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## THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF SHENSHI IN THE HISTORY OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MODERN CHINESE SOCIETY

*This article explores the cultural capital accumulation of Shenshi in Chinese civilization and its modern legacy. The Shenshi, akin to the English «gentleman», emerged as intellectual elite deeply influenced by Confucianism, embodying moral and cultural aspirations. The imperial examination system played a pivotal role in shaping their social mobility and cultural authority, institutionalizing knowledge through state-sanctioned texts. However, this system also sowed seeds of its own critique, as evidential research and commercial text circulation inadvertently challenged orthodox interpretations. The article further examines how private writings transcended their original contexts to become public cultural resources, facilitating the democratization of cultural capital. In the modern era, Shenshi traditions persist through hybrid educational models blending traditional academies with Western-style universities, as well as digital reading practices that reinterpret classical literati habits. These adaptations highlight the enduring yet evolving influence of Shenshi culture in contemporary society.*

**Key words:** Shenshi, cultural capital, imperial examination system, Confucianism, digital reading, modernity, cultural legacy

### **Культурный капитал Шэньши в истории китайской цивилизации и его влияние на современное китайское общество**

*Исследуется процесс накопления культурного капитала Шэньши в китайской цивилизации и его современное состояние. Социальная страта Шэньши (аналогична английскому понятию «джентльмен») сформировалась как интеллектуальная элита, глубоко впитавшая конфуцианские ценности и воплощавшая классические моральные и культурные идеалы. Система императорских экзаменов сыграла ключевую роль в формировании их социальной мобильности и культурного авторитета, институализируя знания через государственно одобренные тексты. Однако эта же система породила и критику ортодоксальных интерпретаций классических сочинений, поскольку текстологические исследования и коммерческое распространение текстов непреднамеренно бросили вызов их традиционным трактовкам. Рассматривается также, как частные письменные источники выходили за пределы своего первоначального контекста, превращаясь в общедоступные культурные ресурсы и способствуя демократизации культуры. В современную эпоху традиции Шэньши сохраняются через гибридные образовательные модели, сочетающие традиционные академии с университетами западного образца, а также через практики цифрового чтения, переосмысливающие стандарты классических школ. Эта адаптация подчеркивает устойчивое, но в то же время эволюционирующее влияние культуры Шэньши в современном китайском обществе.*

**Ключевые слова:** Шэньши, культурный капитал, система имперских экзаменов, конфуцианство, цифровое чтение, современность, культурное наследие.

### **Introduction**

The Chinese Shenshi, often likened to the English «gentleman», emerged as distinctive intellectual elite in Chinese civilization, deeply rooted in Confucian values and moral ideals. As the custodians of cultural and ethical norms, the Shenshi played a pivotal role in

shaping China's social and intellectual landscape. Their influence was perpetuated through mechanisms such as the imperial examination system, which not only reinforced their cultural authority but also facilitated social mobility. However, this system, while institutionalizing knowledge, also inadvertently sowed the seeds for its own critique, as evidential research and commercial text circulation challenged orthodox interpretations.

Beyond formal institutions, private writings – family instructions, personal notes, and

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literary jottings – transcended their original contexts to become public cultural resources, democratizing access to cultural capital. In the modern era, the legacy of the Shenshi endures through hybrid educational models that blend traditional academies (shuyuan) with Western-style universities, as well as through digital reading practices that reinterpret classical literati habits. These adaptations highlight the resilience and adaptability of Shenshi culture in contemporary society.

This article explores the accumulation of cultural capital by the Shenshi class throughout Chinese history and examines its enduring legacy in modern times. By analyzing the interplay between institutional structures, private writings, and contemporary transformations, the study sheds light on how the Shenshi's cultural influence continues to evolve, bridging the past and present in China's ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity.

