each party adheres as closely as possible to the meritocratic principle.

On the other hand, Xiahou Xuan's critique almost provided a cautionary tale on how easily the nine ranks system could go wrong in reality. Individuals working at the central government (*taige* 臺閣), those who served as leaders of local governments (*guanzhang* 官長), and the unbiased arbiters (*zhongzheng* 中正) that travelled between the center and the localities—all of their powers needed to be carefully reined in order for this system to work. When Cao Pi and Chen Qun invented the nine ranks system to centralize the process of official selection, they did not solve the issue of continued power struggle between the ruler and his subjects, who were locally powerful. Instead, they invented a new playing field for such a struggle to unfold itself.

This chapter provides an inevitably incomplete explanation of how the nine ranks system failed as a meritocratic institution in early medieval China. The predominantly aristocratic characteristic of the nine ranks system in the early medieval period has been a focal point of scholarship since Miyazaki's ground-breaking study. Built upon this scholarly tradition

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[226] *Sanguozhi* 9, p. 296.

that connects the transformation of nine ranks system with the macro-level societal changes of early medieval era, my analysis will be focus on the emergence of micro-level political themes and practices that led to the eventual transformation of the nine ranks system into an institution that reproduced and amplified the pre-existing social hierarchy in early medieval China. In contrast to the last chapter, where I argue for viewing the nine ranks system as an attempt at meritocracy, this chapter examines the many pieces of evidence stacked against the system's efficacy in actualizing such a meritocratic vision.

I start by reviewing the famous critique of the nine ranks system by the Jin official Liu Yi 劉毅, where he laid out the messy outcomes following decades of Chinese government's implementation of the system. Following that, I study three themes that shed light on how the elite families meddled with what was supposed to be a meritocratic process of recruitment and how the emperors became complicit in the aristocratic takeover of the system. First, I examine the political sensitivity surrounding "ostentations (*fuhua* 浮華)" in the Cao Wei period, which demonstrated the elites' interest in controlling the process of official selection. This tendency posed a direct challenge to the nine ranks system as part of Cao Wei rulers' effort to consolidate their political power. Next, I look into the formation of designated "pure (*qing* 清)" career paths for official candidates from elite families in the Jin dynasty, which facilitated the nine ranks system's turn towards an aristocratic institution. In the fourth and last section of this chapter, I discuss how the practice of "conferring higher ranks (*zengwei* 增位)" by early medieval emperors further dismantled the nine ranks system's meritocratic promise. In short, the following sections consider how different political players in early medieval China contributed to the replacement of an individual's talent by the power of his family as the primary metric for the government's hiring practice, and thereby provide an explanation of why the nine ranks system failed as a meritocratic reform.

1. The Nine Ranks System Mess

Xiahou Xuan did not go so far as asking for a complete overhaul of the system by removing unbiased arbiters all together. His argument was representative of the wave of criticisms of the nine ranks system during the Cao Wei period that still attempted to salvage this institution. However, shortly after the Wei-Jin dynastic transition, we can see the more radical criticism by Liu Yi that called for demolishing the nine ranks system.[227] This section provides a reading of selected parts of Liu Yi's criticism of the nine ranks system, which reflected key characteristics of the transformation of this political institution following the Wei-Jin transition.

During the Taikang era (280-289), the Jin official Liu Yi 劉毅 (216-285)[228] argued the nine ranks system posed a significant challenge to the political stability of the Jin empire:

> Nowadays, when the selected unbiased arbiters decide [the placements of individuals according to] the nine ranks, they assign high [ranks] and low [ranks] arbitrarily, holding honors and dishonors [for others] in their hands. They exercise the authority and enjoy the privilege of the ruler; they steal power and influence from the heavenly dynasty.
>
> 今立中正，定九品，高下任意，榮辱在手。操人主之威福，奪天朝之權勢。[229]

[227] "'…your subject believes that it is better to demote unbiased arbiters and discard the nine ranks [system], thus retiring the flawed institution of the Wei family and establishing a grand institution of this era.' The memorial was submitted [to the emperor, who] replied positively. Afterwards, Wei Guan, the Minister of Works, also submitted a memorial with others calling for retiring the nine ranks [system] and reviving the ancient system of local recommendations and selections. The Emperor did not implement this '…愚臣以為宜罷中正，除九品，棄魏氏之弊法，立一代之美制.' 疏奏，優詔答之. 後司空衛瓘等亦共表宜省九品，復古鄉議里選. 帝竟不施行," from: *Jinshu* 45, p. 1277.

[228] Like Xiahou Xuan, Liu Yi also came from a privileged class. But Liu Yi was also recognized as an expert in official selection, see: his biography in *Jinshu* 45. Xuanhou Xuan's and Liu Yi's criticisms of the nine ranks system represent early observations of the tendency for the nine ranks system to deviate from a meritocratic ideal.

[229] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1273.

Liu Yi also believed that the unbiased arbiters were allowed too much power by the nine ranks system. He put together a comprehensive critique of the nine ranks system in eight arguments, where he called out the many evils that the unbiased arbiters undertook:

> …despite its name, the role of unbiased arbiter is in fact a host of wrongdoings; the working of nine ranks system only introduced eight kinds of harms.
>
> 雖職名中正，實為姦府；事名九品，而有八損。[230]

For instance, the second of those "eight harms" focuses on how new developments in the nine ranks system in the Jin dynasty further exacerbated the strained central-local relation:

> The purpose of establishing prefectural heads was to collate pure discussions from the respective prefectures and to create consensuses on which all can agree, so that agreements will subdue disagreements and various discussions will be unified.
>
> 置州都者，取州里清議，咸所歸服，將以鎮異同，一言議。[231]

This critique addressed the "prefectural head (*zhou du* 州都)," which was the alternative name of "grand unbiased arbiters (*da zhongzheng* 大中正)," a new role introduced into the nine ranks system in 249 that mediated the local unbiased arbiters and the central government. Sitting at the prefecture level, they reigned over those unbiased arbiters at the lower commandery level. The establishment of this new level of unbiased arbiters in the form of "prefectural head" has been cited by historians such as Tang Zhangru as the demonstration of the continued growth of powerful local clans, as many of these clans began to extend their power and influence to the regions surrounding their bases, leading to the growth of their influence over larger geographical areas that corresponded to prefectures.[232]

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[230] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1277.
[231] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1274.
[232] Tang, "Jiupin Zhongzheng zhidu shi shi," p. 102. For more discussion on this issue, see footnote 192.

Liu Yi spoke quite approvingly of the establishment of prefectural heads. He showed empathy to the function they were designed to serve. A few years later, he himself even agreed to serve as one for Qingzhou 青州 prefecture.[233] But overall, Liu Yi witnessed more harm than good being introduced by the nine ranks system. In particular, he was disappointed by how it brought chaos into the highest level of Jin dynasty's bureaucracy:

> Currently, we value the role [of prefectural heads] yet neglect the individuals [who serve in these roles], as their verdicts must be assessed by Diao You[234]. Diao You has no connections to the prefectures, and these prefectural heads are not managed by him. [For him] to assess the nine ranks, this is like asking someone to guide a group of people who disobey him, like having someone decide on things they are not responsible for. It has given rise to the spread of slanders, false accusations, perversions, and disputes…Disapprovals and disagreements have flooded the prefectures. Grudges and enmities have sprouted among high officials.
>
> 今重其任而輕其人，所立品格，還訪刁攸。攸非州里之所歸，非職分之所置，今訪之，歸正於所不服，決事於所不職，以長讒構之源，以生乖爭之兆…駮違之論橫於州里，嫌讎之隙結於大臣。[235]

Liu Yi argued that forcing the prefectural heads to report to Diao You only introduced more trouble for both the center and the local. Diao You was an official who served as the Palace Aide to the Censor-in-Chief (御史中丞) under the Emperor Wu of Jin (r. 266-290).[236] As no Censor-in-

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[233] After retiring from his central official post, Liu Yi himself worked as a prefectural head at Qingzhou 青州 until his passing and was known for his fairness. His biography in *Jinshu* recorded that "Afterwards, the Ministry of Education nominated Yi as the grand unbiased arbiter of Qingzhou…Yi then became the prefectural head who was capable of determining and rectifying the ranks of individuals 後司徒舉毅為青州大中正…毅遂為州都，銓正人流." See: *Jinshu* 45, p. 1278.
[234] "Diao Yong…his great grandfather [Diao] You was the Censor-in-Chief in the Jin dynasty 刁雍…高祖攸, 晉御史中丞," from: *Weishu* 38, p. 865.
[235] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1274.
[236] *Jinshu* 69, p. 1842.

Chief was in place during his tenure, in practice, Diao You became the head of the Censorate (御史臺), an increasingly powerful unit that surveilled the entire body of officials for the Jin emperors.[237] It was under this institutional context that the works of unbiased arbiters came under Diao You's oversight.

Why was Liu Yi arguing against involving Diao You in the nine ranks system? In a perfect world, having an external party like the Censorate to audit the work of unbiased arbiters could prevent the latter from abusing power, which Liu Yi was also concerned with. However, he took a bigger issue with how this arrangement gave rise to disputes and resentments between Diao You's department and other central government officials, which introduced "grudges and enmities" into the bureaucracy. His argument highlighted how the nine ranks system negatively impacted the morale of court officials.

Another major thread of Liu Yi's critiques hinged on the use of moral character over hands-on administrative experience by the unbiased arbiters of his time. Here, he almost repeated Cao Cao's bashing of the Eastern Han recommendation system's reliance on moral character:

> The primary purpose of establishing ranks and asking for merit-based reports was to seek talented individuals to administer governmental matters, instead of to encourage the superficial enhancement of one's reputation or the development of mutual friendliness or distaste. Regardless of one's acts of filial piety, they do not take place in the government. Therefore, [one should apply the principle of] "prioritizing propriety over personal favor on what takes place outside the gate [of one's

[237] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, pp. 592-593.

residential house]."[238] When individuals serve in government posts, with their responsibilities varying from being significant to insignificant, with their matters varying from being difficult to simple [to handle], they obtain varying degrees of achievements and rewards. It is only based on his achievement and responsibility that we find out about a talented person's worth.

凡所以立品設狀者，求人才以理物也，非虛飾名譽，相為好醜。雖孝悌之行，不施朝廷，故門外之事，以義斷恩。既以在官，職有大小，事有劇易，各有功報，此人才之實效，功分之所得也。[239]

Like Cao Cao, Liu Yi also rejected filial piety as a reliable indicator of one's suitability for serving in office. Interestingly, he drew on a pair of well-known Confucian ideas—"personal favor (*en* 恩)" and "propriety (*yi* 義)"—from the *Classics of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記) to resist the expansive political ideology of filial piety. "Personal favor" and "propriety" are contrasted in *Liji* to highlight how ritual obligations for an individual differ in the domestic versus political spaces. "Personal favor" is rooted in the idealized Confucian familial hierarchy and reinforces its patriarchal premise: within the confine of one's family, personal favor is considered the guiding principle for one's ritual behavior. This is reflected, for example, in the honoring of paternal love in Confucian death rituals.[240] In contrast, outside the domestic domain, it is one's affiliation with their lord that a Confucian considered to be most fundamental. One is expected

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[238] "Within the door [of one's residential house], personal favor trumps propriety; outside the door, propriety overcomes personal favor 門內之治, 恩掩義; 門外之治, 義斷恩," from: *Liji zhengyi* 63, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben*, p. 3680.
[239] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1276.
[240] The concept of "personal favor (*en* 恩)" is also prescriptive in nature. It discounts the actual emotional connections that one feels towards their family members: father, mother, uncles, aunts, siblings, and sometimes individuals such as wet nurses. Instead, it argues that one must recognize the father-son relationship to be the most fundamental. See: "One mourns with a higher degree of sincerity for those who have bestowed them more personal favors. This is why for one's father, one wears an unhemmed hemp bib with unstitched lower border (*zhan cui*) into a third year. It is the application of the principle of personal favor. Within the door of one's residential house, personal favor trumps propriety. 其恩厚者其服重，故為父斬衰三年，以恩制者也。門內之治恩揜義," *Liji zhengyi* 63, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben*, p. 3680.

to perform mourning ritual for their lord expressing the same degree of sincerity, regardless of the latter's high or low degree of nobility.[241] "Propriety," therefore, focuses on the idealized political relationship between a lord and a subject, but especially on the sense of duty and obedience to be internalized and practiced by the subject. The *Liji* text pairs but also differentiates these two concepts to underpin the drastically different natures of the domestic and political spaces.[242] By utilizing this, Liu Yi separated one's moral virtue from his political virtue and criticized the contemporary practice of valuing filial piety over one's actual administrative experience in the recruitment process.[243]

The Jin state's drive to propagate Confucian Ideology and the relevancy of morality to government employment needs to be construed in the rise of a new political dynamic where weak emperors were in direr need of support from their aristocratic subjects. Part of the Jin ruling house's weakness came from the legitimacy of their ascent to power. The elite class at that time had intimate experience of the Sima family's usurpation, an outright violation of the Confucian ethical code that emphasizes obedience to one's lord. In affirming their support of Confucian moral values, the Sima family set out to redeem themselves from this epic moral failure and to reestablish its political legitimacy. Therefore, Liu Yi's opposition to the emphasis on morality in official recruitment was acutely at odds with the ideological campaign

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[241] "'Honoring the honorable ones' and 'venerating the venerable ones' are main types of propriety. 貴貴尊尊，義之大者也." The Eastern Han classicist Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 annotated this sentence from *Liji* as follows: "'Honoring the honorable ones' refers to the situation where one works for a lord who is a *dafu* i.e. second-to-lowest mobility; 'venerating the venerable ones' refers to the situation where one works for the son of heaven or a feudal lord 貴貴, 謂為大夫君也; 尊尊, 謂為天子諸侯也." The point is that in the (idealized) Zhou system *dafu* and the son of heaven were the lowest and highest ranks of individuals who could initiate a political "lord-subject" relationship. Zheng Xuan's annotation illustrates that "propriety" as a concept reinforces the shared nature of such a relationship, regardless of the actual political power of the person in the lord's position. See: *Liji zhengyi* 63, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben*, p. 3680.

[242] That is, one must wear "an unhemmed hemp bib with unstitched lower border (*zhan cui* 斬缞)" into a third year. This is considered the roughest type of mourning attire that is suitable for expressing the deepest sense of sadness through self-deprivation.

[243] A similar but weaker version of Liu Yi's interpretation is recorded in Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648)'s commentary on *Liji*: "'Outside the door' means the court space. For someone employed in public services and attending the imperial court, he must prioritize [the interests of] the public and propriety over personal favors 門外, 謂朝廷之間. 既仕公朝, 當以公義斷絕私恩," from: *Liji zhengyi* 63, from: *Shisanjing zhushu Qing Jiaqing kan ben*, p. 3680.

orchestrated by the Jin ruling house. Thanks to a concerted effort by the educated elites as well as the ruling house Sima family, the study and performance of Confucian ethical ideals became essential for bureaucratic advancement in this period. As Charles Holcombe has pointed out, the Wei-Jin period saw a continued expansion of a rigorous Confucian classical education for the educated elites since their formative years, which greatly facilitated the translation of Confucian ethical ideals into social norms.[244] What Liu Yi criticized was, intentionally or unintentionally, a practice that fit the Jin ruling house's political agenda of appeasing and forging a political alliance with the elites.

The merit-based system of official selection that Liu Yi called for was compromised due to this new political dynamic, which had already subsumed the nine ranks system that was intended to serve meritocracy. The next three sections look at three interrelated factors that shed light on the political structures and incentives behind the making of this new political dynamic, as well as how the nine ranks system became an aristocratic institution.

2. The Political Sensitivity of "Ostentation"

In yet another critique of the nine ranks system, Liu Yi singled out the problem of "ostentation (*fuhua* 浮華)" as a major repercussion of a system of official recruitment that "suppressed people with substantial achievements while holding in high regard people with feigned reputations 抑功實而隆虛名."[245] He argued that the disregard of actual administrative accomplishment in determining one's *pin* rank had led to dangerous outcomes for the government:

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[244] See: Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han*, ch.4.

[245] "Nowadays, it is the opposite: when it is time to reward well-deserved officials, those who have demanding responsibilities receive humble ranks, whereas those who have no experience in office receive high ranks. This only serves to suppress people with substantial achievements and to hold in high regard the ones with insubstantial reputations. 今則反之，於限當報，雖職之高，還附卑品，無績於官，而獲高敘，是為抑功實而隆虛名也," from: *Jinshu* 45, p. 1276.

> At the top level, it deprived our heavenly dynasty of its charge of official assessment. At the bottom level, it encouraged *shi* scholars to engage in ostentation and partisanship.
>
> 上奪天朝考績之分，下長浮華朋黨之士。[246]

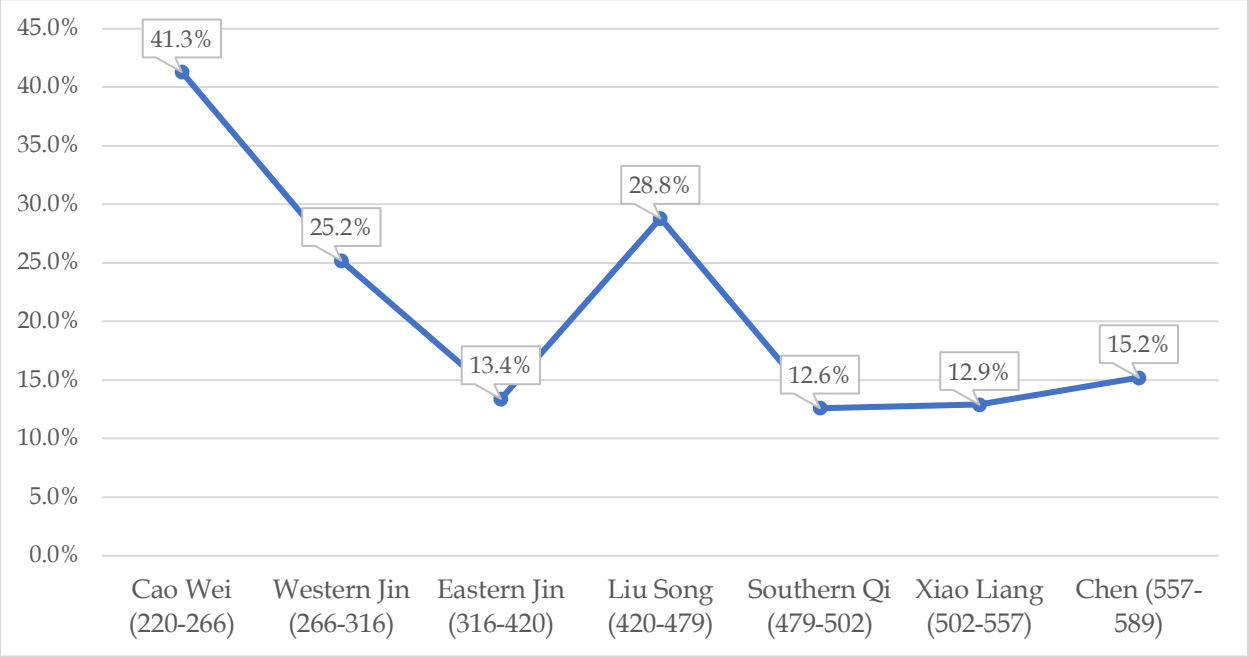
Liu Yi's accusation of the nine ranks system for encouraging "ostentation" carried no small weight at his time. This section dives into this political sensitivity surrounding the phenomenon for elite scholar-officials to establish coalitions in the eyes of emperors by focusing on the "anti-ostentation" campaign during Cao Rui's reign (226-239). The focus of my discussion is on the escalated tension between the activities conducted by such coalitions and the meritocratic reforms over the entire officialdom sponsored by the emperor. I highlight the challenge for a merit-based, centralizing institution that is the nine ranks system to resist a turn towards aristocracy, which preluded its downfall after the Wei-Jin transition. In the Jin dynasty, with the formation of binary tracks for elite and non-elite candidates of government roles, the elite clans were empowered to transform the nine ranks system to assist their own agenda of solidifying themselves as the dominant force in the political field over the emperors.

