

# Elite Overproduction: An Inside Perspective

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## 1

To become an administrative official in imperial China necessitated following a burdensome path from an early age. To begin with, a student needed to familiarise himself (being born male was a prerequisite) with the classical canon of Confucian philosophy, history, and poetry, encompassing some 400,000 characters. Mastery of the source material was then to be demonstrated during a series of increasingly selective examinations, beginning locally and eventually reaching the imperial level before proceeding to the final palace exam, conducted under the eyes of the emperor himself.<sup>1</sup> Those who succeeded became scholar-officials and were guaranteed lives of wide-reaching influence, material comfort, and social respect among the imperial ruling class.

One aspiring student seeking a place among the elect during the late days of the last imperial dynasty was Hong Xiuquan. Born in 1814 as the son of a moderately prosperous farmer, he showed enough talent that his family made the necessary financial sacrifices to let him undertake further study. After intensive learning in primary school, Hong took the local examination and placed first. Enthralled by this early success, he continued studying in hopes of a great career. Eventually the talented youth attempted the imperial examination—and failed.

Returning to farm work, he continued to hope and study. After still more years of toiling, he failed again. While taking the examination for a third time, he suffered a nervous breakdown during which he came to believe himself to be the son of God. After a fourth and final failure, Hong finally recognised the God of his vision as the Christian God of whom the pamphlets of Christian missionaries told. He finally understood the degradation of idolatrous China and his own mission to preach as a brother of Jesus Christ. Travelling the country he gathered followers. Within ten years he had proclaimed the 'Heavenly Kingdom' (*Taiping*) and begun a rebellion that would last

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<sup>1</sup> The content, number, and order of examinations of course varied throughout history. Nonetheless, an examination system existed continuously in its open, meritocratic form from at least from the tenth-century Song dynasty to its abolition in 1905 under the Qing dynasty.

for years with a death toll in the millions. Before the rebellion was violently squashed in 1846, Hong had just enough time to implement his own version of the examination system—only with a Christian canon instead of a Confucian one, and with himself on top.

## 2

Today, in another declining empire, no single exam decides the career of aspirant youngsters. A person of the same calibre as Hong might instead follow the arduous path of admission to selective elementary school, boarding school, outstanding A levels and gap year, and then dreaded university admission to inevitably wind up at an international elite university like Cambridge, where this journal originated. Here the ambitious fresher will seek to distinguish themselves intellectually or socially. They might join a well-connected club like the Cambridge Union, seek professional openings, or join a political party. If they are more finely minded they will try their hand at student writing. They might even found a journal themselves, not entirely unlike this one.

It is one of the curious observations to be made at Cambridge these days that the number of student-run journals has grown vastly. Where once the Cambridge Quarterly ruled supreme in the highbrow segment, a flush of 'Review of ...'s and other obscurely titled magazines now compete for a meagre market share. This surge does not correspond with a rise in total readership. At any given launch event one is bound to find cheap wine and the same artsy people encountered at the last. The new journals serve primarily as outlet for aspiring intellectual types who are finding it ever more difficult to place their writing in established publications. Life is tough when even a student journal will not have you, though this is a good primer on what awaits any wannabe writer on the journalistic and academic job market. Most students know better and care little. They are here not for high-minded discourse but to achieve good grades and attend careers events.

## 3

The universities best known for producing the leisure class of *Brideshead Revisited* fame have become hothouses of striving

ambition. Where once a privileged few mingled fashionably, now many toil hard. This development is apparent in the total number of students, which has ballooned to more than 20,000 at Cambridge. It has also left visible traces in the architectural disasters that all too often followed the overextension of colleges previously housing nearer 100 than 1,000 students. But complaining about aesthetic escapades leaves a bitter taste. When the students were fewer, they were also almost exclusively white, male, privately educated at public schools, and exceedingly rich. Without the expansion of higher education beginning in the post-war years, the university would not be as open to grammar-school, female, non-white, and international students.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps for this reason that it has become so difficult to talk about having too many graduates. The meritocratic opening has given talent at least *some* chance to thrive regardless of origin. Yet with upward mobility for select poor, but no downward mobility for the rich, it gets crowded on top. Critique so far has been reserved for humanities students, whose degrees are more openly educational credentials rather than signifiers of hard skills. Further tuition fee hikes could close the gates of merit again and reduce the number of economically useless humanities graduates burdening the national economy by reintroducing feudal restrictions.