### **Writing as a Mechanism for the Accumulation of Cultural Capital**

In the history of Chinese civilization, the Shenshi class is the core group of the upper class. Initially, this title mainly reflected status, but with the deep influence of Confucianism, it was gradually endowed with deep moral connotations, similar to the concept of «gentleman» in English [1, p. 1]. Mr. Zhou Rongde pointed out in his article that the Shenshi class is the intellectual elite class of the society. This group has distinctive features: they have established a unique system of values and norms, maintain a distinctive lifestyle, and have clear cultural aspirations. The Shenshi class not only understood Confucian ethics and morals, but also showed strong adaptability in the process of social change, and were able to accept new things more quickly [1, p. 118–127]. However, there are significant differences between Shenshi and European gentlemen, especially after the establishment of the imperial examination system; the Chinese Shenshi class has developed unique social attributes and cultural characteristics.

The Imperial Examination System, the core mechanism for selecting officials in ancient China, originated in the Sui-Tang period (605–907 AD), flourished during the Ming-Qing era (1368–1905), and endured for approximately 1300 years. This hierarchical examination system recruited talent primarily through testing mastery of Confucian classics,

with examination results determining official appointments and promotions. Social stratification and mobility represent two dimensions – static and dynamic – of the same societal structure. The examination system served as a critical mechanism in traditional China for both reinforcing social hierarchies and enabling vertical mobility: «Imperial China's semi-closed stratification system permitted upward mobility almost exclusively through the examinations» [2, p. 81–82]. When Ming-Qing literati bent over their examination papers, they were not merely testing; they were participating in an unprecedented ritual of epistemic discipline. Conservative estimates suggest that by the Mid-Ming dynasty, candidates were required to memorize approximately 400 000 characters of classical texts for the exams. This extraordinary mnemonic training forged a unique mode of cultural capital accumulation, where knowledge was measured not by depth of understanding, but by: textual precision (character-perfect recitation), discursive mimicry (replicating orthodox commentary styles), intertextual agility (weaving prescribed allusions).

The essence of knowledge monopoly lies in the institutionalization of symbolic power. When Zhu Xi's Commentaries on the *Four Books* became the imperially mandated standard for civil examinations during the Song dynasty, their authority derived no longer from scholarly persuasion but from statesanctioned power. Examination candidates whose answers deviated from these orthodox interpretations were routinely marked as «nonconforming» – a practice that created what Foucault termed a «regime of truth»: a system where institutions rigidly define both what constitutes valid knowledge and who holds the right to produce it [3, p. 184–194]. This mechanism transformed the Shenshi class into primary beneficiaries of epistemic monopoly. Through the examination system, they gained: exclusive interpretive authority over Confucian canon, gate keeping privileges for bureaucratic appointments, cultural capital accumulation via textual performativity.

Yet this very system carried within it the seeds of its own deconstruction. When textual critics immersed themselves in collating ancient texts, the empirical methods they inadvertently developed ultimately undermined the canonical authority on which examinations relied. During the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820), the renowned scholar Ruan Yuan trained students

to re-examine Confucian classics through evidential research techniques. While intended to serve examination preparation, these scholarly drills inadvertently cultivated intellectual tools for questioning orthodox commentaries. Even more telling was the paradox of model essay circulation: although officially published to standardize writing, the unauthorized reprints of examination exemplars by commercial booksellers created textual spaces beyond state control. These knowledge practices flourishing in institutional cracks reveal a crucial truth even within the most rigid monopolies, cultural capital inevitably finds unexpected channels for subversive circulation.

In examining writing as a mechanism for cultural capital accumulation, the publicization of private texts like family instructions and personal notes constitutes a crucial yet often overlooked dimension. These seemingly intimate writings functioned as subterranean channels for cultural capital circulation in traditional society. When Yan Zhitui composed *Family Instructions of The Yan Clan* (颜氏家训) amidst wartime chaos, he never anticipated that these domestic guidelines would evolve into societal behavioral norms centuries later. A telling case emerged during the Wanli era (1573–1620): the Shanxi merchant Wang family printed thousands of copies of *Zhu Xi's Family Instructions* (朱子家训) for distribution among regional trade guilds. This deliberate publicization of private texts facilitated the permeation of literati values into commoner strata – a phenomenon perfectly illustrating Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, wherein a privileged class's lifestyle becomes canonized as societal exemplar through textual mediation [4, p. 169–225].