The trend that government positions became increasingly dominated by elite candidates since the Jin dynasty has been documented by transmitted texts, but those sources seem to have exaggerated the extent of this phenomenon—a point to keep in mind as we dive into such sources throughout the rest of this chapter. In the aforementioned memorial, Liu Yi famously claimed that "among holders of the superior rank, there are no candidates from impoverished households; among holders of the inferior ranks, there are no candidates from influential clans (上品無寒門, 下品無勢族)." The court historian Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513) concurred with this in

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[246] *Jinshu* 45, p. 1276.

his *Songshu*, in which he stated: "All those who are robed and capped are of the second rank; all those who are below it subsequently constitute the inferior and insignificant (凡厥衣冠, 莫非二品; 自此以還, 遂成卑庶)."[247] Both authors stated that the nine ranks system led to a class divide where the top ranks were exclusively given to candidates from privileged backgrounds in this period. This was untrue if we look at anecdotal and statistical evidence collected by Wang Zhenglu 汪征魯 from the biographical chapters of the early medieval dynastic histories. Directly challenging the narrative that "among the higher ranks, there are no [candidates from] impoverished households (上品無寒門)," Wang found at least 25 cases from the Western Jin time of individuals serving in mid-to-high official positions but were not from an elite background.[248] Moreover, data show the pathway into high officialdom was never fully closed to individuals coming from humble backgrounds (see chart 1).[249]



[247] *Songshu* 94, p. 2302.
[248] Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, p. 257.
[249] The percentages for the Northern Dynasties were similar: 21% (222 out of 1059) for the Northern Wei, 35% (57 out of 163) for the Eastern Wei and the Northern Qi combinedly, and 10.9% (26 out of 238) for the Western Wei and the Northern Zhou combinedly. See: Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, p. 256, chart 7 and 8.

Chart 1: Percentage of Central Government Officials from Impoverished Households, 220-589. Source: Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xuanguan tizhi yanjiu*, p. 257.

Wang found that 41.3% (102 out of 247) of central government officials came from a non-elite household under the Cao Wei government. The percentage dropped to 25.2% (59 out of 234) in the Western Jin times and then further to 13.4% in the Eastern Jin. Due to the small sample sizes and selection biases of our sources, it is hard to ascertain how representative these data points were, but these episodes and data points show that the Chinese governments through the early medieval era always preserved a certain level of openness to people who were not coming from the elite families. A more faithful characterization of this period, based on Wang's study, is that access to central government positions became increasingly limited for individuals outside the privileged class. This trend in central government's hiring practice reflects the social problems facing the larger Chinese society from third to sixth centuries, especially after the Wei-Jin transition: social stratification with plummeted upward social mobility for commoners, the impact of which lasted into the end of sixth century.

At the beginning of this continuum was the Cao Wei government's problematization of "ostentation." In what ways did it reflect the tension between aristocracy and meritocratic reforms sponsored by the state? The following early-third century anecdote from Guo Ban 郭頒's *Wei-Jin Shiyu* 魏晉世語[250] provides us with some clues:

[250] The book *Wei-Jin Shiyu* 魏晉世語 (also known as simply *Shiyu* 世語) was a collection of anecdotes that must have been lost as of the beginning of Yuan dynasty (late thirteenth century), according to the *yiwen zhi* 藝文志(bibliography) of *Songshi* 宋史. It was arguably compiled sometime around the years 316-317. This was based on quotations of it in other sources, which covered information as late as the era of Emperor Min of Western Jin (r. 313-316). In addition, Pei Songzhi 裴松之 hinted in one of his *Sanguo zhi* commentaries that the book's compiler Guo Ban 郭頒 was a contemporary figure of Gan Bao 干寶 (?-336), who referenced this title in his *Jinshu* 晉書 (this is a different *Jinshu* from the dynastic history of the same name completed by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 in 648), which was completed in the early years of the Eastern Jin dynasty (established 317). For more information on the book, see: Wei Shimin 魏世民, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao xiaoshuo shi* 魏晉南北朝小說史 (Anhui da xue chu banshe, 2011), pp. 490-91.

> At that time, eminent scholars such as Xiahou Xuan [who was a Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary[251]], Zhuge Dan, and Deng Yang [both Imperial Secretaries[252]] evaluated and judged each other. They named four people, including [Xiahou] Xuan and [?] Chou, as "The Four Intelligent Ones," and another eight people including [Zhuge] Dan and [?] Bei as "The Eight Insightful Ones." Liu Xi [the son of Secretariat Supervisor[253] Liu Fang], Sun Mi [the son of Secretariat Supervisor Sun Zi], and Wei Lie [the son of Minister of the Division of Officials[254] Wei Zhen] could not match the above twelve individuals. But because of their fathers' prestige, they were included as "The Three at Ease." These were the fifteen individuals. The emperor [Cao Rui] believed they encouraged the culture of ostentation and expelled all of them from their offices.
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> 是時，當世俊士散騎常侍夏侯玄、尚書諸葛誕、鄧颺之徒，共相題表，以玄、疇四人為四聰，誕、備八人為八達，中書監劉放子熙、孫資子密、吏部尚書衛臻子烈三人，咸不及此，以父居勢位，容之為三豫，凡十五人。帝以搆長浮華，皆免官錮。

This paragraph shows how the social activity of "evaluating and judging each other (共相題表)" empowered a self-organized society of elite scholars at that time. This activity functioned to establish a hierarchy among these individuals, like what unbiased arbiters did, but it adopted a combination of talent and prestige as the metrics of evaluation. Its aristocratic element is clearly seen in the case of "The Three at Ease 三豫," as these three individuals were inducted into the circle primarily due to their affluent family background. What we see here is, therefore, how the elite scholars in the early third century developed an alternative system of evaluating

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[251] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 395.
[252] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 411.
[253] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 193.
[254] Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 411.

someone's worthiness outside the newly installed system of the nine ranks by the Cao Wei state at that time, which put these communities in conflict with the government that attempted to centralize and standardize the same process. This conflict constituted an important context for the emperor's purging of these fifteen elites in the name of battling "ostentation."

The issue of "ostentation" was potent since the mid-second century. It emerged as an unintended outcome of a Han state program that guided cohorts of government officials' descendants through a Confucian moral curriculum and prepared them for serving in the government like their fathers. Fan Ye 范曄 (398-455) retrospectively traced the emergence of this issue back to an educational reform during Eastern Han's Empress Dowager Liang 梁太后 (116-150)'s reign that encouraged young scholars from families of officials to gather annually. He criticized that such gatherings ironically led to the decline of Confucian classical learning.[255] The discourse that identifies ostentation as an activity detrimental to the promotion of Confucian classical learning lasted into Cao Pi's Huangchu 黃初 era (220-226): an official Liu Jing 劉靖 (?-254) recommended Cao Pi to curb the "ostentation and networking (浮華交遊)" among the offspring of high officials by enrolling them into the Imperial Academy, where they would be selected for official employment based on their individual academic achievements.[256] From Liu Jing's perspective, the concern for ostentation remained primarily an educational one.

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[255] "Emperor Liang ordered: 'From the Grand General to [officials ranking] six-hundred bushels, all must enroll their sons in in the imperial academy. Every year, on the months when these students participated in the archery ceremony, they gathered in a banquet. This has become a tradition since then.' Afterwards, many more students travelled to study at the academy. During its peak there were about thirty thousand of them. However, most of these students were not skilled in the study of philology. Instead, they engaged in ostentatious activities together. The culture of Confucian scholarship declined 梁太后詔曰: '大將軍下至六百石，悉遣子就學，每歲輒於鄉射月一饗會之，以此為常.' 自是遊學增盛，至三萬餘生。然章句漸疏，而多以浮華相尚，儒者之風蓋衰矣," *Houhanshu* 79, p. 2547.

[256] "Following ancient traditions, [we should] mandate that sons and grandsons of officials [at the ranks of] two-thousand bushels and above to enroll in the imperial academy upon turning fifteen *sui*. This policy encourages honorable acts and discourages shameful acts among them. Those who are learned in the Classics and refined in their actions will be promoted, in order to celebrate their honorable qualities. Those who stray away from learning and abandon their pursuits will be demoted, in order to punish bad behaviors. If we promote the good ones and caution those who reject the teachings, the phenomenon of ostentatious

During Cao Rui's reign, ostentation quickly became an important political issue. This was in part due to the highly intertwined relation between personal and political networks for the elites at that time. The fifteen individuals purged by Cao Rui held similar official ranks, being either third-rank officials or the sons of such officials. During the Cao Wei time, the Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary (*sanqi changshi* 散騎常侍, which was Xiahou Xuan's role) and Imperial Secretaries (尚書, the positions held by Zhuge Dan and Deng Yang) were both on the third highest rank of the official ladder. So were Secretariat Supervisor (中書監) and Minister of the Division of Officials (吏部尚書), the official titles of the fathers of "The Three at Ease."[257] This highlights that, for the elite scholars at that time, their social circles were, at least partly, organized based on their political status. Their self-fashioning activities seemed to have taken place informally in these circles; but these circles—as personal networks—were preconfigured by the political network in early medieval China. As any divide between public and private interests became blurred, the partisanship built upon these officials' personal networks posed a threat to the imperial house.

By purging these fifteen individuals, Cao Rui redefined "ostentation" as an epidemic political issue, one that held critical implications for his empire if not contained and eradicated at an early stage of development. This view was likely facilitated by a complaint made by the official Dong Zhao 董昭 (156-236) that alarmed Cao Rui about the scope and impact of the "ostentation" phenomenon:

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social gathering will naturally die down 依遵古法，使二千石以上子孫，年從十五，皆入太學。明制黜陟榮辱之路；其經明行脩者，則進之以崇德；荒教廢業者，則退之以懲惡；舉善而教不能則勸，浮華交游，不禁自息矣," *Sanguozhi* 15, p. 464.

[257] See: *Tongdian* 36, pp. 991-994. Minister of the Division of Officials was not included in this text, but it ranked on the thirteenth in the Xiao Liang bureaucratic rank chart. According the latter, Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary 散騎常侍 was one rank below Head of the Division of Officials (the twelfth), whereas Secretariat Supervisor 中書監 was two ranks above it (the fifteenth). As Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary and Secretariat Supervisor were both third-rank official titles in Cao Wei, we could infer that Head of the Division of Officials was also on the third rank.

> I have observed that the young generation nowadays no longer view learning as their essential endeavor. Instead, networking has become their primary undertaking. The scholars in our state have ceased to prioritize filial piety, fraternal duty, integrity, and refinement. Instead, they chase after power and personal benefits. They have forged communities and exchange praises among themselves. They weaponize criticisms to punish and eradicate [their enemies]. They utilize communally established reputations to reward [their ingroup]. Those who adhere to them are lauded repeatedly, whereas others are slandered for not submitting to them.
> 竊見當今年少，不復以學問為本，專更以交遊為業；國士不以孝悌清修為首，乃以趨勢遊利為先。和黨連群，互相褒歎，以毀訾為罰戮，用黨譽為爵賞，附己者則歎之盈耳，不附者則為作瑕釁。[258]

One may reasonably speculate that Cao Rui intended his crackdown on the fifteen individuals to be a warning sent to his entire officialdom, a statement on his intolerance for partisanship. Its effect on court officials can be seen in the writings of Wang Chang 王昶 (?-259), who once anxiously warned his own descendent to abstain from any engagement in ostentation and partisanship.[259]

Moreover, the purging of the fifteen officials can be viewed as part of Cao Rui's continuous efforts to centralize power and tighten the control over his officials.[260] It went hand

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[258] *Sanguozhi* 14, p. 442.
[259] "If a person is not focused on the most refined actions, and instead betray the roots to chase after the branches, he will fall into ostentation and join cliques. Ostentation will make one suffer from inauthenticity. Cliques introduce the trouble of [favoring] one person over another. There are many examples of people who fell for these two problematic actions. Those put them in such dangerous situations and in such cliques are going too far to chase the branches. This was the result of being confused by the fleeting reputation and blinded by the short-term benefit [that one gains from engaging in ostentation] 人若不篤於至行，而背本逐末，以陷浮華焉，以成朋黨焉；浮華則有虛偽之累，朋黨則有彼此之患。此二者之戒，昭然著明，而循覆車滋衆，逐末彌甚，皆由惑當時之譽，昧目前之利故也," from: *Sanguozhi* 27, pp. 744-45.
[260] For example, on fourth year of the Taihe era (230), Cao Rui ordered that "…those where are ostentatious and not oriented towards the fundamental Way shall all be demoted. 其浮華不務道本者, 皆罷退之," from: *Sanguozhi* 3, p. 97.

in hand with the promotion of meritocratic institutions in this period. In chapter 2, I have explained how Cao Pi and Cao Rui established the unbiased arbiters and transformed the recommendation system under the new framework of the nine ranks system to promote meritocracy in the official election process. Built on that, here I argue that Cao Rui's promotion of meritocracy was partly driven by the incident of ostentation and served his political agenda of containing the elite scholars and solidifying his own power.

The political intent behind Cao Rui's promotion of meritocratic reforms inside the government is best illustrated by his attempt to introduce "*kao ke* 考课," a more rigorous method to assess the capabilities of his officials, towards the end of his reign. During the Jingchu 景初 era (237-239), Cao Rui expressed his deep frustration with the ostentation case and drew on the fifteen ostentatious officials who "pursued fame (馳名譽)" to complain to Lu Yu 盧毓 (183-257), who had been the Minister of the Division of Officials (吏部尚書), about the unreliability of people's reputations.[261] Hearing this, Lu Yu advised Cao Rui to implement assessment over elected officials:

> It is inadequate to select the extraordinary men only based on reputation, but reputation allows us to obtain the conventionally good men, who respect the teachings, aspire to morality, and gain reputation as a consequence of that. One shall not find fault with them. I, your subject, am not capable of identifying the extraordinary men. You, my lord, is better off following the course of the people and the contentions [to select officials]. But once elected, they should be assessed.

[261] "Prior to this, Zhuge Dan and Deng yang, among others, pursued fame and joked about themselves being 'the four intelligents' and 'the eight insightfuls.' The emperor abhorred them… 'The election of officials only follows the fame; yet fame is like a cake painted on the ground that cannot be eaten. 前此諸葛誕、鄧颺等馳名譽，有四聰八達之誚，帝疾之…'…選舉莫取有名，名如畫地作餅，不可啖也,'" from: *Sanguozhi* 22, p. 651.

名不足以致異人，而可以得常士。常士畏教慕善，然後有名，非所當疾也。愚臣既不足以識異人，又主者正以循民案常為職，但當有以驗其後。[262]

Cao Rui took Lu Yu's advice and then ordered Liu Shao (the author of *Renwuzhi*) to invent the metrics for this new "*kaoke* 考课" system. Liu Shao finished his assignment and submitted a proposal consisting of seventy-two principles shortly after.[263] Although these metrics did not go into effect due to the emperor's passing in 239, from the debates among their contemporaries, we get a glimpse of this reform's ambitious scope, which reflects his intention to further strengthen his hold over the officialdom, as well as how the officialdom reacted to this. Liu Shao's proposal sought to establish one's concrete achievements (*shixiao* 事效) over reputation (*mingsheng* 名聲) as the primary metric for the recommendation system.[264] This took Lu Yu's initial advice to a more radical direction, and this idea was picked up by the likes of Liu Yi in the Jin dynasty.

The scope of this new assessment system was equally if not more radical. If implemented, the "*kaoke*" system would apply to both official candidates and current officials.[265] One of its biggest supporters, Du Shu 杜恕, passionately reiterated this point, arguing that "high officials and inner-court officials should be assessed, too, according to their own areas of

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[262] *Sanguozhi* 22, pp. 651-52.
[263] "During the Jingchu era, [Liu Shao] was ordered to draft the rules for assessing officials at the capital city using examinations…Thus, he drafted seventy-two principles for assessing officials at the capital city using examinations, and then wrote an outline. 景初中，受詔作都官考課。…輒作都官考課七十二條，又作說略一篇," from: *Sanguozhi* 21, p. 619; *Tongdian* 15, p. 367.
[264] The proposal asks each prefecture and commandery to assess its candidates according to the 'four subjects' [of the Han dynasty]. One's candidacy must be established upon **concrete achievements**, before he receives recommendation. He will first serve on a probation at the county government, directly serving his people as a civil servant; then, based on his degree of achievements, he will be promoted to serve at a commandery, or even received higher ranks or nobility. This is the most pressing task for *kao ke*…How can we only follow people's **reputations**? 其欲使州郡考士，必由四科，皆有**事效**，然後察舉，試辟公府，為親民長吏，轉以功次補郡守者，或就增秩賜爵，此最考課之急務也。…所徇者豈**聲名**而已乎," from: *Sanguozhi* 16, p. 500.
[265] "At that time, the court was debating on the system of *kao ke* (=the assessment of officials), which was to apply to officials from the inner and outer courts. 時又大議考課之制，以考內外衆官," from: *Sanguozhi* 16, p. 500.

responsibilities 至於公卿及內職大臣，亦當俱以其職考課之也."[266] Fu Gu 傅嘏 (209-255), who emerged as an outspoken critic of this reform, believed this new system would further strengthen the monopoly of the Division of Officials (*libu* 吏部) over the entire officialdom, which implied that the proposed reform was to impact all officials.[267] These testimonies highlighted Cao Rui's intention to leverage the Division of Officials to limit the power of his current and future officials, as the proposed assessment over their performances would permit the replacements of underperformed officials. Moreover, a new emphasis on one's administrative achievements, both before and after entering the government, could limit their control over who is better suited for becoming an official and, as the case of the fifteen individuals implies, their ability to define their own circles.[268]

Cao Rui's public purging of the fifteen individuals and his subsequent attempt to implement "*kaoke*" signaled the heightened political tension between the emperor and the emerging coalitions of court officials. To be clear, the caution against "ostentation" was not new. Tang Zhangru's research has already shed light on the continuity between the Eastern Han's and Cao Wei's political agenda to combat ostentation. Tang also noted that the first three leaders of the Cao Wei regime (Cao Cao, Cao Pi, and Cao Rui) all harbored resentments towards these communities of elite scholars.[269] Built on his study, my discussion has addressed how the anti-ostentation effort reached its peak under Cao Rui's reign. It highlights the political

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[266] "The proposal to establish *kao ke* has stated the way of the Zhou and Han dynasties and fully recovered the original intent of Jing Fang. It makes clear the essentials of *kao ke*… Your subject believes that this proposal should be accepted, and an assessment based on prefectures and commanderies should be established. Not only should the system be materialized but also should rewards and publishments to follow suit, so that people will adhere to it. High officials and inner-court officials should also be assessed according to their own areas of responsibilities. 今奏考功者，陳周、漢之法為，終京房之本旨，可謂明考課之要矣…臣以為便當顯其身，用其言，使具為課州郡之法，法具施行，立必信之賞，施必行之罰。至於公卿及內職大臣，亦當俱以其職考課之也," from: *Sanguozhi* 16, p. 501.

[267] "The role of selecting talent has been exclusively assigned to the Division of Officials. 選才之職專任吏部," from: *Sanguozhi* 21, p. 623.

[268] Wu Huilian 吳慧蓮, "Cao Wei de kaoke fa yu Wei Jin geming 曹魏的考課法與魏晉革命," *Taida lishi xuebao* 臺大歷史學報 21 (1997), pp. 68-69, 73-77.