But that misses the point: that there has been a vast increase in graduates of all subjects, of whom fewer than ever find appropriate jobs.<sup>3</sup> Deindustrialisation has left few opportunities in the productive sector. Instead there is increased competition for the last remaining bastions of well-paid white-collar work in Britain's financialised service economy: law, banking, and consulting. As a result, even finance salaries are stagnating and there is a lawyer glut. The meritocrats of today fail slowly: they have nowhere to go.

## 4

What connects a newly meritocratic Britain with imperial China? Both share a fundamental societal defect. Acceptance rates to elite universities and jobs are sinking today for the same reasons that the pass rate fell below 1% in Qing-era imperial examinations: there are too many applicants and too few places. After economic growth has peaked and elite selection has ossified, societies produce more aspirant elites through their established institutions than they can accommodate in the ruling class.

Such is the thesis of Peter Turchin, the historian who coined the concept of 'elite overproduction'. His ideas are finding keen readers increasingly worried about decline. He has been given space in *Bloomberg* and inspired a 'long read' in *The Atlantic* as well as a *Financial Times* piece titled 'The real class war is within the rich'.<sup>4</sup> A Soviet

- 2 This is a Pyrrhic victory indeed. About half of undergraduates at Cambridge and Oxford are still privately educated, and the other half are still unrepresentatively middle- and upper-class. Leaving the EU, meanwhile, will cause ever more international students to be outpriced, with only the super-rich being able to afford the fees three times as high as home fees.
- 3 Higher education participation rates have increased from below 5% in the 1940s to almost 40% of each new cohort today. At the same time, GDP growth has contracted, and the UK has slipped from being the third-largest exporter nation, in 1970, to being the sixth-largest, in 2019.
- 4 Peter Turchin, 'Blame Rich, Overeducated Elites as Society Frays' (*Bloomberg*, 12 November 2016) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-11-12/blame-rich-overeducated-elites-as-society-frays>>; Janan Ganesh, 'The real class war is within the rich' *Financial Times* (1 December 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/0bf03db8-c61b-4222->

émigré zoologist turned prophet of history, Turchin makes for a curious figure. Frowned upon in academia, he has crossed the Rubicon of the discipline: predicting historical dynamics of the future instead of just retracing the movement of the past.

Elite overproduction is one key feature of the demographic analysis by which Turchin wishes to quantify the challenges that mount up as a society ages and is overcome by rivals. In books such as *Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall* (2003), *Secular Cycles* (2006), and more recently *Ages of Discord* (2016), Turchin draws an image of social determinism. His theories of long-term patterns in demography seek to apply the precision of the natural sciences to history. But just like Francis Fukuyama, the last public philosopher of history, Turchin seems more like a thinker of the big-picture history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1992 Fukuyama proclaimed 'the end of history' in capitalist and democratic liberalism. Yet while Fukuyama was reading Hegel and finding history's eschatology in modernity, Turchin seems rather inspired by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Turchin's suggestions of cyclical development confront us with the question—has history ended yet?

## 5

Already the resurgence of authoritarianism and great power competition seems to render Fukuyama's end of history thesis a cruel joke. But Turchin goes further. There is a direction to our historical movement—declining—and there are identifiable causes for this disintegration. After a period of post-war consolidation, Western hegemony is challenged not just from the Far East but also increasingly by internal social unrest. Elite overproduction, for which the late-stage Chinese imperial examination system is such a fitting parable, correlates to social instability. In China, failed candidates would become local teachers for a new generation of students or retreat into ascetic hermitage. But they would remain highly educated, having come close enough to the structures of power to see their functioning, while remaining excluded from them.