The circulation trajectories of personal notes reveal even more remarkable transformations. Hong Mai's *Random Notes at Rongzhai Studio* (容斋随笔), originally personal reading jottings, became essential examination references after commercial publication. The evolution of Shen Kuo's *Dream Pool Essays* (梦溪笔谈) epitomizes this phenomenon: what began as a Northern Song manuscript shared among friends matured into a Qing dynasty public knowledge repository spanning astronomy, mathematics, and medicine – with over 1200 textual variants across editions [5, p. 118–127]. These variations document how private intellect morphs into communal heritage through dissemination.

More sociologically significant is their cross-boundary mobility. Consider Zhang Dai's Tao'an's *Dream Recollections* (陶庵梦忆): initially a Ming loyalist's private memoirs, it was repurposed by Qing merchants as a business networking manual by the Daoguang era (1821–1850).

This functional metamorphosis vividly enacts Habermas's public sphere formation, where private experiences enter collective discourse through textual mediation, ultimately shaping communal memory [6, p. 27–56]. When we encounter these yellowed manuscripts in museum cases, we witness not just fading ink but microhistories of cultural capital breaching social barriers. Their journeys remind us: in traditional China, writing was never merely a recording tool; it was a stealth mechanism for redistributing social power.

### Modern Legacy of Shenshi Culture

When Shenshi accomplished the creative transformation of cultural capital, the rationality of interaction and wisdom of survival embedded in these practices encountered a brand-new challenge of modernity in the wave of modern Western learning – the creative mechanism of traditional literati had to face a more fundamental proposition: how to reconstruct their own cultural legitimacy in the globalized intellectual order. The creative mechanism of traditional Shenshi had to face a more fundamental proposition: how to reconstruct its own cultural legitimacy in the globalized knowledge order. The reconstitution of cultural legitimacy first manifested in the institutional transformation of educational spaces. As the lecturing tradition of academy (shuyuan) masters gave way to modern university disciplines, the quintessential literati ethos of «establishing the moral heart of the universe» found unexpected contemporary expression within new knowledge-production regimes.

When examining the enduring legacy of Shenshi culture, one must consider the institutional continuity between traditional academies and modern universities. China's transition from shuyuan to Western-style University represented not mere organizational replacement, but profound cultural recombination. The Tongwen College (1862) and Hubei Self-Strengthening Institute (1893), established by the Westernization Movement faction, retained traditional courtyard architectures while displaying Western mathematical formulae and

world maps in their lecture halls. This spatial semiotic hybridity vividly encapsulates the tensions of cultural transition. Zhang Zhidong's principle of «Chinese Learning as the Foundation, Western Learning for Practical Use» [7, p. 12–15] materialized in the bifurcated curricula of these new academies: classical texts in morning sessions, philosophy and mathematics in the afternoons. Such «cultural dual-trackism» constitutes what Homi Bhabha theorized as the «Third Space» – one that «displaces the binarism of Self/Other, East/West, tradition/modernity, and enables a form of cultural translation that is neither assimilation nor resistance» [8, p. 53–56]. Within this liminal zone, Shenshi culture generated unanticipated creative possibilities amidst tradition-modernity negotiations.

Yet the more profound legacy lies in the subtle transmission of pedagogical ideals. The traditional shuyuan model, where «teachers and students coexisted in daily communion, with masters resolving disciples' doubts» – found modern expression through tutorial systems and residential colleges. When Peking University President Cai Yuanpei instituted his «inclusiveness» policy in 1917, its ethos directly echoed Zhu Xi's centuries-old White Deer Grotto Academy tradition of «inter-school debates». Similarly, Tsinghua President Mei Yiqi's «liberal education» conceptually derived from *The Book of Rites*' pedagogical philosophy: «The noble person's learning is cultivated in repose and nourished in leisure» [9, p. 1521], simply transposing the «Six Arts» onto modern disciplines. Through such creative transformations, Chinese higher education developed its distinctive cultural character.

Most revealing is the reconstruction of cultural memory through campus spaces. The 1920s Northern Building at Jinling University blended Gothic bell-tower silhouettes with traditional xieshan roofs, while Wuhan University's 1931 library harmonized glazed-tile eaves with neoclassical colonnades. These architectural experiments transcended aesthetic hybridity to become material embodiments of cultural negotiation [10, p. 7–9].