[269] Tang, "Jiupin Zhongzheng zhidu shi shi," pp. 92-99.

logic for Cao Rui to expel these officials, and how it was in symbiotic relation with his promotion of meritocratic reforms over the system of official recruitment.

This heightened tension between the emperor and the coalition of high officials posed a critical challenge for the nine ranks system to maintain its momentum, for the system itself relied heavily on the latter group to serve as unbiased arbiters and uphold the fairness of selections. Following the fall of the Cao Wei regime, meritocratic reforms over the officialdom quickly went astray when there was a lack of aggressive promotion by emperors like Cao Rui: *kaoke* was never implemented; the nine ranks system also gave way to the granting of high-rank roles at central government to aristocratic candidates, regardless of their talent and administrative experience. My next section shows how this transformation of the nine ranks system unfolded with the establishment of "pure" paths for heritage candidates during the Jin dynasty.

3. Heritage Candidates and Their "Pure" Path

Qing 清 (purity) was a powerful idea throughout early medieval China. As a concept, it was widely applied by Chinese intellectuals to honor all things with an elevated quality above the rest of their kind, from the objects and scenes in the natural world to the various aspects of personhood and human activities, including moral character, intelligence, literary crafts, and political merit.[270] Ueda Sanae 上田早苗 pointed out that being *qing* in the bureaucratic context meant for elite scholars to maintain the lifestyle of detachment from office or imperial power,

[270] Yoshimori Kensuke 葭森健介, "Menfa 'guizu' zhipei ji 'qing' de linian 門閥「貴族」支配及「清」的理念," *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 (1993.3), pp. 90-93; also see: Zhang, *Zhonggu shiqi qingzhuo guanzhi yanjiu*, pp. 122-26.

while holding government positions.[271] This paradoxical state was directly reflected in the pursuit by such scholar-officials of government positions without substantial duties but still requiring the highest *pin* rank.[272]

The motivation for the elite class to practice *qing* in the political setting under the Jin dynasty was reflected in the creation of a strict distinction between pure and impure (*zhuo* 濁) government roles, as well as pure and impure career tracks. But this took place at the cost of the nine ranks system, whose mission was on the appointment of government officials based on their individual talent. This section focuses on how the effectiveness of the nine ranks system greatly suffered from the aristocrats class's pursuit of government roles that they considered to be "pure." Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513)'s reflection on the emergence of a class-based division of government roles offered an account of this new phenomenon:

> *Junzi* and *xiaoren* are categories that array people into different kinds. One who treads the Way is a *junzi*, one who goes astray from the Way is a *xiaoren*. Butchery and fishing are inferior undertakings; carpentry and construction are base professions. Yet, [Jiang] Taigong rose [from fishing] to become a counselor at the Zhou court, Fu Yue went [from building walls] to become a minister at the Yin court. [At that time, whether one came from] a family with generations of aristocrats or an extravagant lifestyle was not taken into consideration in the recruiting process; regardless of one's nobility or obscurity, [the state] considered talent only. By the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, this way had not been altered…low-level clerks at commandry- and district-level governments came from aristocratic households; glaive-holding

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[271] Ueda Sanae 上田早苗, "Kizoku-teki kansei no seiritsu: Seikan no yurai to sono seikaku 貴族的官制の成立: 清官の由来とその性格," In *Chūgoku chūsei-shi kenkyū: Rikuchō Zui Tō no shakai to bunka* 中国中世史研究: 六朝隋唐の社会と文化 (Tokyo: Tōkai Daigaku Shuppankai, 1970), pp. 103-32.
[272] Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, pp. 124-25.

guardians were men from powerful clans. **This was different from later times when two separate paths were forged.**

夫君子、小人，類物之稱。蹈道則為君子，違之則為小人。屠釣，卑事也；版築，賤役也，太公起為周師，傅說去為殷相。非論公侯之世，鼎食之資，明揚幽仄，唯才是與。逮于二漢，茲道未革……郡縣掾史，並出豪家，負戈宿衛，皆由勢族，**非若晚代，分為二塗者也。**[273]

Shen Yue began his discussion by invoking the classical discourses about *junzi* 君子 and *xiaoren* 小人 and historical examples from past times. From them he teased out the cultural ideal of meritocracy, which he believed was upheld from ancient time down to the Han dynasty. In the next section, he turned to acknowledge the emergence of separate career paths for aristocrats and non-aristocrats, which violated the meritocratic principle that the nine ranks system initially was intended to promote:

> Following the chaos at the end of the Han dynasties, Emperor Wu of Wei [=Cao Cao] established his reign. Out of expediency amidst military urgency, he created the nine ranks system, which was intended to distinguish superior talents from inferior ones, and not to separate those from lofty clans from those from humble upbringings. The system was continued in the following decades and became a constant institution. It remained unchanged when the Wei was replaced by the Jin dynasty. The unbiased arbiters in the provinces and commanderies were asked to appraise individuals by their talent, yet talented men seldom received promotions or demotions. However, in practice, resources of one's family became the standard by which individuals boosted themselves over others. The vulgar unbiased arbiters followed the current trend of

[273] *Songshu* 94, p. 2301.

events to assign low and high ranks to candidates and looked down upon or looked up to them accordingly. This is why Liu Yi said: "there were no lofty clans among the low ranks and no humble clans among the high ranks." As years went by, such a trend became firmly established, to the point that **all who were born in a family of officials, were automatically assigned the second rank, and consequently everyone else became the inferior kind.** The way of Zhou and Han dynasties was to use the intelligent to rule over the stupid; differences in intelligence guided the ranks of official posts. **Since Wei and Jin dynasties, the aristocratic ruled the humble; the distinction between official posts for the *shi* aristocrats and *shu* commoners became apparent.**

漢末喪亂，魏武始基，軍中倉卒，權立九品。蓋以論人才優劣，非為世族高卑。因此相沿，遂為成法。自魏至晉，莫之能改，州都郡正，以才品人，而舉世人才，升降蓋寡。徒以馮藉世資，用相陵駕，都正俗士，斟酌時宜，品目少多，隨事俯仰，劉毅所云「下品無高門，上品無賤族」者也。歲月遷訛，斯風漸篤，**凡厥衣冠，莫非二品，自此以還，遂成卑庶。**周、漢之道，以智役愚，臺隸參差，用成等級；**魏晉以來，以貴役賤，士庶之科，較然有辨。**[274]

Official candidates in the Jin dynasty were clearly aware of and constantly referred to the "two separate paths (二途)" and the "distinction between official posts for the *shi* aristocrats and *shu* commoners (士庶之科)" that Shen Yue named in the above paragraphs. There is abundant anecdotal evidence on how aristocrats viewed administrative positions at local governments as well as individuals (usually of humble backgrounds) who pursued such opportunities with great disdain. For example, Suo Jing 索靖 (219-303), a Jin general, commented that his son 索綝

[274] *Songshu* 94, pp. 2301-02.

Suo Lin (?-316) "was so talented that he should serve in the imperial court and temple instead of letting his talent go to waste in dealing with bundles of bamboo strips. Those clerical posts at provincial or commandry governments shall not taint my son 廊廟之才, 非簡札之用, 州郡吏不足污吾兒也."[275] Dao Wei 到撝 (433-490), an official at the Song and Qi dynasties in the south, once mocked one of his peers, Wang Yan 王晏 (?-497), for his career path: "Yan was initially an Attendant-in-Ordinary at a princely region, then was promoted to Supernumerary Cavalier Gentleman-in-Attendance there. Individuals who consider themselves pure and refined would reject such appointments. [Dao Wei] therefore made fun of him 晏先為國常侍, 轉員外散騎郎, 此二職清華所不為, 故以此嘲之."[276]

Besides the social stigma, individuals from non-elite backgrounds frequently found themselves trapped in these "impure" positions for life, which further demonstrates the impact of separate paths for officials from the elite and non-elite backgrounds. Later a heroic figure of the Jin dynasty, Yi Xiong 易雄, in his early days "worked as a district-level clerk. He considered himself to be too humble and saw no way to go up, so he took off his headwrap, hung it on the entrance of the district government, and quit 少為縣吏, 自念卑賤, 無由自達, 乃脫幘挂縣門而去."[277] Yi Xiong internalized the kind of disdain for local clerical jobs as expressed by the aristocratics Suo Jing and Dao Wei. He was also conscious of how little opportunity for promotion was there for a clerical staff at a district-level government, which led to his decision to opt out. His experience was echoed by Wang Shen 王沈 (?-266), who also "came from a humble background. He could not integrate with his time, and therefore was suppressed by his contemporary aristocrats. He was employed as a commandery-level writing clerk. There, he felt

[275] *Jinshu* 60, p. 1650.
[276] *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), vol. 25, p. 677.
[277] *Jinshu* 89, p. 2314.

depressed since his ambition could not be achieved. 出於寒素, 不能隨時沉浮, 為時豪所抑. 仕郡文學掾, 鬱鬱不得志."[278] Individuals from humble backgrounds faced unprecedented challenges to move up from their appointments in local government in Jin dynasty. In contrast to the ancient examples cited by Shen Yue, where fishers and builders became political leaders, this new era was marked by the rigid stratification of social class, which rendered individual talent and accomplishment much less critical in the making of a successful career in the government.

Aristocrats like Suo Lin and Dao Wei who directly benefited from such a system no longer accepted roles that could not afford the privileges they sought in government jobs. Against this background, a cluster of entry-level positions at the central government, jointly called the "Yellow-Cavaliers (*Huang-San* 黃散)," began to gain popularity for the "pure and refined" lifestyle that came with them:

> From Wei to Jin times, [the government] established four positions of Gentleman-in-Attendance Serving at the Yellow Gate, who took charge of matters of the Office of Chancellery together with the Palace Attendant Supervisor. Same as Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary, this role was considered pure and refined. The term "Yellow-Cavaliers" referred to these two positions.
>
> 自魏至晉，置給事黃門侍郎四人，與侍中俱管門下眾事，與散騎常侍並清華，世謂之黃散焉。[279]

Gentleman-in-Attendance Serving at the Yellow Gate *(Jishi huangmen shilang* 給事黃門侍郎*)*, more conveniently called Gentleman-in-Attendance at the Yellow Gate *(Huangmen shilang* 黃門

[278] *Jinshu* 92, p. 2381.
[279] *Chuxueji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), vol. 12, p. 283.

侍郎), can be best described as being an emperor's associate and companion.[280] They worked under the Palace Attendant Supervisor (*Shizhong* 侍中) that led the Office of Chancellery (*Menxia sheng* 門下省). Within the same department, the Cavalier (*Sanqi* 散騎) constituted an independent section led by the Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary *(Sanqi changshi* 散騎常侍), with Cavalier Gentlemen-in-Attendance (*Sanqi shilang* 散騎侍郎) working under him.[281] The Cavalier officials also served the emperor intimately; for this reason, they were usually elected from an emperor's "relatives and longstanding acquaintances 親舊."[282]

Both the Gentleman-in-Attendance at the Yellow Gate and the Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary were government positions of the fifth rank in the Western Jin, requiring a second *pin* rank (the highest one could get) from their holders. Together with their supervisors, they were said to be responsible for reviewing policy recommendations submitted to the emperor, as the Chancellery (*Mengxia*) department they belonged to played a pivotal role in the bureaucratic system by helping emperors process and revise incoming policies and documents for publication and distribution.[283] In spite of the seemingly serious and demanding nature of such positions, it was reported that for the actual holders of such titles, a typical day consisted of no more than "accompanying emperors to travel in and out of his palace and chatting with them 出

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[280] "Since the Wei and Jin times, Gentlemen-in-Attendance Serving at the Yellow Gate were jobs for serving and safeguarding [the emperor] 魏晉以來，給事黃門侍郎並為侍衛之官," from: *Tongdian* 21, p. 549.
[281] "Despite being listed under the Office of Chancellery, they formed a separate office 雖隸門下，別為一省," from: *Tang liudian* 唐六典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), vol. 8, p. 246。
[282] *Taiping yulan* 224, p. 1066a.
[283] "In the Wei and Jin times, the Cavalier Attendants-in-Ordinary, the Cavalier Gentlemen-in-Attendance, the Palace Attendant Supervisor, and the Gentlemen-in-Attendance at the Yellow Gate all evaluated and articulated in the affairs of the Division of Officials. After Jin dynasty's retreat to the South, this arrangement was discontinued 魏、晉散騎常侍、侍郎，與侍中、黃門侍郎共平尚書奏事，江左乃罷," from: *Songshu* 40, p. 1244; also see: Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 329.

入侍從, 與上談議" and serving as "subjects that greet guests at banquets 賓宴之臣."[284] Multiple historical records explicitly stated that they "did not take charge of specific matters 不典事."[285]

The "Yellow-Cavaliers" were redundant officials (*rong guan* 冗官). But the very redundancy of such roles satisfied the needs for "purity" in the mind of aristocrats. Precisely because of their lack of actual clerical responsibilities, such positions afforded the elites a lifestyle of detachment, without giving up on all the privileges that came with a government employment.[286] For instance, the phonetics scholar Meng Kang 孟康 was once hired as a Cavalier Gentlemen-in-Attendance due to his personal relation with the empress. While serving in this position, he found time to "read classics and traditions widely, due to his employment as a redundant official 因在冗官，博讀書傳."[287] Already in the Cao Wei period, the government elected descendants of aristocratic families and young relatives of the imperial house to these roles based on familial background and nepotism, instead of personal merits.[288] This was partly by design, as Cao Pi intended for the Cavaliers roles to be preparatory roles for young elites who were to govern local regions: "it is my intention to make the *shi* gentlemen under heaven to first gain experience as a Cavalier, before being sent out to take charge of prefectures and commanderies 天下之士, 欲使皆先歷散騎, 然後出据州郡, 是吾本意也."[289] In practice, however, most of the Cavalier officials preferred to return to the comfortable environment at the central government as soon as possible. According to Yan Buke's study, while many of the elite holders of such positions were indeed dispatched to serve in local governments, most of them were

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[284] *Taiping yulan* 224, p. 1066a.
[285] *Jinshu* 24, p. 733; *Chuxueji* 12, p. 287; *Tongdian* 21, p. 552.
[286] Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 118.
[287] *Sanguozhi* 16, p. 506.
[288] "At that time, Cavalier Attendants-in-Ordinary were filled with descendants from aristocratic clans 是時，散騎侍郎多貴戚子弟," from *Weizhi* 魏志, quoted in: *Beitang shuchao* 58, in *Tangdai sida leishu* 1, p. 231; "Supernumerary attendants and attendants-in-ordinary were redundant support roles. Most of them were relatives of the emperor's family members or descendants of aristocratic clans 員外侍郎及給事冗從，皆是帝室茂親，或貴遊子弟," from: *Taiping yulan* 221, p. 1054.
[289] *Wei mingchen zou* 魏名臣奏, quoted in: *Sanguozhi* 24, p. 680.

promoted back into the Chancellery not long after.[290] This career path stood in sharp contrast to the one treaded by official candidates of non-elite backgrounds who were elected through the recommendation system as the "filial pious and incorruptible." The latter group usually started out in a local government and entered the central government after amassing multiple years of experience.

Because of all the privileges that came with the "Yellow-Cavaliers" career path, competition for these positions among the aristocrats intensified. As the demands for such roles went up, the governments responded by inventing new ways to accommodate more individuals to become "Yellow-Cavaliers." The Wei government offered to the likes of Ren Kai 任愷, Wang Rui 王濬, and Sima You 司馬攸 the Cavalier Attendants-in-Ordinary position on a supernumerary (*yuanwai* 員外) basis. This meant their employment was outside this role's authorized quota of four. The agenda for creating these supernumerary employments was said to be: "at that time, aristocrats preferred idle employment, therefore [the government] established supernumerary roles 於時公族務在閒任, 故置外位."[291] But it was not until the Jin dynasty that the government hosted a total of six types of Cavalier jobs to satisfy the appetite for this title by the elites.[292] In spite of the massively increased quota, there remained many more individuals who were first hired on a supernumerary basis. Therefore, it was said that "the household names of Jin dynasty that were put in charge of state affairs usually started out as a Supernumerary Cavalier Attendants-in-Attendance 晉代名家身有國制者，起家多為員外散

[290] Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, p. 122.
[291] "Jin zhugong zan 晉諸公贊," quoted in: *Beitang shuchao* 58, in *Tangdai sida leishu* 1, p. 230.
[292] *Jinshu* 24, pp. 733-34.

騎侍郎."[293] As Lian Xianyong and Zhang Xuhua argued, this might have partly served to strengthen the alliance between the Jin ruling house and the aristocratic families.[294]

The emergence of the "Yellow-Cavaliers" career track within the bureaucratic system in early medieval China facilitated the aristocratic turn of the nine ranks system. The election of such roles reinforced the aristocratic forces within bureaucracy that a bureaucratic system sought to overcome. As the "Yellow-Cavalier" type of positions were, by design, to provide companionship for the emperors, imperial relatives and members of the aristocratic families became top candidates naturally due to their affinity with the aristocratic lifestyle and the social circles. Moreover, the incorporation of such roles into the nine ranks system dissociated *pin* ranks with individual merit, thus steering the nine ranks system away from its meritocratic purpose. Redundant as they were, "Yellow-Cavaliers" required their holders to be of the highest second *pin* rank. Unbiased arbiters in this new era frequently granted elite candidates the highest rank solely based on their family status, a practice that was named "tying second rank to family status (*erpin xizi* 二品系資)."[295] The second rank became a marker of elite candidates that separated them from their "impure (*zhuo* 濁)"non-elite peers in the bureaucratic system. This divide between the second *pin* rank and all ranks below eventually evolved into the difference between "the superior rank (*shangpin* 上品)" and "the inferior rank (*xiapin* 下品)," which showed that everything below the second rank was considered categorically inferior. This binary was most famously adopted in the aforementioned sensational statement by Liu Yi: "among holders of the superior rank, there is no candidate from impoverished households; among holders of the inferior ranks, there is no candidate from influential clans (上品無寒門, 下

[293] *Tongdian* 21, p. 553.
[294] Lian Xianyong 連先用, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao sanqi zhuguan de ruogan wenti yanjiu* 魏晉南北朝散騎諸官的若干問題研究 (M.A. thesis, Zhengzhou daxue, 2015); Zhang, *Zhonggu shiqi qingzhuo guanzhi yanjiu*, pp. 102-103.
[295] *Jinshu* 46, p. 1311.