Those with the liberty to educate themselves do not integrate well with hierarchical orders. This is a truth well known to realist political philosophers from Hobbes to Machiavelli. No one grasped this better than ancient Chinese legalist thinker Lord Shang, who in opposing the meritocratic Confucianism that would lay the foundation for the later imperial examination system wrote that:

Sophistry and cleverness are an aid to lawlessness; rites and music are symptoms of dissipations and licence; kindness and benevolence are the foster-mother of transgressions; employment and promotion are opportunities for the rapacity of the wicked.<sup>5</sup>

Is it not always members of the disaffected elite who have both the greatest motivation and the means to challenge the existing order? That, in any case, is the explanation most often suggested for the Cambridge Five, the upper-middle-class spies who went on from then-exclusive Cambridge to supply information to the Soviet Union. Bored and ostracised, they did not fit into the ruling class—who could take the bourgeoisie seriously again after dining at high table in Cambridge?—but they did find elite places from which to spy. Elite class traitors are also what the former law student Vladimir

- 8c76-4fb23988ec13>; Graeme Wood, 'The next decade could be even worse' (*The Atlantic*, December 2020) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/can-history-predict-future/616993/>>.
- 5 Shang Yang, *The Book of Lord Shang*.

Ilyich Ulyanov imagined in his pamphlet ‘What is to be done?’. The working classes need to be instructed into revolt by bourgeois renegades who possessed greater insight into capitalism, he insisted, as he began leading precisely that revolt under the name of ‘Lenin’.

## 6

One does not need Turchin’s historical prophecies or Spengler’s pessimism to appreciate the usefulness of the concept of elite overproduction. In many ways it is not so very distinct from Thomas Piketty’s empirical work on inequality. Piketty showed in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) that the rate of capital accumulation has grown faster than even the highest wages. As a consequence, the outpaced managerial elite, whose wealth and status stem from work, is unable to keep up with those who happen to inherit much greater riches. That is the ‘class war among the rich’: Magic Circle lawyers and City bankers who struggle to keep up in London. More recently, *Capital and Ideology* (2019) correlated this economic divergence with political demography and the emergence of the ‘Brahmin left’. Losing out economically, educated voters (read: the meritocratic elites) throughout the Western world now tend to vote on the left, when historically they were firmly part of the conservative establishment.

This should be no surprise. Revenue streams from the British Empire have ended and the value of the UK’s exports has failed to keep up since the 1970s. Economic growth has been sluggish as we stumble from one economic crisis to the next. Real wages are stagnating, while the cost of housing has risen so sharply that home ownership is now well out of reach for all but the highest-paid percentiles or those who can expect inheritances. Those who are forced to rent pay an ever greater share of their income into the pockets of buy-to-let landlords. This culminates in substantial generational inequality, so that for the first time in recent history those in the new generation will be materially worse off than their parents. And this does not even take into account the havoc to be wrought by climate change, with which the next generation will pay dearly for the lifestyle of the last. These are easy times to be unhappy, even as a prospective member of the meritocratic elite better off than the rest of the generation.

## 7

Elite overproduction is here a small part of a greater picture of economic and industrial developments. As the economic pie shrinks and inequality deepens, elite credentials become ever more important while also losing out against culminated financial interests. This is not to say that conflict broods only within the elites—instead, elite conflict is part of an increasing rift. Intra-elite competition is, then, not so much the canary in the coalmine as the very last stop before chaos. The good people of Workington have learnt to expect little. But if even the Cambridge overachievers struggle, trouble is inbound.

Will the overproduced elites of the new generation turn to unrest, with Oxbridge graduates leading the masses? So far, the tradition of British schooling continues to succeed in leaving its products docile and removed from social action. Instead, it is the establishment upper-class scions on the right who have forged an alliance with some of the left-behind masses: Trump, the Brexiteers, the Oxford graduate Viktor Orbán. By themselves, surplus elites produce little but increasingly shrill newspaper columns.

Elite overproduction and competition are but snapshots of larger conflicts. Still, they incentivise us to reconsider the sort of bold

historical thinking necessary to understand such challenges. It is a tautology that a society which produces conflict is not peaceful, but the statement bears repeating. When even the very best have to fear for their place, something is off. Either the Enlightenment promise of education and opportunity for all will be fulfilled and we build a society that accommodates for it, or feudal limitations for the majority will return. Talking openly about our elites highlights this urgency. Unless taken seriously, Turchin’s historical theories may prove to be right, and we may tumble into the end of Western civilisation as we know it, led by some disappointed meritocrat who has failed their final examinations.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, give the young meritocratic elite opportunities to address the challenges of our time—from stagnation and climate change to that other great meritocratic nation in the East, we have enough issues that deserve attention. Give the aspiring elite something to plough their hubris into. Something good might come out of it. At the very least, keep them busy and buy their new journal.

<sup>6</sup> Art school rejects are of particularly dangerous character, one hears.