Contemporary Chinese universities continue this dialogic tradition through institutional forms like «National Studies Academies» and «Confucius Institutes», alongside pedagogical activities such as «classics recitation» and «poetry composition». These initiatives collectively address a fundamental question:

How can the millennial spirit of shuyuan academies be revitalized within modern academic structures? Since Fudan University and Xi'an Jiaotong University pioneered contemporary shuyuan in 2005, over 70 Chinese universities have established nearly 200 shuyuan [11, p. 43]. This has demonstrated the widespread revival and development of the academy system since the 21st century. Such institutional resurgence reveals how the contemporary legacy of Shenshi culture is undergoing a creative modern transformation.

In the era of electronic reading, the traditional Shenshi's reading habit is undergoing a silent metamorphosis. When we open the poetry APP in our cell phones or use e-book readers, behind this seemingly modern behavior, the shadow of the ancient literati's «green lanterns and yellow scrolls» looms. According to the «Generation Z Digital Reading Report» released by Yuewen Group, «Generation Z» (Post-1995 Generation) users read 5,3 classical literature works per capita throughout the year, with the reading activity from 11:00 p. m. to 1:00 a. m. reaching the peak throughout the day, accounting for more than 35 % [12]. This data is highly consistent with the habit of the Shenshi of «reading at night». For example, The Ming scholar Hu Yinglin recorded in his *Shaoshishanfang Bicong* (少室山房笔丛) that he would «hold scrolls until midnight, unable to put them down». Yet a more fascinating phenomenon emerges today, contemporary readers' digital annotations and highlights on classical texts-shared via cloud platforms – ave formed a trans-temporal system of «virtual commentary», where 21st-century marginalia converse with centuries-old writings.

The habits of literati in the digital era show a unique duality, a phenomenon that has been fully evidenced in the cultural consumption data in recent years. On the one hand, the popularity of electronic reading devices needs to meet the traditional literati book collection. Amazon data show that China's Kindle users have an average of hundreds of e-books, similar to the ancients «sitting in the city of books» the ideal; on the other hand, fragmented reading has completely changed the traditional «incense burning and sitting silently» state of concentration. Tencent data show that the total number of active WeChat reading is about 16 million people, the daily per capita use of about half an hour, the single day per capita number of times to start 6,59 times [13]. This

unique duality has given rise to a whole new form of cultural participation. E-reading devices enable readers to immerse themselves in the world of reading anytime, anywhere through their convenience and massive storage capacity.

Besides, the rise of fragmented reading has greatly expanded the breadth and diversity of reading. On digital reading platforms, readers can easily access various types of books and exchange ideas with other readers through social media and online communities. This interactivity and socialization enhances the pleasure of reading and facilitates the dissemination of knowledge. In addition, digital reading has given rise to new forms of cultural activities, such as online book clubs and virtual literary salons, which have further enriched readers' cultural life [14, p. 48–53].

Digital tools have given the spirit of Shenshi a more universal form of existence while dissolving the sense of traditional reading rituals. When the fluorescence of Kindle replaces the dimness of the oil lamp, when the cloud annotation covers the vermilion of the paper page, the real change may not lie in the

form of media, but in the redistribution of intellectual power – every ordinary Internet user has gained the right to «annotate the classics». This is a vivid example of what Bourdieu called «the democratization of cultural capital».

### Conclusion

The Shenshi legacy embodies the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and transformation. Their journey – from imperial examination halls to digital reading platforms – demonstrates how elite knowledge systems both shape and adapt to societal changes. The examination system's paradox, simultaneously enforcing orthodoxy while fostering critical scholarship, mirrors contemporary tensions between tradition and innovation. Today's hybrid educational models and digital reading practices continue this evolution, proving cultural capital's remarkable fluidity. The Shenshi experience ultimately reveals a fundamental truth: true cultural endurance requires both reverence for tradition and the courage to reinterpret it. As China navigates modernity, this balance remains its most valuable intellectual inheritance.

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