品無勢族)." While candidates from less privileged backgrounds did sometimes enter the superior rank track, this new system overwhelmingly relied on a candidate's family background to determine his placement within the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Notably, the second *pin* rank also evolved into multiple tiers. This was a process that intertwined with the elites' effort to establish a hierarchy among themselves, something practiced by the crowd of fifteen "ostentatious" individuals purged by Cao Rui. As Zhang Xuhua has shown, as the competition for more prestigious titles intensified, members of the elite class developed a new ranking scheme within the second *pin* rank based on the varying degrees of aristocracy to allocate the increasingly limited opportunities to serve.[296] At the top of the hierarchy were candidates "evidently of second *pin* rank (*zhuoran erpin* 灼然二品)." This title was borrowed from the Jin-dynasty recommendation system, where a small fraction of locally recommended individuals received a special remark "evidently so (*zhuoran* 灼然)" based on demonstrated extraordinary talent.[297] Now, it described the most privileged aristocratic clans, as seen in the usage "belonging to the evident clans 門在灼然,"[298] and was prefixed to those candidates of the second *pin* ranks that came from such backgrounds. Below the "evidently so" group were the second and third tiers, named "second *pin* rank based on family status (*mendi erpin* 門地二品)" and "with talent worthy of second *pin* rank (*erpin caikan* 二品才堪)." This distinction was made explicit in the writings of Wang Yun 王蘊, a Jin-dynasty official, who routinely noted the sources of an official candidate's boosted status by clarifying whether it was

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[296] Zhang, *Jiupin zhongzhengzhi yanjiu*, pp. 214-19.
[297] For instance, Deng You 鄧攸 was "recommended as an 'evidently of second rank' 舉灼然二品." In the case of Wen Qiao 溫嶠, the title was referred to simply as "evidently 灼然." See their biographies in *Jinshu* 90 and 67.
[298] The expression can be found in *Jinshu* 114, p. 2917. In Northern Wei dynasty, there were eight clans that were considered "evident (*zhuoran* 灼然)." *Weishu* characterized these eight clans as "since the founding emperor, [members of these clans have been holding] prestigious titles unparalleled of their time and government roles that [afforded them privileges] approximated kings and dukes 太祖以降, 勛著當世, 位盡王公," from: *Weishu* 113, p. 3014.

due to family status (地 *di*) or talent (才 *cai*): "Yun constantly sent reports to [Emperor Jianwen] that wrote 'such and such candidate came from prestigious family, and such and such candidate is talented.' 蘊輒連狀白之, 曰: '某人有地, 某人有才.'" The positioning of the last tier "with talent worthy of second rank" at the lowest place reflects both the waning relevance of the discourse of meritocracy in the political world, as well as the marginal state of candidates from lower social state within the larger cohort of second-rank official candidates in Jin times.[299]

The effort to systematically categorize and differentiate degrees of privilege afforded by one's family background eventually led to the overhaul of the bureaucratic ranking system in both the Northern Wei (386-535) and the Southern Liang (502-557) dynasties. One shared characteristic of these two overhauls was the massive increases of the number of ranks (thirty in total for Northern Wei; twenty-five in total for Southern Liang). The Northern Wei reforms spear headed by Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (467-499, born Tuoba Hong 拓跋宏; r. 471-499) in 495 and 499 introduced the distinction between full ranks and associate ranks (*cong pin* 從品), while creating a more granular ranking scheme for government roles below the third rank. As for the Southern Liang, Emperor Wu 梁武帝 (464-549, born Xiao Yan 蕭衍; r. 502-549) executed a reform in 508 under the advice of Xu Mian 徐勉 (465-535), who led the Division of Officials at that time, that created separate sets of government roles for elites and non-elites for civil officials.[300] As this reform has been well-documented and researched by historians since Miyazaki, below I provide only a summary of the scholarly consensus regarding its relationship with the decline of the nine ranks system.[301] Emperor Wu of Liang's new bureaucratic hierarchy

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[299] Zhang Xuhua argued that the *caikan* category included only the lower *shi* elites and excluded commoners. See: Zhang, *Jiupin zhongzheng zhi yanjiu*, p. 217.
[300] *Suishu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), vol. 26, p. 741. For a general overview of the Southern Liang system, see: Zhang, *Zhonggu shiqi qingzhuo guanzhi yanjiu*, pp. 193-204.
[301] Zhang, *Zhonggu shiqi qingzhuo guanzhi yanjiu*, pp. 193-237; Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 278-79.

included twenty-five *guanpin* 官品 ranks (i.e. ranks of government jobs, not individuals' *pin* ranks) in two separate streams. All candidates from non-elite backgrounds were employed at one of the seven "out-of-class" ranks, which corresponded to the seven *pin* ranks from the third to the ninth in the old system. In contrast, elite candidates took on roles arrayed by a granular scheme of eighteen "in-class" ranks. The result of this new system, according to *The History of the Southern Dynasties*, was the even more unfair treatment for average individuals who sought for government careers:

> [Xu Mian] instituted the change from nine ranks to eighteen ranks. Since then, those who obsessively pursued advancements bribed their way up, whereas those who held fast to the Way by staying in lower positions came to be obscure due to poverty.
>
> 其制開九品為十八班，自是貪冒苟進者以財貨取通，守道淪退者以貧寒見沒矣。[302]

However, when reading this account against the statistical evidence gathered by Wang Zhenglu, we can see that this reform under Emperor Wu of Liang was probably not a change as drastic as the historiographer claimed, since the southern Liang and its subsequent Chen dynasties did not witness any significant dip in their percentages of high officials coming from non-elite backgrounds (see chart 1). Instead, it is more appropriate to interpret this change as the institutionalization of several ongoing trends that had weakened the effectiveness of the nine ranks system since its inception. These trends included (1) the separation of an elite class of government officials from the non-elite ones through the construction of "pure" versus "impure" career paths, (2) the establishment of a hierarchy among officials from the elites class based on their varying levels of prestige, and last but not least, (3) the shift of the official recruitment system from selecting individual on a meritocratic basis to alignment the prestige

[302] *Nanshi* 60, p. 1478.

offered by a government job with the prestige of candidate's family. By the first half of the sixth century, the nine ranks system had clearly failed its meritocratic mission, with the higher *pin* ranks detached from individual merit.

4. The Conferring of Higher Ranks by Emperors

The transformation of the nine ranks system in early medieval China from a meritocratic institution to an aristocratic one took place as the result of actions by both the aristocratic clans and the emperors. My following discussion focuses on how the practice of "conferring higher ranks (*zengwei* 增位)" by emperors further contributed to the demise of the nine ranks system as a meritocratic institution.

Chen Changqi 陳長琦 first established the link between the decline of nine ranks system and the abuse of *zengwei* in his comprehensive study of the forty-six cases of *zengwei* from 265 to 569.[303] According to Chen, the earliest *zengwei* took place when the Emperor Wu of Jin 晉武帝 (236-290, born Sima Yan 司馬炎; r. 266-290) ascended to the throne: in 265, he announced that "all civil and military officials shall ascend ranks by two 文武普增位二等"[304] as part of his imperial order in preparation of a new political era. As Chen has convincingly shown, we must make sense of *zengwei* in the context of the nine ranks. To allow all of his currently serving officials to "ascend ranks by two 增位二等" means that they would move two ranks up in their *pin* ranks, which raises the ceilings for them in terms of future promotions.[305] For example, if an official first received a fourth *pin* rank from the unbiased arbiter and started off as an official of the seventh rank, he could move up to reach the fourth rank but not further up, unless his *pin*

[303] Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, p. 212-14.
[304] *Jinshu* 3, p. 52.
[305] Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 206-07, 216-17.

rank was later reassigned at a higher rank. For this person, upon receiving this *zengwei* from the Emperor Wu of Jin, his *pin* rank immediately rose to the second and he became eligible for further promotions.

Functionally, *zengwei* provided a sense of hope for the entire officialdom by partially removing the barriers created by the strict *pin* ranks. New emperors in early medieval China used it to get buy-ins from officials, especially those whose careers had stagnated due to the limitations of their *pin* ranks. Emperors typically included both "civil and military (*wenwu* 文武)" officials in their announcements, as long as they were still serving. In some cases, emperors nominally extended the benefit by combining *zengwei* with words such as "universally (*pu* 普)" or "all under heaven (*tianxia* 天下)." For instance, after the burial of Emperor Wu was completed, his successor Emperor Hui of Jin 晉惠帝 (259-307, born Sima Zhong 司馬衷; r. 290-301, 301-307) announced that "all under heaven shall ascend in ranks by one; those who helped organize the burial rituals shall ascend by two 增天下位一等, 預喪事者二等."[306] This type of *zengwei* included those with a *pin* rank but currently without appointment. It can be interpreted as the emperor's gesture of benevolence to both current officials and non-officials who might soon join the government.[307]

Building or strengthening his political stance, in particular his alliance with the officials, was the overarching motivation for an emperor to carry out *zengwei*. In investigating the forty-six cases of *zengwei* in early medieval China, Chen Changqi identified fourteen different kinds, with more than half of them taking place in the Eastern Jin (fourteen) and the Liu Song (thirteen) dynasties in southern China.[308] I further summarize them into three main categories

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[306] *Jinshu* 4, p 89.
[307] See: Chen Changqi's distinction between "文武增位" and "普增位," in: Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 199-200.
[308] Chen, *Guanpin de qiyuan*, pp. 212-14.

depending on the varying ritual needs that triggered *zengwei*: (1) change of era, (2) establishment of crown prince or empress, and (3) other celebratory rituals.

Most frequently, an emperor bestowed higher ranks to officials when he announced the beginning of a new reign era. An era change tended to be a liminal time when the emperor's political power was yet to solidify. This was especially true in the case of Emperor Hui of Jin who "conferred two higher ranks to all officials 增吏位二等" upon his return to the throne, which had been temporarily usurped by his clansman Sima Lun 司馬倫 (240-301) amidst the infamous "rebellion of the eight princes."[309] Later in the Eastern Jin era, immediately following the dethronement of the emperor Emperor Fei of Jin 晉廢帝 (born Sima Yi 司馬奕; r. 365-372) as orchestrated by the powerful general Huan Wen 桓溫 (312-373), the newly enthroned Emperor Xiaowu of Jin 晉孝武帝 (362-396, born Sima Yao 司馬曜; r. 372-396) also announced the conferring of two higher ranks to all civil and military officials.[310] Later, during the Southern Dynasties, Emperor Wen of Song 宋文帝 (407-453, born Liu Yilong 劉義隆; r. 424-453) was enthroned in the same year as the murders of two of his older brothers by powerful ministers at the Song court. He ordered "to change the era name from Jingping to Yuanjia and grant civil and military officials two higher ranks 改景平二年為元嘉元年, 文武增位二等."[311] All three emperors referenced here were facing political perils and consequently motivated to win over support and establish their power by leveraging *zengwei.* Accompanying *zengwei*, they also

[309] "An amnesty and two higher ranks to all officials were announced 大赦, 增吏位二等," from: *Jinshu* 4, p. 98.
[310] "An amnesty was applied to all under heaven. A public celebration was hosted for five consecutive days. Two higher ranks were conferred to all civil and military officials. Those who are filial pious, obedient, loyal, and devoted, as well as men and women who are widowed, without offspring, or orphaned, were relieved with five bushels of rice 大赦天下，大酺五日，增文武位二等，孝順忠貞鰥寡孤獨米人五斛," from: *Jinshu* 9, p. 221.
[311] *Songshu* 5, p. 73.

offered other benefits to the general public, such as amnesty, distributing food and calling for grand banquets (*dapu* 大酺) to be held across his region, and canceling unpaid debts.[312]

The appointment of an empress or crown prince constituted a very similar liminal moment, as it introduced redistributions or transfers of political power that increased instability. *Zengwei*, in this context, helped build good will towards the chosen individual and appease those who were in favor of other candidates. For example, in the year 375, Emperor Xiaowu of Jin appointed the daughter of high official Wang Yun 王蘊 (330-384) as his empress, which further strengthened the Wang clan's influence.[313] Following this, he announced the "adding of one higher rank for all civil and military officials 加文武位一等,"[314] an act that likely served to appease other officials. This happened once again in 387, when the emperor appointed his oldest son Sima Dezong (382-419; r. 396-419) as the crown prince. Sima Dezong was a child with developmental disabilities. According to *Jinshu*: "Emperor [An] was not intellectual. From childhood to adulthood, he was capable of neither speaking nor even comprehending seasonal changes. No orders issued by him came from his own will 帝不惠. 自少及長, 口不能言, 雖寒暑之變, 無以辯也. 凡所動止, 皆非己出."[315] When the announcement came out, Emperor Xiaowu accompanied it with a series of remedial actions–similar to what followed his own enthronement–to gather support for the young, weak crown prince from both his officials and the general population, including "an amnesty, to grant civil and military officials

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[312] See: "An amnesty and a change of era [were announced]. Those who were orphaned or widowed were relieved with five bushels of grains. A public celebration was hosted for five consecutive days 大赦, 改元, 孤寡賜穀五斛, 大酺五日," from: *Jinshu* 4, p. 98; "An amnesty was applied to all under heaven. The second year of the Jingping era was changed to the first year of the Yuanjia era. Two higher ranks were conferred to all civil and military officials. All overdue rents and debts were cancelled 大赦天下, 改景平二年為元嘉元年, 文武賜位二等, 逋租宿債勿復收," from: *Songshu*, vol. 5, p. 73.
[313] Wang Yun's father Wang Meng 王濛 (309-347) was Upper Administrator at the Ministry of Education (*situ zuo zhangshi* 司徒左長史) and a favorite of Emperor Xiaowu's father, Emperor Jianwen of Jin 晉簡文帝 (320-372, born Sima Yu 司馬昱; r. 372). Also see: *Jinshu* 93 and *Jinshu* 32.
[314] *Jinshu* 9, p. 227.
[315] *Jinshu* 10, p. 267.

two higher ranks, to permit the holding of grant banquets for five consecutive days, and to gift all officials with cloth of varying amounts and kinds 大赦, 增文武位二等, 大酺五日, 賜百官布帛各有差."[316]

Emperors invoked *zengwei* also as a means of celebration in a wide array of situations. Celebratory moments could occur after the emperors completed important ritual tasks, ranging from his own coming-of-age ceremony[317] to making offerings at the altar of the southern suburb.[318] Emperors sometimes issued special rewards in the form of *zengwei* to officials who contributed to the success of ritual projects. This occurred, for example, when the new imperial temple was completed in 289. Aside from assigning one higher rank to all, Emperor Wu of Jin 晉武帝 (236-290, born Sima Yan 司馬炎; r. 266-290) rewarded contributors to the building project with one more higher rank.[319] Another example was Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (464-549, born Xiao Yan 蕭衍; r. 504-549), who provided *zengwei* specifically to individuals from his hometown that pilgrimaged with him to his mother's mausoleum.[320] This usage of *zengwei*

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[316] *Jinshu* 9, p. 236.

[317] During Emperor Cheng of Jin 晉成帝 (321-342, born Sima Yan 司馬衍; r. 325-342)'s time: "The Emperor completed his capping ceremony, announced an amnesty, conferred one higher rank to all civil and military officials, hosted a public celebration for three consecutive days, and relieved all men and women who were struggling to survive on their own due to being widowed, without offspring, or orphaned by sending each one of them five bushels of rice 帝加元服, 大赦, 增文武位一等, 大酺三日, 賜鰥寡孤獨不能自存者米, 人五斛," from: *Jinshu* 7, p. 169.

[318] This ceremony usually took place in winter and was an important ritual for emperors to communicate with and please the heavenly spirit. "[On the first month of 437, the emperor] rode his chariot to make offerings at the southern heavenly altar. He announced an amnesty for all under heaven, conferred one higher rank to all civil and military officials, and relieved those who were struggling to survive on their own due to being without offspring, elderly, or stricken by the six diseases by sending each one of them five bushels of grains 車駕親祠南郊, 大赦天下, 文武賜位一等, 孤老六疾不能自存者, 人賜穀五斛," from: *Songshu* 5, p. 84.

[319] "…[On 289,] the imperial temple was completed…ancestral tablets were migrated into the new temple. The emperor welcomed them on the sideway and then performed the *xia* ceremony [a grand Confucian ritual for worshipping the ancestrors]. Afterwards, an amnesty was announced. One higher rank was conferred to all civil and military officials. Those who participated in the construction of the imperial temple were conferred two higher ranks ...太廟成...遷神主于新廟, 帝迎于道左, 遂祫祭. 大赦, 文武增位一等, 作廟者二等," *Jinshu* 3, p. 79.

[320] "On the tenth year of the Datong era [544]…the imperial chariot arrived at the Lanling to visit the Jianning mausoleum; on theday of Xinchou, he arrived at the Xiu mausoleum, and ordered: '…the senior and junior members from [my mother's] hometown travelled here from afar. Their emotions and expressions are sincere. In order to console their hearts, I confer one higher rank to all of them, with additional rewards 大同十年...輿駕幸蘭陵, 謁建寧陵; 辛丑, 至修陵. 詔曰: '...故鄉老少, 接踵遠至, 情貌孜孜, 若歸於父, 宜有以慰其此心. 並可錫位一階, 并加頒賚,'" see : *Liangshu* 3, p. 88. According to the same text, the Jian[ning] mausoleum was occupied by his mother Empress Dowager Zhang, and the Xiu mausoleum his late wife, Empress Xi.

occasionally extended to celebrations unrelated to ritual, such as an auspicious event or military victory[321]; overall, it reflects the need for emperors in early medieval China to constantly consolidate their alliance with their officials and associates by incentivizing the latter with better career prospects, even without pressing political issues.

Emperors in early medieval China abused *zengwei* to solidify their power, since for many of them their survival hinged on the support of their officials. Frequently invoking *zengwei* came at the price of the nine ranks system, whose meritocratic principles diminished as officials' *pin* ranks suffered from inflation. We can infer the prevalence of *zengwei* in the fourth century from its transmission to the non-Han-Chinese political systems. Later Zhao was a regime ruled by the Jie 羯 tribe in northern China from 319 to 351. In 335, its Emperor Wu of Later Zhao (295-349, born Shi Hu 石虎; r. 334-349) announced an amnesty, a change of era, and "conferring one higher rank to all officials 百官增位一等"[322] following his usurpation of the throne. This can be read as the monarch's conscious adoption of a Han Chinese political tradition. On the other hand, *Zengwei* continued to serve as part of the standard toolkit for Chinese emperors to mitigate political instability. Emperor Xiaowu of Jin, according to *The Book of Jin*, issued *zengwei* four times during his twenty-five years of reign, totalling six higher ranks for his officials. In other words, the *pin* rank of an official moved up automatically by one almost every four years in this period; as a result, any official would become eligible for serving as a top official (requiring a *pin* rank at the second) as long as he kept his job long enough, which rendered the *pin* rank meaningless as a measurement of someone's talent.

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[321] See: "Song Wendi jiahe xiu jingshi dashe zhe 宋文帝嘉禾秀京師大赦詔," from: *Wenguan cilin* 文館詞林, vol. 667, in *Shiyuan congshu* 適園叢書 (China: Nanlin Zhangshi, 1916), vol. 47, pp. 3b; "[Emperor Wen of Song announced] the end of emergency state that day, an amnesty for all under heaven, and one higher rank to all civil and military officials 是日解嚴, 大赦天下, 文武賜位一等," from: *Songshu* 9, p. 182.
[322] *Jinshu* 107, p. 2785.

Such higher ranks could sometimes be transferred to others. Following the death of Emperor Xiaoming of Northern Wei 北魏孝明帝 (510-528, born Yuan Xu 元詡; r. 515-528), a *zengwei* was announced with the added policy that "for those who are already of the second rank or above and cannot receive a higher rank, it can be transferred to their son or younger brother 若二品以上不能自受者, 任授兒弟."[323] This indicates that the Northern Wei emperors had possibly sent out too many higher ranks to their officials that they ceased to become meaningful for the latter unless they could be applied to the junior members of their families. In this case, these higher ranks completely contradicted the initial point of a personalized *pin* evaluation that was the foundation of the nine ranks system. Instead, much like the Han tradition of "appointing one's offspring (*renzi*)," it became a system that rewarded current officials with a special privilege that they could share with their heirs.[324]

5. Concluding Remarks

The nine ranks system, despite its lack of success in promoting a merit-based system of official selection, was adopted throughout the early medieval period. This system lasted for over three hundred years and was eventually abolished after the reunification of the northern and southern parts of China by the Sui dynasty (581-619).[325] Zhang Xuhua's study has convincingly argued that the system was ended as part of the Sui emperors' continued reform of local governments from 583 to 607, which led to an overhaul of the administrative structure of their territory. All previously established commandries (*jun* 郡) and prefectures (*zhou* 州) were

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[323] *Weishu* 9, p. 249.
[324] For a discussion of the link between the *renzi* system and nine ranks system, see: Yan, *Chaju zhidu bianqian shigao*, pp. 117-26.
[325] Tang Zhangru argued that the actual abolishment of the system was at Tang dynasty. See: Tang, "Menfa de xingcheng jiqi shuailuo 門閥的形成及其衰落," *Wuhan daxue renwen kexue xuebao (lishi zhuanhao)* 武漢大學人文科學學報(歷史專號) (1959), p. 22.

abolished. The "prefecture-commandry-district (*zhou-jun-xian* 州-郡-縣)" system (three levels of local governments) was transformed into a new "commandry-district (*jun-xian* 郡-縣)" system (only two levels). During this reform of the local government system, the assignment of unbiased arbiters to select candidates from these local regions were halted.[326]

As this chapter has shown, *pin* ranks and the nine ranks system as a whole had ceased to make a difference for official candidates from non-elite backgrounds long before the fadeout of the unbiased arbiters during the Sui dynasty. With the establishment of the "Yellow-Cavaliers" as a separate career track for the top elites, meritocracy was sidelined. The system came into being as part of the Cao Wei government's effort to contain the political influence of powerful elites. Cao Rui's effort to wipe out the coalitions of "ostentatious" scholarly officials that interfered with this mission was not taken up by the Jin ruling house. Instead, the elites and the emperors became complicit in transforming *pin* ranks into metrics of nobility and streamlining the process of placing elites into key central government roles. Already in the Jin times, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) had proposed to adopt examinations to weed out incapable official candidates and punish those who enabled their candidacies:

> Those who were recommended under the "extraordinary" and "filial pious" categories shall be tested with the classics and respond to political issues on paper. This is to prevent them from practicing crime and wrongdoings. Those who failed the tests must not be employed; and the officials who recommended them must be published and jailed as well…if [the recommenders] received bribes and engaged in unjust practices of recommendations, once such activities were exposed and verified, the recommenders shall be expelled from serving in government for life and would

[326] Zhang, *Jiupin zhongzhengzhi yanjiu*, pp. 479-92, 519-21.

never be excused even in the case of amnesty. The recommended candidates will be charged with the same crime as the recommenders. Once this is put into practice, in one or two years, we will realize that most "extraordinary" and "filial pious" candidates could not pass the test. We will also realize that the recommendation practice under heaven has long been crude. But after that, more and more people will refine their morality and study diligently.

秀孝皆宜如舊試經答策，防其罪對之奸，當令必絕其不中者勿署，吏加罰禁錮…若受賕而舉所不當，發覺有驗者除名，禁錮終身，不以赦令原，所舉與舉者同罪。今試用此法，治一二歲之間，秀孝必多不行者，亦足以知天下貢舉不精之久矣。過此，則必多修德而勤學者矣。[327]

Ge Hong's vision for a new system of official employment that relies on testing, publishment, and centralized surveillance of the process only became the practice in China some three centuries later. The arduously long unfolding of the history of nine ranks system eventually gave way to the dominance of the civil examination system, but it had a more lasting impact on the Chinese intellectual world. In the next chapter, I will investigate one stream of such impact in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

[327] *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 15, p. 404.

Chapter 4: Buddhist Reimaginations of the Nine Ranks System in Fifth Century

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the meritocratic system of nine ranks became an institution that supported aristocracy since the Wei-Jin transition. Elite clans since the second half of the third century began to develop a vested interest to place their descendants into government roles by manipulating the ranking system. Throughout the early medieval period, the nine ranks system continued to function to sustain these elites' sociopolitical prestige, before it was discontinued and replaced by civil examinations in the Sui dynasty.

The continued relevance of the nine ranks system in these three hundred years attested to the tenacity of the Chinese aristocracy in early medieval China. After the Jin regime retreated to Jiankang city after losing Luoyang and Chang'an to the Xiongnu-led regime of Later Zhao in 311 and 316, respectively, China entered the era of the Northern and Southern dynasties with continued standoffs between northern and southern regimes. To those elites affiliated with the southern regimes, however, a sense of cultural continuity and social stability prevailed despite moments of military defeats and political disruptions, including the final downfall of the Jin dynasty in 420. Critical demographic and cultural changes that transpired in this period, such as the continuous inflow of ethnically non-Han people and their cultures, felt less visible and relevant to southern elites than to their northern counterparts. Partly, this intriguing phenomenon can be explained by the strong political alliances between these southern elites

and their new rulers. For any newcomers to the cultural scenes in South China, it was important to address and coexist with the traditions these elites valued.[328]

At the beginning of the fifth century, the nine ranks system was one of these prevalent old traditions, and Mahayana Buddhism was one of the most significant new forces being introduced into South China. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which Buddhists in this period sought to reconcile the nine-rank political institution with their religious worldview. I argue that the nine ranks system impacted Chinese Buddhism in at least two ways. First, for individuals who took the intellectual leadership for the emerging Chinese Buddhist communities, they reconciled the religious doctrine of karma with the aristocratic nine ranks system to adapt to the socio-political reality in China at that time. Second, they were also informed by the nine ranks system to visualize, add nuance to, and reformulate what salvation looks like for their Chinese audience.

The first part of my discussion below focuses on Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-417)—one of the most prominent Buddhist leaders in the fifth century—and his engagement with the nine ranks system in his apologetic writing. The second and third parts investigate the reimagination of nine ranks by Pure Land Buddhists at the beginning of the fifth century, as seen in soteriological discourses in sutras and motifs in visual arts. Overall, this chapter sheds light on the creative ways that Buddhism in early medieval China embraced the nine ranks system as a manifestation of social hierarchy, to attract followers who conformed to the aristocratic worldview, in which the system was embedded. It shows that the cultural significance of the nine ranks system went beyond China's political and institutional history into the cultural and religious history.

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[328] Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han*.

1. "Nine Ranks" in Huiyuan's Theory of Karmic Retribution

It is impossible to underestimate the extent to which Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-417) shaped Chinese Buddhism. He not only made the teachings of Buddha accessible to a wider audience, but also provided an exemplar of what it means to be a Chinese Buddhist, and what a Chinese Buddhist community looks like. Huiyuan's followers, walking all passages of life, highlighted his success in bringing Buddhism into common households, contributing to its further spread in China. Erik Zürcher, in his *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, contextualized Huiyuan's heritage as follows:

> His life marks the beginning of a new era in Chinese Buddhism…an era in which Buddhism has finally taken hold of all strata of Chinese society, from the imperial devotees of the Liu-Song dynasty and their Buddhist courtiers down to the illiterate masses of the population, and in which it had become an integral part of Chinese culture.[329]

Because Huiyuan played such a key part in transforming Chinese Buddhism into a religion that spoke to both the highest and the lowest echelons of society[330], his views on Chinese society and his strategies to address the issue of hierarchy and inequality merit our attention. Scholars have associated his success in spreading the Buddhist message to his residence in Lushan 庐山 (or Mount Lu, in current-day Jiangxi Province), where he built the first large-scale Chinese Buddhist community (close to 3,000 in membership) consisting of both ordained Buddhists and

[329] Erik Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China (Leiden: Brill, 1959), p. 239.
[330] For an overview of Huiyuan's followers and their backgrounds, see: Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨, Shi Yinhai 釋印海 trans., *Zhongguo jingtu jiaolishi* 中國淨土教理史 (Taipei: Huiri jiangtang, 1974), pp. 21-26, 35-37.

lay followers.[331] In his famous *Discourse on Why Monks Do Not Pay Homage to the Sovereign* 沙門不敬王者論, Huiyuan defended the independence of his Buddhist assembly with the argument that a Buddhist's pursuit of the ultimate source of truth (宗 *zong*) requires their detachment from the transformations of this world (化 *hua*), at which level the Confucians and the monarchs and their power operate; at the same time, he admitted the need for Buddhism to gather support from the latter groups.[332] The success of this *Discourse* provided a theoretical foundation to the continued expansion of Buddhist communities across China in the following centuries.

On political matters not directly involving the status of Buddhist assemblies, Huiyuan remained largely silent. As the power dynamics in China continued to be volatile, Huiyuan's reluctance to involve himself in political debates and his non-committal attitude towards political figures of his time possibly served to shield off future retaliations against his followers. This has no doubt created a challenge for scholars to reconstruct his political and social philosophy, not to mention his opinions about specific political institutions such as the nine ranks system. From his apologetic writing, however, it is possible to gain insights into Huiyuan's stance on political hierarchy and social inequality. A rare mention of the nine ranks system is buried in Huiyuan's *Discourse on the Three Types of Karma* 三報論, as part of his discussion of the Buddhist concept of "karmic retribution (*bao* 報)."

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[331] Zürcher, pp. 208-19; Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Hanwei Nanbeichao fojiao shi* 漢魏南北朝佛教史 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1991); Hong Yue Guo, *Rebirth and Karmic Retribution in Fifth-century China: A Study of the Teachings of the Buddhist Monk Lu Shan Huiyuan* (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2007), pp. 47-74.

[332] "Consequently, those who turn back to the source and pursue the ultimate source of truth do not spoil their spirits with [mundane] livings; those who transcend the mundane world do not burden their [transcendental] livings with emotions…to pursue the ultimate source truth means to not follow the transformations of this world…this is why monks disregard the formalities of the monarchs, focus on honoring their own mission, and do not accept noble titles from the monarchs while benefiting from their patronage. 是故反本求宗者, 不以生累其神; 超落塵封者, 不以情累其生…不順化以求宗…斯沙門之所以抗禮萬乘, 高尚其事, 不爵王侯而沾其惠者也," from: "Shamen bujing wangzhe lun 沙門不敬王者論," *Hongmingji* 弘明集, vol. 5 (T52, no. 2102, p. 30c). Translation with modifications from: Harumi Hirano Ziegler (trans.), *The Collection for the Propagation and Clarification of Buddhism, Volume I* (Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai America, 2015), p. 180.

The overarching argument of this text is that the class divisions experienced by individuals, as the result of the nine ranks system, must be attributed to karma.[333] Scholarly research on this text has been primarily focused on its relation to Huiyuan's philosophy of the immorality of the soul.[334] Little attention has been paid to Huiyuan's attitude of the nine ranks system and how it relates to the ethical challenge to his concept of karmic retribution:

> As humans' good and bad deeds gradually evolve, they result in the creation of the nine ranks. **All that has to do with the nine ranks do not fall under [the category of] "karmic retribution in this life."** What retributions in this life entail is utterly undecipherable by common beings.
>
> The nine ranks are not excluded from the three types of karmic retribution, either. Why? The mystery of the world operates on its own and never awaits us to manifest itself. Since their manifestations are beyond our control, retributions in this life also take effect on us in no time. **This is how retributions in this life works, and how they do not include the nine ranks.**
>
> 夫善惡之興其有漸。漸以之極則有九品之論。凡在九品，非現報之所攝。然則現報，絕夫常類可知。
>
> 類非九品，則非三報之所攝，何者？若利害交於目前而頓相傾奪。神機自運，不待慮而發。發不待慮，則報不旋踵而應。此現報之一隅，絕夫九品者也。[335]

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[333] For an overview of the various Chinese and Indian intellectual traditions on "karmic retribution" before Huiyuan, see: Zhang Xuesong 張雪松, "Huiyuan ye bao lun hui shuo su yuan 慧遠業報輪迴說溯源," *Zhongguo jing tu zong yan jiu* 中國淨土宗研究 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2008), pp. 82-89.

[334] Guo, *Rebirth and Karmic Retribution in Fifth-century China* (2007), pp. 169-201; Sangyop Lee, *The Soteriology of the Soul: The* Shen Bumie *Discourse in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2021), pp. 71-122.

[335] *Hongmingji* 5 (T52, p. 2102, p. 34b). Translation based on: Walter Liebenthal, "Shih Hui-yüan's Buddhism as Set Forth in His Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 70.4 (1950), pp. 255-57; Hirano Ziegler (trans.), *The Collection for the Propagation and Clarification of Buddhism, Volume I*, p. 203. Hirano Ziegler rendered the term "九品" as "[a traditional] theory [in China] on the nine grades" throughout his translation, but this interpretation seems unsupported. "九品" was widely known to Huiyuan and his contemporaries as an operating political institution, instead of an ancient theory.

"Retributions in this life (*xianbao* 現報)" in Huiyuan's writing appears to be a mysterious process in which human beings experience the immediate effect of one's actions. If the nine ranks attributed to individuals were not the results of this mechanism, then what was it? Based on Huiyuan's typology of the three types of karmic retribution, it is the outcome of one's actions in the past lives:

> The sutra says the following about karmic retribution: there are three types of retributions, the first is retributions in this life, the second is retributions in the next life, the third is retributions in one of the following lives.
>
> Retributions in this life means the good or bad karma, initiated by this body, takes effect on this very body. Retributions in the next life means the karma takes effect on an individual in their next life. Retributions in one of the following lives means the karma may wait for one's second next life, or third next life, or after one hundred or one thousand lives before it takes effect.
>
> Karmic retribution take effect on no other objects than one's consciousness. The consciousness does not settle in one place. It resonates with various things as it comes into contact with them. Depending on how fast or slow for the heart to resonate with one's karma, retribution may arrive early or late. While its time of arrival varies, the nature of retributions always correspond to the good or bad karma upon arrival. The severity of a given retribution also depends on the extent of one's good or evil deeds. These three types of retributions manifest nature's [mechanism of] rewarding and punishing [human actions].
>
> 經說業有三報：一曰現報，二曰生報，三曰後報。
>
> 現報者善惡始於此身即此身受。生報者來生便受。後報者或經二生三生百生千生，然後乃受。

受之無主，必由於心。心無定司，感事而應。應有遲速，故報有先後。先後雖異，咸隨所遇而為對。對有強弱，故輕重不同。斯乃自然之賞罰，三報之大略也。[336]

To decipher why Huiyuan expounded on and emphasized the delayed arrival of one's karma here, one must consider his interlocutor: Dai Kui 戴逵 (331-396), a famous critic of Buddhist theology, to whom Huiyuan wrote this text in response. Dai criticized the concept of "karmic retribution (*bao* 報)" by resorting to a classical issue of theology and ethics supported by our everyday observation: that men are often not rewarded for their good deeds, and not punished by their bad behavior.[337] The operating nine ranks system at that time, in fact, was an example where political privilege was not distributed based on merit, but rather on the accumulated wealth and influence of one's family. For intellectuals like Dai, the social implications of the Buddhis concept of karma, which presumed a positive correlation between action and outcome, certainly came across as tone-deaf and incongruent with their lived experience.

Huiyuan therefore had to confront the injustice of this world, while defending the ultimate justice that Buddhist karma represents. He began by acknowledging that karma's effect does not always arrive immediately.[338] Next, he argued that Dai's rebuttal ignored the larger Buddhist truth, which is superior to worldly teachings precisely because it helps people overcome their limited and misguided sense of justice and injustice in their present life:

People say that good merits yield no good fortunes and evil deeds yield no misfortunes. They appeal to the supernatural, being saddened by how they were mistreated, exclaiming over how heaven abuses the good people. I say all these teachings are limited

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[336] *Hongmingji* 5 (T52, no. 2102, p. 34b).
[337] See: "Treatise on Questioning the Buddhists 釋疑論," *Hongmingji* 18. For further historical context of Dai Kui's writing, see: Fang Litian 方立天, *Huiyuan jiqi foxue* 慧遠及其佛學 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 93-98.
[338] "In this world, there are people who accumulate good merits yet suffer from misfortunes, there are others who take ominous and evil actions yet achieve good fortunes. This is because their karmic retribution of this life have yet to arrive, while their karmic retribution from past lives are still manifesting themselves. 世或有積善而殃集, 或有凶邪而致慶. 此皆現業未就, 而前行始應." *Hongmingji* 5 (T52, no. 2102, p. 34b).

in their scopes and do not originate from a higher place. As a result, their followers subordinate the greater path to their frivolous accomplishments. Had they received the right instructions, their consciousnesses would have realized that the ultimate truth does not lie here.

Here Is why. The classics of this world limit themselves to the boundaries of our current life. They fail to illuminate what goes beyond. Since what goes on beyond this world is not illuminated, those who look for the truth confine themselves to what goes through their eyes and ears. This is why for the ancient kings, to reach the hearts of their people and to realize their potentials, they took care of [what goes through] their eyes and ears. If we can allow people to comprehensively understand the ways of both this world and the other world, in our pursuit of spreading the great teaching, everybody will reach the same conclusion, and avoid being confused by the many different paths and being shocked by their differences.

謂積善之無慶，積惡之無殃，感神明而悲所愚，慨天喪之於善人。咸謂名教之盡無宗於上，遂使大道翳於小成。以正言為善誘，應心求實必至理之無此。

原其所由，由世異典以一生為限不明其外。其外未明，故尋理者，自畢於視聽之內。此先王即民心而通其分，以耳目為關鍵者也。如令合內外之道，以求弘教之情，則知理會之必同，不惑眾塗而駭其異。[339]

To sum up, Huiyuan's discussion of the nine ranks served as an important part of his articulated response to the attack on the legitimacy of the Buddhist doctrine on karmic retribution by intellectuals who were troubled by the thorny issue of injustice and inequality permeating the lower socioeconomic class in an aristocratic society. Aside from practicing a

[339] *Hongmingji* 5 (T52, no. 2102, p. 34c).

complete withdrawal from political involvement himself, Huiyuan instructed his Buddhist community to turn away from this-worldly matters by interpreting suffering as results of one's actions in past lives,[340] whether it means to accept the injustices including the nine ranks system that was abused by the dominating elite families, or to shift one's focus towards cultivating good merits that will culminate in the religious salvation to come. His discussion of the three types of karmic retribution, therefore, encourages acceptance of social inequality and the status quo of early medieval Chinese aristocracy among his followers. This stance further reveals the social conservatism underlying Huiyuan's vision of a Buddhist's place in this world. As I have discussed, in his *Discourse on Why Monks Do Not Pay Homage to the Sovereign*, Huiyuan emphasized that Buddhist monks, while disengaged themselves in politics, do benefit from the charity and support of the dominating class.

One can clearly identify the heritage of Huiyuan in a debate between Buddhists and anti-Buddhist scholars a century later.[341] Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460-494), a prince and the second son of Emperor Wu of the Southern Qi dynasty (479-502), was one of the most high-profile Buddhist devotees at that time. In 489, at the literary salon where Xiao regularly hosts famous literati, one of his prominent associates, Fan Zhen 范縝 (450-510), openly challenged the Buddhist concept of karma by reasoning that the soul (*shen* 神) of a person must perish alongside one's body at death, thus making reincarnation and the continuity among one's

[340] Kimura Eiichi 木村英一, *Eon kenkyū. Ibun hen* 慧遠研究 遺文篇 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1960), pp. 311-15; Fang, *Huiyuan jiqi foxue*, pp. 96-98; Sun Maoxia 孫茂霞, "Guanyu Lushan Huiyuan *Sanbao lun* zhong de jige wenti 關於廬山慧遠《三報論》中的幾個問題," *Zhongguo foxue* 中國佛學 34 (2014): 218-27.

[341] See: Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 517-18; Robert Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), p. 9; Guo, *Rebirth and Karmic Retribution in Fifth-Century China* (2007), pp. 245-52.

multiple lives ontologically baseless.[342] Upon hearing Fan's view, Xiao questioned the social implication of his denial of karma:

> [Xiao] Ziliang asked: "If you do not believe in karmic retribution, then what can be the origins of the disparity between the rich and prestigious, and the poor and humble?"
>
> 子良問曰：「君不信因果，何得富貴貧賤？」

Clearly, Xiao's question mobilized the discourse of karmic retribution as explained by Huiyuan and as a legitimization of the existing social hierarchy. In response to this, Fan used an intriguing metaphor of flower petals to dispute the concept of Buddhist karma:

> [Fan] Zhen replied: "Human lives are like flower petals from the same tree. They fall as the wind blows. Some of the petals go through the wavering curtains to land on a cushioned seat. Others fly past fences and walls to fall into a cesspool. You, my honor, are one such petal that fell on a cushioned seat, whereas I, your base subject, am in a cesspool. The rich and prestigious are indeed treading a different path from the poor and humble, but it has nothing to do with karma."
>
> Ziliang was unable to respond on the spot, but he continued to wonder about this matter. [Fan Zhen] therefore retreated to jot down his reasoning and composed the "Treatise on the Mortality of the Soul."
>
> 縝答曰：「人生如樹花同發，隨風而墮，自有拂簾幌墜于茵席之上，自有關籬牆落於糞溷之中。墜茵席者，殿下是也；落糞溷者，下官是也。貴賤雖復殊途，因果竟在何處。」
>
> 子良不能屈，然深怪之。退論其理，著神滅論。[343]

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[342] "Treatise on the Mortality of the Soul 神滅論," the complete version of Fan Zhen's reasoning was published a decade after this debate in the early sixth century.
[343] From: *Nanshi* 57, p. 1421.

One curious fact about Fan Zhen's response is that, by using the metaphor of how petals land in different places, Fan implied that the existing social hierarchy cannot be explained by individual merits. This is in sharp contrast with Xiao's assumption that social inequality can be rationalized as the outcomes of individual karmas.

But Fan's push back was by no means a radical challenge to the existing social order, either. Instead, according to the petals metaphor he used, social hierarchy emerged from a mystifying process that, while neither fair nor decided by Buddhist karma, could still be conceived as natural.[344] Therefore, one could argue that Huiyuan's social conservatism merely attests to how dominant the existing social order was at his time. Both Huiyuan's Buddhism and his critics were carefully tiptoeing around criticizing that order to evade any clashes with the mainstream political culture in Chinese society at that time.

Even though Huiyuan contributed to Buddhism by helping it reach people from various social strata, my analysis of his discussion of the nine ranks system shows that his social view still largely catered to the selected, privileged few like Xiao Ziliang, who then gladly embraced the Buddhist theory of karmic retribution as an explanation of the cause of inequality. Huiyuan's case establishes the wider impact of the nine ranks system on Chinese society through its impact on the development of a new religious movement in fifth-century China. In the next two sections, I will argue that the nine ranks system's impact on Chinese Buddhism is also seen in one of its most prominent traditions, Pure Land Buddhism.

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[344] For the follow-up to this debate in the sixth century, its context and impact, see: Walter Liebenthal, "The Immortality of the Soul in Chinese Thought," *Monumenta Nipponica* 8.1/2 (1952), pp. 327-397; Whalen Lai, "Emperor Wu of Liang on the Immortal Soul, Shen Pu Mieh," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101.2 (1981), pp. 167-75; Tom De Rauw, *Beyond Buddhist Apology: The Political Use of Buddhism by Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (r. 502-549)* (Ph.D. dissertation, Ghent University, 2008); Michael Radich, "A 'Prehistory' to Chinese Debates on the Survival of the Death by the Spirit, with a Focus on the Term *shishen* 識神 / *shenshi* 神識," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 44.2 (2016), pp. 105-26.

2. Incorporating the Nine Ranks into the Western Pure Land

Pure Land Buddhism was one significant branch of Mahayana Buddhism that started to gain traction in China around Huiyuan's time. This Buddhist tradition developed around the devotional worship of the Amitâbha Buddha, who resides in the western Pure Land (Sukhāvatī) and welcomes followers to join him by reciting his name (*nianfo* 念佛), the simplicity of which method proved to be especially appealing to lay followers.[345] Huiyuan was commonly said to have formally established a Pure Land "School," although scholars have found this claim to be historically dubious.[346] Less controversial is that many of the doctrinal and liturgical traditions associated with the Pure Land tradition were practiced by Huiyuan and his followers in Lushan. It is useful to keep this link between Huiyuan and the Pure Land tradition in mind as we examine one of its key concepts, "the nine ranks of afterlives (*jiupin wangsheng* 九品往生)," in relation to the political nine ranks system. My following discussion seeks to trace the historical and intellectual heritage of the nine ranks system, a political institution, in the development of the Pure Land concept of the nine ranks of afterlives. Little scholarship has been produced to firmly establish their relationship in the religious history of early medieval China, although several scholars have suggested a possible linkage based on the obvious similarity of the two concepts.[347]

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[345] For a useful and thought-provoking overview of the development of the Pure Land tradition in medieval China, as well as the methodological difficulty of treating it as a "school," see: Robert H. Sharf, "On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 88 (2002), pp. 282-331.

[346] Zürcher, p. 219. Also see: Michizuku, *Zhonguo jingtu jiaoli shi*, pp. 17-26; Chen Yangjiong 陳揚炯, *Zhongguo jingtu zong tongshi* 中國淨土宗通史 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chu banshe, 2008), pp. 96-98.

[347] The earliest scholarly discussion of this that I have found is: Yamaguchi Susumu 山口益, Sakurabe Hajime 桜部建, and Mori Mikisaburō 森三樹三郎 (trans.), *Jōdo Sanbukyō* 浄土三部経 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1976), p. 237. Most recently, this idea was discussed in the popular work: Jiang Xiao 姜霄, "Jiupin wangsheng yu jiupin guanren 九品往生与九品官人," *Zhongguo shehui kexue bao* 中國社會科學報 (August 12, 2022), p. 5. In both publications, the authors noted the structural similarities of the two systems without establishing any historical arguments about why such similarities existed in the context of Buddhist history in China.

The nine ranks of afterlives first appeared in the *Sutra of the Visualization of the Buddha of the Infinite Life* (*Guan wuliangshoufo jing* 觀無量壽佛經), also known as the *Visualization Sutra*, a text that may be apocryphal. Kālayaśas 畺良耶舍 (383-442), a Buddhist translator-monk from Central Asia, was said to have translated the surviving version of the sutra from Sanskrit into Chinese. However, modern textual criticism has shown that the sutra was either a completely indigenous Chinese text from early fifth century, or a compilation of translated Central Asian texts with Chinese additions.[348] Regardless of the text's nature and origin, its canonical status cannot be denied. The *Visualization Sutra* has been regarded as one of the Pure Land tradition's three principal scriptures. It served to inspire the worship of the Pure Land in early medieval China and, for our purpose, sheds light on how Chinese Buddhism interacted with the nine ranks system.[349]

As its full title suggests, the *Visualization Sutra* provides guidance on a particular practice of "visualization" (*guan* 觀) focused on one's rebirth into the western Pure Land of the Amitâbha Buddha—also known as the Buddha of the Infinite Life (*wuliangshou* 無量壽佛). The first six *juan* ("scrolls") of the sutra guides Buddhist practitioners through a virtual journey of the cosmos within the pure land, providing vivid descriptions of the sun, the water, the ground, the trees with many jewels. Then, the sutra describes the Amitâbha Buddha, his body, his gesture, and his surroundings (*juan* 7 to 11) in detail, before turning to the methodological

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[348] See: Julian Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvatī: Shan-tao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-liang Shou-fo Ching* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 36-39, 394 (footnote 13); Nobuyoshi Yamabe, *The Sutra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha: The Interfusion of the Chinese and Indian Cultures in Central Asia as Reflected in a Fifth-Century Apocryphal Sutra* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999), especially chapter 2 ("Chinese Elements"), pp. 185-298.

[349] While the number nine could be found in Chinese Buddhist texts from earlier times, it was never applied to describe a hierarchy among its practitioners. Rather, the number nine is typically used to describe various types, such as "the nine types of worries 慾界九種煩惱" in *Abhidharmasāra* 阿毘曇心論 (T28, no. 1550, p. 819b), of which Huiyuan was a translator. Noteworthy is that the fifth volume of the *Bodhisattva Womb Sutra* 菩薩處胎經 (T12, no. 384, p. 1023c; translated by Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 at the beginning of fifth century) contains a seemingly hierarchical list of the nine ranks as "upper upper, middle upper, lower upper, upper middle, etc." but the text was highly cryptical and brief in what the nine ranks refer to.

issues of visualization for practitioners (*juan* 12 and 13).[350] The last three *juan* (14 to 16) of the sutra merit our special attention. In them, the afterlives of all sentient beings are divided into nine ranks based on their commitment to the way of the Buddha and their deeds in this life. Corresponding to these nine ranks, nine different timelines for the rebirth into the Pure Land are described here as well. With minor textual variations, the nine ranks of afterlives follow the same hierarchal structure as the nine ranks system in early medieval China.[351]

	Nine ranks system (based on *Hanshu*)	***Visualization Sutra***
1	Upper-upper: sages 上上聖人	Upper-upper level 上品上生
2	Middle-upper: humane men 上中仁人	Middle-upper level 上品中生
3	Lower-upper: wise men 上下智人	Lower-upper level 上品下生
4	Upper-middle 中上	Upper-middle level 中品上生
5	Middle-middle 中中	Middle-middle level 中品中生
6	Lower-middle 中下	Lower-middle level 中品下生
7	Upper-lower 下上	Upper-lower level 下品上生
8	Middle-lower 下中	Middle-lower level 下品中生
9	Lower-lower: stupid men 下下愚人	Lower-lower level 下品下生

Juan 14 begins from Buddha's brief statement that "those [re]born in the West [Pure Land] are of nine ranks 凡生西方有九品人,"[352] then dives into the characteristics of the upper-upper level

[350] Hisao Inagaki, "Synopsis of the Three Sutras," from: Hisao Inagaki and Harold Stewart (trans.), *Three Pure Land Sutras* (Revised Second Edition; BDK America, 2003), pp. xvii-xxi.
[351] Yamaguchi et al. (trans.), *Jōdo Sanbukyō*, p. 237.
[352] This paragraph starter only appears in the Goryeo edition of the sutra. See: Yamaguchi et al. (trans.), *Jōdo Sanbukyō* (1976), p. 237.

sentient beings as well as a visual description of what transpires when they depart from this world for the Pure Land:

> Sentient beings who attain rebirth of the upper-upper level resolve to be reborn in the Kingdom [of the Buddha] and awaken three kinds of consciousness, and so are reborn there. Which three kinds of consciousness? First, the consciousness of ultimate sincerity. Second, the consciousness of deep devotion. Third, the consciousness of transferring one's merits towards rebirth. Those with the three kinds of consciousness are surely to be reborn into that Kingdom.
>
> In addition, three more kinds of sentient beings also attain rebirth. Which three? First, those who exercise compassion, abstain from killings, and completely adhere to all Buddhist precepts. Second, those who chant and recite the Mahayana sutras of greater scope. Third, those who practice the six forms of mindfulness (anusmṛti) and direct one's actions towards rebirth in the kingdom of Buddha. With these merits, after one or up to seven days, they attain rebirth. Upon their rebirth in that Kingdom through their advancement and vigor, they see the Amitâbha Buddha and the bodhisattvas Avalokitêśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, alongside numerous transformations of the Buddha body, an assembly of a hundred thousand monks and listeners (*śrāvakas*), and innumerable celestial beings (*devas*) in seven-jeweled palaces. Avalokitêśvara Bodhisattva, carrying his adamantine platform, comes to the aspirant alongside Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva. Amitâbha Buddha projects a great enlightenment onto the body of this aspirant, then extends his hands in welcome alongside the bodhisattvas. Avalokitêśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, together with numerous bodhisattvas, praise and encourage the practitioner. Seeing this,

the aspirant rejoices and dances. They see themselves sitting on the adamantine platform to follow the Buddha. Instantly, they attain rebirth into that Kingdom…This is someone who attains the upper-upper rank.

上品上生者，若有眾生願生彼國者，發三種心，即便往生。何等為三？一者、至誠心。二者、深心。三者、迴向發願心。具三心者必生彼國。

復有三種眾生，當得往生。何等為三？一者、慈心不殺，具諸戒行。二者、讀誦大乘方等經典。三者、修行六念，迴向發願生彼佛國。具此功德，一日乃至七日，即得往生。

生彼國時，此人精進勇猛故，阿彌陀如來與觀世音及大勢至，無數化佛，百千比丘，聲聞大眾，無量諸天，七寶宮殿，觀世音菩薩執金剛臺，與大勢至菩薩至行者前。阿彌陀佛放大光明，照行者身，與諸菩薩授手迎接。觀世音、大勢至與無數菩薩，讚歎行者，勸進其心。行者見已，歡喜踊躍。自見其身乘金剛臺，隨從佛後，如彈指頃，往生彼國。...是名上品上生者。[353]

The destinies of the other eight ranks of sentient beings are provided in the rest of the sutra following the same twofold structure: a description of the actions that are characteristic for the category, and a visual depiction of what they can see following the rebirth into the Pure Land. The nine rankers are differentiated also by their temporal residency outside the Pure Land leading to the rebirth: those of the upper-upper rank wait no time to ride an "adamantine platform (*jingang tai* 金剛臺)" to the Buddha's side, whereas others must first wait inside a "lotus flower platform (*lianhua tai* 蓮花臺)" until the lotus flower blossoms.[354]

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[353] *Fo shuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經 (T12, no. 365, pp. 344c-345a). Translations are of my own, although I have consulted: Inagaki and Stewart (trans.), *Three Pure Land Sutras* (2003), pp. 79-85. One big difference here between my translation and theirs is of the term "心," which Ingaki and Stewart rendered as "faith." I choose "consciousness" over "faith" to avoid the latter's vagueness and Christian connotation in modern English.

[354] *Fo shuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經 (T12, no. 365, pp. 345a-346a).

	Rank	**Time for lotus flower to blossom**
2	Middle-upper level	One night (“經宿即開”)
3	Lower-upper level	“One day and one night” = 1 day (“一日一夜蓮花乃開”)
4	Upper-middle level	“After a while” = [between 1 and 6 days] (“蓮花尋開”)
5	Middle-middle level	“On the seventh day” = 6 days (“經于七日蓮花乃敷”)
6	Lower-middle level	7 days (“經七日”)
7	Upper-lower level	49 days (“經七七日蓮花乃敷”)
8	Middle-lower level	6 eons (*kalpa*) = around 100 billion years (“經于六劫蓮花乃敷”)
9	Lower-lower level	12 eons = around 200 billion years (“於蓮花中滿十二大劫，蓮花方開”)

Although sentient beings of all nine ranks would eventually join the pure land, the induction process for those of the lowest ranks were extremely long. The sutra also describes that the eighth rankers would almost be showered by the “many fires from hell 地獄眾火” and the ninth rankers almost “should fall into the unfortunate rebirths 應墮惡道,” before the Amitâbha Buddha’s transformations and bodhisattvas come to their rescue.[355] In this sense, the sutra warns Buddhist practitioners of their actions: even though the Buddha is willing to spare his

[355] *Fo shuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經 (T12, no. 365, p. 346a).

compassion to every single sentient being, one must still strive to reach a higher level through rectifying and refining their own actions throughout their lives. For this purpose, readers of the *Visualization Sutra* are provided in these three *juan* a code of conduct that prescribes the actions leading to a desirable outcome following one's physical demise, and encourages them to avoid and rectify those wrongdoings that bring about an undesirable outcome.[356]

Actions	**Result**
● Understand the truth of part of the Mahayana sutras ● Trust the Buddhist first principle (cause and effect) ● Not slander Mahayana Buddhism	Middle-upper level
● Trust the Buddhist first principle ● Not slander Mahayana Buddhism ● Aspire to the ultimate path	Lower-upper level
● Observe the Buddhist moral precepts comprehensively ● Not commit the five deadly sins ● Bring no trouble upon any being	Upper-middle level
● Observe the Buddhist moral precepts partially ● Be courteous	Middle-middle level
● Observe filial piety to one's parents ● Treat beings with compassion	Lower-middle level
● Commit sins without repentance ● Have no faith in Buddhism but do not vocally slander Mahayana Buddhism during lifetime ● Hear titles of the Mahayana sutras on death bed	Upper-lower level
● Commit sins and transgress all moral precepts without repentance ● Steal from the Buddhist community or preach evil teachings to deviate followers of Buddhism	Middle-lower level
● Commit every deadly sin	Lower-lower level

[356] *Fo shuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經 (T12, no. 365, p. 346a). See: Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvatī*, pp. 251-52.

From this list of actions, one can see that the sutra actively promotes three sets of behaviors: (a) knowledge of Buddhist religious doctrines; (b) adherence to moral principles; (c) respect for the Buddhist community. The most venerated Buddhist practitioners, ending up in the three upper levels, are good citizens and members of the Buddhist assemblies—categories (b) and (c)—throughout their lifetime, and the differences among them come from varying levels of understanding and commitment to (a), the religious truth.

But for most people, what this code of conduct really promotes is their action (praxis) instead of their knowing (belief). Such is the case for those who fall under the middle-level categories: they are evaluated based on the extent to which they follow the moral precepts, instead of their understanding of the ultimate truth. Here, the sutra reserves a spot for the non-Buddhists, most of whom in early medieval China would find themselves in the lower-middle level, based on their adherence to the Confucian social norms such as filial piety.[357] Sinners belong to the lower levels, but are further distinguished from one another not only based on the extent of their sinful behaviors and the degree of harm and disruption they caused for the Buddhist community. For instance, even for those who disagree with the Buddhist truths from the bottom of their hearts, the Sutra still permits them to enter the pure land after a relatively short stay of 49 days in the lotus flower, so long as they have refrained from vocalizing their disagreements with the sangha. On the other hand, those who have undermined the interests of Buddhism by vandalizing or stealing from its community, or turning its members away from practicing Buddhism, will be stuck in a limbo for 100 billion years after death.

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[357] Keith Nathaniel Knapp, *Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

These action-oriented rules that the *Visualization Sutra* promotes through its formulation of the nine ranks of afterlives (*jiupin wangsheng* 九品往生) could have had important sociological stakes for the Chinese Buddhist community in fifth century. This religious system appealed to members of the wider society by incorporating them and the moral principles they valued (such as filial piety) into the Buddhist worldview. At the same time, its soteriological discourse provided a basis to inculcating Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike with a new code of conduct that supports the expansion of this new religion in Chinese society. The three bottom-level ranks served the purpose of protecting the reputation, property, and prosperity of Buddhist communities, as the text does not shy away from spelling out the severe spiritual repercussions for the enemies and naysayers of Buddhism. The sutra's interpretation of the nine ranks system clearly differs from Huiyuan's. It repurposed the hierarchical framework of a Chinese political institution to develop a new type of hierarchy focused on one's afterlife, with the intention to motivate its readers to practice Buddhism and, furthermore, to protect the wellbeing of the developing Buddhist community.

This theory of the nine ranks of afterlives also illustrates an intellectual tendency unique to the Pure Land tradition as it developed in China in this period, especially when we compare it with the formulation of the hierarchy of rebirths in the *Buddha of the Infinite Life Sutra* (*Foshuo wuliangshou jing* 佛說無量壽經), also known as the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* (*Da Amituo jing* 大阿彌陀經). Another principal scripture of Pure Land Buddhism in China, the *Buddha of the Infinite Life Sutra* has an authentic Indian origin and was translated into Chinese at least a century earlier than the earliest extant version of the *Visualization Sutra*.[358] The text embeds a

[358] The most popular Chinese version was translated by Saṃghavarman 康僧鎧 at 252 CE, or Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 at 308 CE. See: Tsuboi Shun'ei 坪井俊映, "Jingtu san jing gaishuo 淨土三經概說," *Jingtu dianji yanjiu* 淨土典籍研究 (Taipei: Dasheng wenhua chubanshe, 1979), pp. 1-23, 111-119.

discussion of the three types of Buddhist devotees in a dialogue between the Buddha and his disciple Ānanda, where another merit-based typology of the religious outcomes of individuals was offered:

> The Buddha told Ānanda: "In the universe of ten directions, celestial beings (*devas*) and human beings who sincerely aspire to be reborn in that Kingdom are divided into three ranks. Those of the upper rank renounce the household life and give up sensory desires to become monks (*shramana*). Having awakened aspiration for enlightenment, they single-mindedly chant the name of the Buddha of the Infinite Life (Amitâbha Buddha) and cultivate various merits, hoping to attain rebirth in his Kingdom. When they approach the end of their lives, Amitâbha Buddha, accompanied by a host of sages, appear before them. They will follow the Buddha to join his Kingdom and, in no time, spontaneously be reborn within seven-jeweled lotus flowers. They will dwell in the state of no falling back, while attain steadfast wisdom, courage, and superpower. Therefore, Ānanda, all sentient beings who desire to meet Amitâbha Buddha in this world must resolve to attain the highest awakening, cultivate merits, and aspire to be reborn in that Kingdom."
>
> 佛告阿難：「十方世界諸天人民，其有至心願生彼國，凡有三輩。其上輩者：捨家棄欲而作沙門，發菩提心，一向專念無量壽佛，修諸功德願生彼國。此等眾生臨壽終時，無量壽佛與諸大眾現其人前，即隨彼佛往生其國，便於七寶華中自然化生。住不退轉，智慧勇猛神通自在。是故阿難，其有眾生，欲於今世見無量壽佛，應發無上菩提之心，修行功德，願生彼國。[359]

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[359] *Fo shuo Wuliangshouo jing* 佛說無量壽經 (T12, no. 360, pp. 272b). Translations are based on: Luis O. Gomez, *Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light, Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhavativyuha Sutras* (Honolulu and Kyoto: University of Hawai'i Press and Higashi Honganji Shinshu Otani-ha, 1996), p. 187; Inagaki and Stewart (trans.), *Three Pure Land Sutras*, p. 31.

This part of the sutra prescribes that devoted members of the Buddhist monastic order will accumulate the greatest merits and reap the greatest spiritual benefits, which is the induction into the Pure Land by Amitâbha Buddha himself.

The text then proceeds to describe the sets of religious actions that put individuals into the middle and lower ranks. Lay Buddhists constitute the groups that belong to the middle and the lower ranks of rebirths. The sutra here distinguishes between those who strictly follow the Buddhist lifestyle and financially contribute to the Buddhist community, from those who simply practice the *nianfo* technique, while placing both under the Buddhist monastic order:

> "Those of the middle rank…They cultivate merit by doing some good deeds and observing the periods of abstinence. They erect stupas, donate Buddha's statues, and feed the monks (shramana). They also hang banners, light candles, scatter flowers, and burn incense…
>
> Those of the lower rank…Though they are incapable of doing the good deeds, they must resolve to attain the highest enlightenment and single-mindedly direct their thoughts to chant the name of Amitâbha Buddha for at least ten moments of thought, wishing to be reborn in his kingdom…."
>
> 其中輩者…多少修善，奉持齋戒。起立塔像，飯食沙門。懸繒然燈，散華燒香…
>
> 其下輩者…假使不能作諸功德，當發無上菩提之心，一向專意乃至十念念無量壽佛，願生其國…[360]

The traversing from this life to the Pure Land also differs. The upper rankers are introduced to the pure land by the real Buddha. The middle rankers witness the Buddha through one of

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[360] *Fo shuo Wuliangshouo jing* 佛說無量壽經 (T12, no. 360, pp. 272b-c). See: Gomez, *Land of Bliss*, p. 187; Inagaki and Stewart (trans.), *Three Pure Land Sutras*, pp. 31-32.

Buddha's illusory bodies. The lower rankers, on the other hand, deprive themselves of the opportunity to experience the Buddha in reality, as they will only see the Buddha in dreams.[361]

Like the *Visualization Sutra*, the *Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra* also classifies the followers of Buddhism based on their actions and provides a religious doctrine that promotes good deeds that benefit the Buddhist communities. However, this three-rank diagram in *The Infinite Life Sutra* is more limited in its scope than the *Visualization Sutra*, as it emphasizes structure and hierarchy within the Buddhist community. Non-Buddhists and critics of Buddhism, for example, are not part of this typology, which implies their miserable spiritual outlooks: people who do not belong to the Buddhist community in this life will be denied entry into the Pure Land. In comparison, the theory of the nine ranks of afterlives in the *Visualization Sutra* is more expansive, for it reserves the four (6-9) ranks in the lower half for those outside the Buddhist community. In this sense, the expansion from three ranks to nine ranks correlated with the expansion and development of Buddhism in China from the third to the fifth century, which resulted in a more socially conscious way of relating to the larger society and incorporating its diverse members into its religious worldview.

This more socially engaged form of Pure Land theology sprouted in the early-fifth-century China, taking inspirations from both the indigenous Chinese political culture. The Pure Land interpolation of the nine ranks diagram in *The Visualization Sutra* therefore offers an intriguing case of how Chinese Buddhist worldviews took shape by negotiating Chinese ideas into Buddhist religious discourses in the early medieval period. Different from Huiyuan's reference to the nine ranks system as a political institution, here, this apocryphal text creatively repurposed the intellectual framework behind it to develop a new form of religious hierarchy

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[361] *Fo shuo Wuliangshouo jing* 佛說無量壽經 (T12, no. 360, pp. 272b-c).

that better resonates with members of the Chinese society. But the problem it tried to solve was one that had been troubling Chinese Buddhism for centuries, as my analysis of the *Buddha of the Infinte Life Sutra* shows: to motivate a wider audience to practice Buddhism, and to secure the organizational and financial stability of the Buddhist community.

Interestingly, also in the fifth century, religious Daoism made a similar interpolation of the nine ranks system. Gu Huan 顧歡 (approximately 425-488), a vocal supporter of Daoism, argued that the three kinds of immortals could be classified into nine ranks:

> *Shen-xian* (The divine and transcendental) is a general term referring to all the boundless transformations. It is not a name of those who have attained the ultimate marvels, as the latter cannot be named. What can be named can be organized into twenty-seven ranks. *Xian* (a transcendental person) is on track to transform into *zhen* (a perfected person). *Zhen* is on track to transform into *shen* (a divine person), who may also be called *sheng* (a sage). Each group [namely, *xian*, *zhen*, and *shen*] can be organized into nine ranks. When one transcends the highest rank, they enter the realm of emptiness and nothingness, ridding themselves of doings and namings."
> 神仙是大化之總稱，非窮妙之至名。至名無名，其有名者二十七品，仙變成真，真變成神，或謂之聖，各有九品，品極則入空寂，無為無名。[362]

According to the *Book of the Southern Qi*, Gu composed this passage in the historical context of Buddho-Daoist conflicts, where the natures of the Daoist immortals came under attack by Buddhist scholars.[363] Gu's invention of the nine ranks of various immortals in the above text was, therefore, a response to the heightened need to theorize the Daoist pantheon by adopting

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[362] *Nanqishu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), vol. 54, p. 934.
[363] "The schools of Buddhism and Daoism established their teachings on divergent foundations. Students [of the two schools] denied and attacked each other 佛道二家，立教既異，學者互相非毀," from: *Nanqishu* 54, p. 931.

the same strategy as his opponents: by resorting to the authority of the nine ranks framework. In the context of my discussion, this Daoist example serves as an intriguing footnote to the interaction between the Chinese political tradition and religious movements in early medieval China.

3. Visualizing the Nine Ranks of Afterlives

As Pure Land Buddhism began to spread in early medieval China, the Chinese "*jingtu bian* 淨土變," or "Transformation Tableaux of the Pure Land" began to emerge as an art genre, facilitating conversions to this Buddhist tradition and providing concrete reference materials for visualization practices. As its name suggest, *jingtu bian* art focuses on portraying the Pure Land. Its visual repertoire includes the geography and landscape of the Pure Land, the iconography of three honorable figures (typically with the Amitābha Buddha at the center, surrounded by the two bodhisattvas, Mahāsthāmaprāpta and Avalokiteśvara), and the portrayals of various seven-jeweled (*qibao* 七寶) material objects, such as trees, lands, and lotus flower ponds.[364] In early medieval times, *jingtu bian* art was getting popular but not yet a mainstream form of Buddhist art in China, as seen in the number of Amitābha images compared with images of Śākyamuni, Maitreya, and Avalokiteśvara.[365]

The three principal scriptures of Pure Land Buddhism, which contain rich textual depictions of the various scenarios of the Pure Land, provided a foundation of the visual repertoire of *jingtu bian* but did not prevent Chinese artists from creatively executing their artistic projects. According to Helen Loveday's study of the iconography of *jingtu bian* art, little

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[364] Bai Wen 白文, *Guangzhong Sui Tang xifang jingtu zaoxiang tuxiangzhi yanjiu* 關中隋唐西方淨土造像圖像志研究 (Xi'an: San Qin chubanshe, 2010), pp. 22-34.
[365] Hou Xudong 侯旭東, *Wu, liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang* 五, 六世紀北方民眾佛教信仰 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 114-16.

stability in terms of how artists represented the Pure Land themes and imagery was achieved prior to the Tang dynasty, when ample manifestations of such art were produced in Dunhuang with greater consistency.[366] Early examples of this genre drew significant inspirations from the all three scriptures, but to various extents.[367] The nine ranks of afterlives, which was unique to the *Visualization Sutra*, saw its earliest extant visual representation in sixth-century China: a mural painting found in the Xiaonanhai 小南海 ("little southern sea") stone caves' middle cave.[368] In the following, I focus on the Xiaonanhai mural painting to probe how the theory of nine ranks of afterlives provided a medium through which Buddhist artists imagined and projected order and hierarchy onto one's afterlife. More important is how the political nine ranks system interacted with the Buddhist reinvention of it. I will first provide an overview of the key geographical and historical contexts to understanding the Xiaonanhai mural painting, before moving to situate it in the development of the Buddhist theory of the nine ranks of afterlives.

The Xiaonanhai stone caves are located in Anyang 安陽 County within the present-day Henan Province. The extant Xiaonanhai stone caves include three disconnected caves, two of which are embellished heavily with Pure Land motifs. The construction of these stone caves started in 550, corresponding to the very beginning of Northern Qi dynasty (550-577 CE). Sengchou 僧稠 (480-560), an influential monk at that time, was said to have mobilized his

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[366] Jérôme Ducor and Helen Loveday, *Le Sūtra des Contemplations du Buddha Vie-Infinie: Essai d'interprétation textuelle et iconographique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 233-386. For a more recent case study of a pure land cave, see: Zhenru Zhou and Luke Li, "Vision and Site: Revisiting a Pure Land Cave in Dunhuang," *Religions* 15.3 (2024): 329.

[367] Fifth-century examples primarily drew inspirations not from the *Visualization Sutra*, but from the other two scriptures: the *Buddha of the Infinite Life Sutra* (discussed in the last section) and the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* (also known as *Fo shuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 or simply *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經). Discussion of these fifth-century *jingtu bian* art can be found in: *Dunhuang shiku quanji 5: Amituojing huajuan* 敦煌石窟全集 5: 阿彌陀經畫卷, edited by Shi Pingting 施萍婷 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2002), pp. 19, 65-68.

[368] For a general survey of the historical development of the subgenre "Transformation Tableaux Based on the *Visualization Sutra* (*Guan wuliangshoufo jing bian* 觀無量壽佛經變), which visualizes the pure land primarily based on the *Visualization Sutra*, see: *Dunhuang shiku quanji 5: Amituojing huajuan*, pp. 88-264.

connection with the founding emperor of the Northern Qi, Emperor Wenxuan (r. 550-559), to support the completion of the stone caves in 555.[369] Two famous Buddhist temples, Lingquan Temple 靈泉寺 (Anyang, 546 CE) and Honggu Temple 洪谷寺 (Lin County 林縣, circa. 550-577), are in the vicinity of Xiaonanhai. This cluster of Buddhist sites attests to the lively scene of Buddhist monasticism in the Anyang region in sixth century[370], which is around 70 km away from Ye 鄴 (present-day Handan 邯鄲), the capital of several of the Northern Dynasties, and 400 km from Luoyang 洛陽, one of the historical centers of North China. Compared with Buddhist art produced during the previous century, the Xiaonanhai cave cannot be regarded as unique within the tradition of *guanfo* (Buddha visualization) art.[371] However, the presence of the nine ranks of the afterlives as a visual element in its middle cave makes it stand out as a standalone example of the *jingtu bian* genre of art from this period.



The middle cave at Xiaonanhai (illustration 1) is 1.34 m in length, 1.19 m in width, and 1.78 m in height. Relief is sculpted on the north, east, and west sides of the cave. The north side facing the entrance is the main side and features the Amitābha Buddha seated at the center with two bodhisattvas sitting at the two corners. Sengchou's figure can be found in between the

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[369] Sengchou accepted the invitation by Emperor Wenxuan to become his residential Buddhist teacher in Ye in 551. See: Sengchou's biography in *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), vol. 14, pp. 573-81. The history of the Xiaonanhai stone caves is engraved on the entrance to the middle cave: "On the first year of the Tianbao era of the great Qi, the Honorable Sengfang of Lingshan Temple, together with Mister Yang Lin of Guyun and others, led a team of local people to inscribe this stone cave, creating an image of the Buddha after his true appearance. On the sixth year, it was renovated and completed by the great Chan master monk Sengchou 大齊天保元年，靈山寺僧方法師、故雲楊公子林等，率諸邑人刊此岩窟，仿像真容。至六年中，國師大德稠禪師重瑩修成，相好斯備." See: Yen Chuan-ying 顏娟英, "Beiqi Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou 北齊小南海石窟與僧稠," *Fojiao sixiang de chuancheng yu fazhan: Yinshun daoshi jiuzhi huadan zhushou wenji* 佛教思想的傳承與發展：印順導師九秩華誕祝壽文集 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1995), p. 563. For an in-depth discussion of Sengchou's role in the creation of the Xiaonanhai stone caves, see: Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu, *The Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel: Images of Deeds and Aspirations* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1999), pp. 14-44.

[370] Hsu, *The Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel*, pp. 2-3.

[371] See: Yamabe, *The Sutra on the Ocean-Like Samadhi of the Visualization of the Buddha*, especially pp. 5-17, 125-184.

Buddha and bodhisattva on the right (illustration 2).[372] The mural painting portrays him honoring the Buddha with incense and flowers. His visual presence is further emphasized by an inscription that reads "provided by *bhikkhu* Sengchou (比丘僧稠供養)."

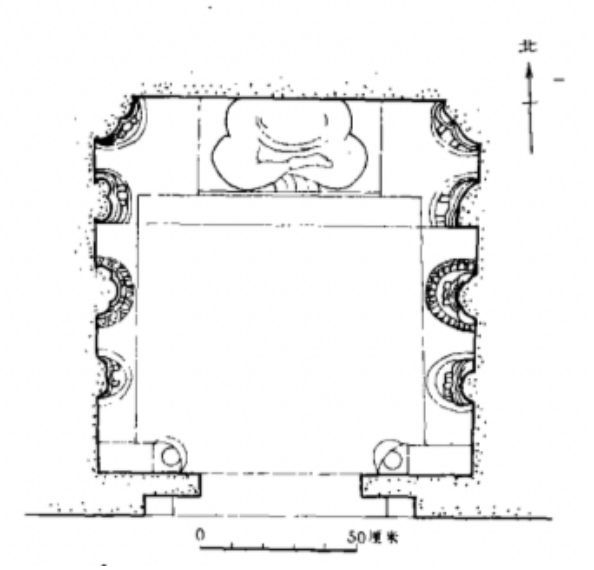


Illustration 1: Sketch of Xiaonanhai middle cave's structure, from: Henan Sheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, "Henan Anyang Lingquansi shiku ji Xiaonanhai shiku 河南安陽靈泉寺石窟及小南海石窟," *Wenwu* 文物 (1988/4), page 11 (figure 36).

[372] The descriptions of the Xiaonanhai middle cave is based on my summary of the original archaeological report and two additional papers: Henan Sheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所, "Henan Anyang Lingquansi shiku ji Xiaonanhai shiku 河南安陽靈泉寺石窟及小南海石窟," *Wenwu* 文物 (1988), no. 4, pp. 1-14, 20; Chuan-ying Yen, "Beiqi Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," pp. 561-98; Zeng Yaomin 曾堯民, "Beichao *Guan wuliangshou jing* guan—yi Xiaonanhai shiku yu Jingying Huiyuan *Guan wuliangshou jing shu* wei zhongxin 北朝《觀無量壽經》觀─以小南海石窟與淨影慧遠《觀無量壽經義疏》為中心," *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Studies* 中華佛學研究 18 (2017): 41-81.



Illustration 2: Photograph of the Xiaonanhai middle cave taken from the entrance, with the north side shown at the center, from: Chuan-ying Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku zhongku beibi 小南海石窟中窟北壁," *Fojiao yishu tudian yu zhishi xitong* 佛教藝術圖典與知識系統, accessed November 9, 2022, https://buddhism.ascdc.sinica.edu.tw/buddhism/layer2.php?id2=G0101MJ00

The east and west sides are similar in their overall spatial structures. Both sides have three main figures sculpted onto the middle, constituting the main body of the scene. A Buddha figure looms large in the middle of both sides. The figure is 0.78 m in height on the east side and 0.75 m on the west, surrounded by two smaller figures of bodhisattva. Maitreya and the nine ranks of afterlives are seen on the east and west sides, respectively. On the east side, two teaching scenes are portrayed above the three main figures. Spatially divided by the aura of the Buddha in the middle, each of the two scenes demonstrates a gathering at which Sakyamuni the historical Buddha or Maitreya the future Buddha instructs their followers. With a similar visual design, on the west side, above the three main sculpted figures, we see the landscape of the pure land above the three main sculpted figures divided in two halves by the Buddha aura in the middle (illustration 3).

The artists who designed this pure land scene on the west side of the Xiaonanhai middle cave no doubt consulted the *Visualization Sutra*. All nine ranks of afterlives portrayed here, accompanied by inscriptions that are directly quoted from the sutra. Three of these inscriptions point to the landmarks of the Pure Land portrayed on the wall: "seven jeweled [missing 2 characters] trees 七寶□□樹," "eight meritorious ponds 八功德水," and "five hundred jeweled towers 五百寶樓." They are described in the chapters 4, 5, and 6 of the sutra.[373] The upper-upper level of afterlife sits at the middle of the entire scene, next to the inscription "[upper-]upper level 上品往生." (c in illustration 4) A person is seen to be contemplating on a platform (3 in illustration 4). This refers to the *Visualization Sutra*'s discussion on how the upper-upper-level individuals arrive at the Pure Land: "They also see themselves riding the adamantine platform to follow the Buddha. Instantly, they are reborn into the other-worldly kingdom…this is what rebirth looks like for practitioners of the upper-upper rank." The next two levels—the "middle-upper level 上品中生" and the "lower-upper level 上品下生"—occupy the right half of the scene. Below the two inscriptions (b and a in illustration 4) are two individuals sitting in fully blossomed and half blossomed lotus flowers (2 and 1 in illustration 4). According to the sutra, for those who belong to the middle-upper level, they ought to wait for one night for the lotus flower to blossom, before their departure to pure land; and this waiting is prolonged to one day for those of the lower-upper level. Here, the artists creatively highlighted the difference by recreating a moment in which a middle-upper leveler's lotus flower is fully blossomed—indicating he is almost done with waiting—whereas the lower-upper leveler and his lotus flower still have some time to go.

[373] Chuan-ying Yen, "Beiqi Xiaonanhai shiku yu Sengchou," pp. 571-73.



Illustration 3: Photograph of the west side of Xiaonanhai middle cave, from: Yen, "Xiaonanhai shiku zhongku xibi."

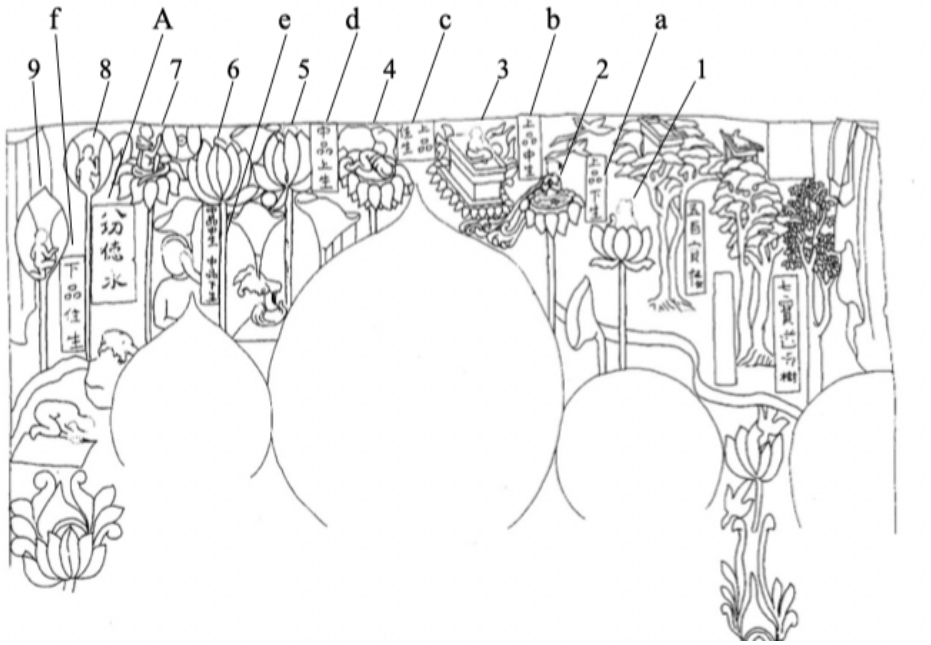


Illustration 4: Sketch of the west side of Xiaonanhai middle cave, from: Chuan-ying Yen, "Beiqi changuanku de tuxiang kao—cong Xiaonanhai shiku dao Xiangtangshan shiku 北齊禪觀窟的圖像考—從小南海石窟到響堂山石窟," *Tōhō gakuho* 東方學報 70 (1998), p. 271; quoted from Yaomin Zeng, "Beichao *Guan wuliangshou jing* guan—yi Xiaonanhai shiku yu Jingying Huiyuan *Guan wuliangshou jing shu* wei zhongxinl," p. 58.

All the other six ranks are clustered in the left half of the scene. They share three inscriptions: "upper-middle level 中品上生," "middle-middle level and lower-middle level 中品中生中品下生," and "lower level 下品往生" (d, e, f in illustration 4), but six separate images exist to portray individuals waiting for rebirth (4-9 in illustration 4).

The one closest to the middle (4 in illustration 4), namely the upper-middle level person, is seen to be worshipping the Buddha on his knees on a fully blossomed lotus flower. Next to him are two closed lotus flowers (5-6 in illustration 4) representing those in the middle-middle and lower-middle ranks. The contrast between open and closed lotus flowers, once again, highlights the varied waiting times for these three middle ranks.

The artists employed the same strategy to portray the three lower ranks: the person representing the upper-lower level is seen seated on the lotus flower, apparently nearing the

end of his forty-nine days of waiting period, whereas the other two are completely wrapped in lotus buds. Different from the two middle-rank individuals, whose existence we could only infer from the lotus flowers, the contours of these two lower-rank individuals are on clear display here. Moreover, their bud-shaped dwelling indicates that this very point of time is only the beginning of their waiting. After all, they will be stuck here for several eons.

The Xiaonanhai middle cave's depiction of the nine ranks of afterlives is not only the earliest visual representation of this intriguing Pure Land Buddhist concept, but also the earliest *jingtu bian* art based primarily on the *Visualization Sutra*. Shi Pingting 施萍婷 claimed that a Western Wei (535-557) mural painting from the first stone cave at Tongzisi 童子寺 ("children's temple") in Minle 民樂, Zhangye 張掖, Gansu Province, is the earliest example of a *Visualization Sutra*-based *jingtu bian* art. I disagree with her statement. The Tongzisi painting contains two inscriptions that reference the Pure Land deathbed vision: "sentient beings of the upper level practice six [missing text] (上品眾修行六[…])," "[sentient beings?] of the upper level who meditate and abide by the precepts and [missing word] the morality will ride a [missing word] lotus flower to see the Buddha in the Añjali Mudrā position, upon passing away (上品□之念持戒□德乘□蓮華見佛合掌往生時)."[374] However, its repeated references to "the upper level 上品" as one unified category of rebirth indicate that this motif is based on the three ranks of afterlives from *The Eternal Life Sutra*, instead of the more granular nine ranks of afterlives from the *Visualization Sutra*. Moreover, its mention of upper-level individuals riding a lotus flower to visit the Buddha is incongruent with the sutra, which claims the upper-upper rank individuals would transport to the Buddha's side on an "adamantine platform 金剛臺" instead.[375]

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[374] See: *Dunhuang shiku quanji 5: Amituojing huajuan*, p. 89; Ding Detian 丁得天 and Jiao Cheng 焦成, "Gansu Sheng Minle Xian Tongzisi Shiku neirong zonglu 甘肅省民樂縣童子寺石窟內容總錄," *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 157 (2016), pp. 17-25.
[375] Gomez, *Land of Bliss*, p. 187.

Therefore, I believe the sixth-century *jingtu bian* art in Tongzisi is not based on the *Visualization Sutra*. By comparing it with the Xiaonanhai example, we see that there was not a singular format for portraying the Pure Land Buddhist vision of afterlives. Instead, Chinese artists at that time exercised agency in choosing their sources of inspiration.

The most intriguing and understudied aspect of the Xiaonanhai mural painting is the artists' consideration of the political nine ranks vis-à-vis the nine ranks of afterlives. Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu has pointed out that a key feature of this Xiaonanhai mural painting is its inscriptions, which clearly spelled out the names of the nine ranks of afterlives. While Hsu reasonably speculated that the inscriptions were added to the scene to highlight the connection between the secular and the Buddhist theories of the nine ranks[376], she overlooked one unique evidence that would have strengthened her point. That is, the artists grouped the nine ranks into six inscriptions, indicating a perception that the nine ranks were not equally important. The three upper ranks and the upper-middle rank have individual inscriptions. The middle-middle and lower-middle levels are combined into one inscription, while the three lower levels into another one (illustration 5). The grouping here is by no means conventional. In fact, it differs from similar representations of the nine ranks of afterlives from the Dunhuang Mogao caves #431 (circa. 7th century CE) and #148 (742 CE), where each rank receives its separate visual space (illustration 6).[377] In particular, the Xiaonanhai cave arranges the nine ranks in a similar way as the Mogao #148 cave, in that viewers are expected to move their eyes back and forth between two sides to follow the sequence of the nine ranks. But compared to the Mogao #148 cave, where the sixth rank (lower-middle level) and the ninth rank (lower-lower level) were

[376] Hsu, *The Xiaonanhai Cave-chapel*, pp. 114-16. Hsu also argued that Sengchou himself may have identified with the upper and middle ranks, which occupy about eighty percent of the pictorial space. This argument is mostly speculative.
[377] *Dunhuang shiku quanji 5: Amituojing huajuan*, pp. 108-13, 191, 261.

placed on right side, spatially separated from the other middle- and lower-level visual blocks, the Xiaonanhai depiction lumps all the less desirable ranks to one side.

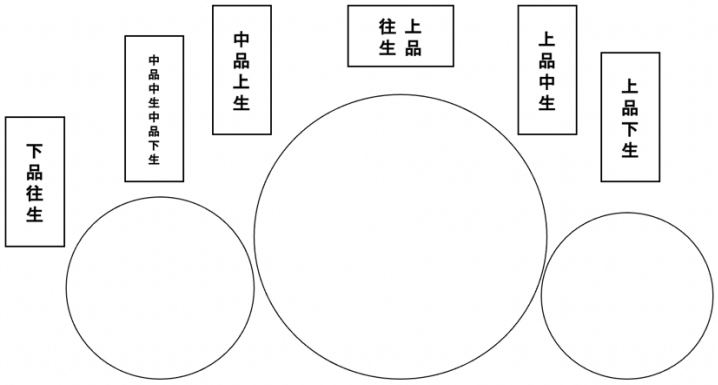


Illustration 5: Sketch of the arrangement of the six inscriptions

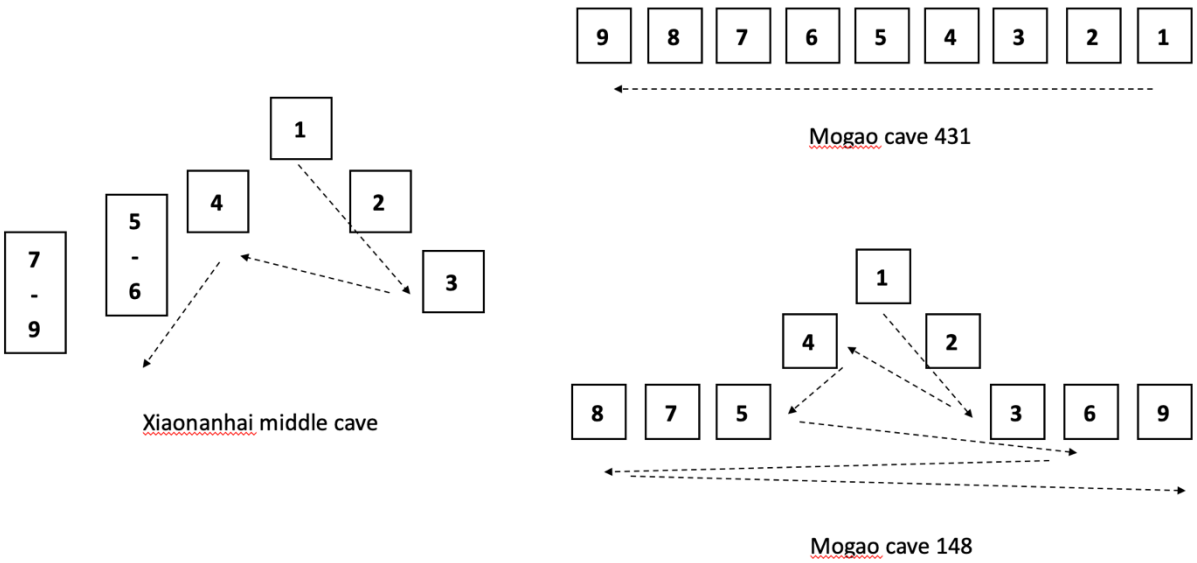


Illustration 6: Sketches of the nine ranks in Xiaonanhai and two Dunhuang Mogao caves. The dotted arrows show the sequence of viewing from the top to bottom ranks.

The artists' choice to group these lower ranks together shows, I argue, an awareness of the contemporary political institution of nine ranks system in early medieval China. Though

named “nine ranks,” officials and official candidates received their ranks from only five of the ranks: from the second (middle-upper) to the sixth (lower-middle). The top rank (upper-upper) was reserved for sage kings like Confucius and Duke Zhou. The three lowest ranks also only existed in theory, not only due to their association with “stupidity 愚” but also because, as Miyazaki and later scholars have explained, the bureaucratic rank at which an official candidate entered the office was typically three to four ranks lower than the rank he had been assigned. Therefore, a rank below the sixth would not lead to an appointment and was therefore never assigned in practice. This means the highest rank one was able to get is the second, and the lowest the sixth. The unique grouping of the nine ranks of afterlives in the Xiaonanhai middle cave has reflected the logic of the political institution, where the lowest three ranks held little utility. Thus, the artists who designed this mural painting merged the three lowest ranks into one inscription (“lower ranks 下品往生”), which was cast to the far-left side of the scene as if it was an outlier (illustrations 4 and 5).

To a sixth-century Chinese visitor to the scene steeped in a political culture dominated by the nine ranks system, this unusual arrangement of the nine ranks of afterlives would have made sense and even allowed them to appreciate the alignment of the Pure Land Buddhist view of afterlives with the secular sense of hierarchy. But to people in later times, this visual design ceased to make sense. This partly explains why the Xiaonanhai grouping of nine ranks stands out as quite unusual, when compared with *guanjing bian* art from the Dunhuang Mogao caves in later centuries. In cave 148, for instance, individual inscriptions are attached to the three lowest ranks. In cave 431, while there is no inscription attached, the images of individuals belong to various ranks were clearly separated from one another, and the three lowest ranks were depicted with great details. For example, artists included items that represent the Buddhist hell—iron caltrops, a pot filled with boiling oil, and trees with sword-branches

pointing up, all of which invoking viewers' sense of corporeal sufferings—that lower-lower-ranked individuals narrowly escape from (illustration 7), which is not found in Xiaonanhai. The delicate treatment of the lower ranks in both Mogao caves shows how the Xiaonanhai prototype was a unique product of the sixth century, when the nine ranks system still held currency among the elite class. As we moved to the seventh and eighth centuries, as the two Mogao examples shows, the tradition of *jingtu bian* evolved in a direction where its entanglement with the elitist nine ranks system had faded. This corresponded historically with the massive popularity that the Pure Land tradition, intellectual and visual, gained in the Sui-Tang period among the masses.[378]



Illustration 7: Scene of the lower-lower rank on the mural painting in Dunhuang Mogao cave 431. See: *Dunhuang shiku quanji 5: Amituojing huajuan*, p. 113 (illustration 94).

[378] Bai Wen, *Guangzhong Sui Tang xifang jingtu zaoxiang tuxiangzhi yanjiu*, pp. 194-96; Yang Mingfen (Shi Juemin) 楊明芬 (釋覺旻), *Tangdai xifang jingtu lichanfa yanjiu: Yi Dunhuang Mogaoku xifang jingtu xinyang wei zhongxin* 唐代西方淨土禮懺法研究: 以敦煌莫高窟西方淨土信仰為中心 (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2007), pp. 321-25.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have showed how the nine ranks system impacted Chinese Buddhism in the fifth century in two major ways. First, by contextualizing the ways in which Huiyuan, a leading Buddhist fifth-century intellectual in South China at that time, reconciled Buddhist doctrines with the sociopolitical reality associated with dominance of the nine ranks system, I have argued that Huiyuan's interpretation of karmic retribution served to legitimize existing social hierarchy, one that privileged political elites in this period.

Following that, I have established how Pure Land Buddhism absorbed the idea of nine ranks to develop its sophisticated system of nine ranks of afterlives, as seen in the *Visualization Sutra* of the fifth century. By studying its version of Pure Land soteriology against that of the early *Buddha of the Infinite Life Sutra*, I have shown how the development of the nine ranks of afterlives was directly inspired by the nine ranks system. The visual analysis of the depiction of the nine ranks of afterlives in the Xiaonanhai stone caves, discussed in the third part, gives us a glimpse into the impact of this Pure Land idea in the sixth-century Buddhist material and visual culture in North China. I conclude my study of the nine ranks system on the note that it was not only a pivotal aspect of the political and social lives of early medieval Chinese elites, but also a critical component of Chinese people's intellectual and religious lives that was underappreciated by previous scholarship.

Reflections

In this final section, I want to offer two brief reflections of the major limitations of my project. The first major limitation of this current study arises from the genre of my primary sources. I build my discussion of the manifestation of the nine ranks idea in the political and institutional realms in the first three chapters entirely upon received texts, namely dynastic histories such as the *Sanguozhi* and the *Jinshu*. These texts were the end products of intensive curatorial and editorial processes led by the succeeding dynasties to advance their political interests. What often accompanies the compilation and issuing of dynastic histories is the demise of their sources, including administrative documents, histories compiled by individuals outside the central government, and anecdotal writings, all of which less heavily censored at the time of production. Therefore, as primary sources, dynastic histories present a partial and sometimes biased view of the sociopolitical landscape of the times they claim to truthfully reflect. These narratives can be enriched and even contradicted by excavated materials, which I have not engaged with.

For instance, the bamboo manuscripts excavated at Changsha Zoumalou 走馬樓 in 1996 contain previously unearthed administrative records that directly speak to the management of local societies by the Sun Wu 孫吳 regime (222-280) during the Three Kingdoms era. One particular interesting set of bamboo slips mentions "upper rank (上品)," "middle rank (中品)," and "lower rank (下品)" in the context of the Wu government's effort to tax individual households (*hu* 戶) based on a three-tier system of asset valuation.[379] Moreover, there are nine

[379] See: Gao Min 高敏, *Changsha Zoumalou jiandu yanjiu* 長沙走馬樓簡牘研究 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 95-97; Brian Lander, Wenchao Ling, and Xin Wen, *State and Local Society in Third Century South China: Administrative Documents Excavated in Zoumalou, Hunan* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), p. 32, 116.

slips containing the phrase "*xia pin zhi xia* 下品之下." Was this the equivalent of the "lower lower rank" of the Cao Wei nine ranks system?[380] Or did it simply refer to a fourth tier of households of the extremely poor?[381] Since there is no mention of other tier outside the above four, there is a lack of consensus regarding whether Sun Wu's system of local tax administration is related to the nine ranks system of their rival, the Cao Wei regime.[382] Nevertheless, the Zoumalou documents highlight the need to study the various ways in which political entities constructed social order by way of arraying and grading people, both as individuals and as households, during this period.

Related to the first point, the second major limitation of this work is due to the limited perspectives that my primary sources represent. The majority of the political debates, the exchange of ideas, and the discursive practices related to the nine ranks system were undertaken by the classically educated, privileged, male individuals of this period. As a political institution, the nine ranks system was exclusionary, barring most individuals from participation. However, the nine ranks as an idea was pervasive in the intellectual world. Besides the case study of Buddhism that the last chapter of this dissertation provides, there were other ways in which people outside the male gentry class interacted with the nine ranks that I have not taken into consideration thus far.

One example is the emergence of the bureaucratic hierarchy (*guanpin* 官品) for women officials (*nüguan* 女官) employed at the emperor's inner court in the fifth century. An important aspect of Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (467-499) of Northern Wei's reform over the inner court

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[380] Zhang Xuhua 張旭華, "Wu jian 'hudiao fenwei jiupin shouwu' de jiejian yu chuangxin 吳簡「戶調分為九品收物」的借鑒與創新," *Xuchang shizhuan xuebao* 許昌師專學報 (2002, no.4), pp. 47-50.
[381] Yu Zhenbo 于振波, *Zoumalou Wu jian xutan* 走馬樓吳簡續探 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2007), pp. 59-72; Ling Wenchao 凌文超, *Wu jian yu Wu zhi* 吳簡與吳制 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2019), pp. 159-79.
[382] Gao, *Changsha Zoumalou jiandu yanjiu*, pp. 92-102.

system was to map the bureaucratic ranks of women officials onto the nine ranks of male officials: "*zuosi, dajian, nü shizhong*, these three posts are considered of the second rank…*nü shi, nü xianren, nü shushi, shu nü, xiaoshu nü*, these five posts are considered to be of the third rank…[these five posts] are considered to be of the fourth rank…[these five posts] are considered to be of the fifth rank 作司、大監、女侍中三官視二品…女史、女賢人、女書史、書女、小書女五官視三品…視四品…視五品."[383] This reform was echoed by the reorganization of women officials into seven ranks in the South during the Liu Song (420-479) dynasty.[384] In what ways did the hierarchy among women officials intersect with that among the consorts and concubines? How did the Northern Wei and Liu Song governments define talent for these women officials? Was the tension between talent and family background also present here? Due to the lack of first-person narratives by these women from this period, we know very little about the way power, hierarchy, and order were configured and perceived in the world of *nüguan*. Therefore, future inquiries into this topic have the potential to transform our understanding of meritocracy and gender roles in the early medieval political system.

The nine ranks system still holds many unanswered questions. I hope to invite future historians to explore this intricate phenomenon that has deeply influenced China in the early medieval period and beyond.

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[383] Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), vol. 13, p. 486.
[384] *Songshu* 41, pp. 1270-78.

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