

# *Chinese Education and Its Historical Root*

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**Abstract:** The paper embarks on an exploratory journey to understand the historical roots of contemporary Chinese education by analyzing its characteristics that mirror older traditions. The formation and evolution of the Chinese educational system are influenced by a myriad of factors, most notably its historical educational paradigms. The Imperial Examination System, which endured for millennia, has had a profound impact on the trajectory of education in China, including the ideals of fairness, the examination pattern, and the nation spirit. This paper aims to delve into this perspective in depth, concentrating on themes such as the historical underpinnings of the Imperial Examination System, its influence on contemporary Chinese education, and the symbiotic relationship between the two. Drawing upon the author's firsthand experience and observations as a participant in the Chinese education, the paper also offers recommendations for its future advancement. These suggestions are formulated with an understanding that while the roots of education may lie in the past, its branches must extend towards the needs and challenges of the future.

**Keywords:** education, history, the imperial examination system

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Formation of the Imperial Examination System

To grasp the intricacies of the Imperial Examination System, it is essential to explore its historical context.

From an economic perspective, China was historically one of the world's most advanced agricultural civilizations, boasting leading productivity, diverse means of production, and a flourishing small-scale peasant economy. This economic landscape laid the foundation for a well-developed feudal system, which in turn led to political stability, national prosperity, and the advancement of culture and education.

From a political vantage point, the centralized royal system and the autocratic monarchy were the cornerstones of feudal civilization in China. Autocratic rule by the monarch inherently risked lapses in judgment owing to the concentration of decision-making power. As a result, it was imperative for the emperor to surround himself with competent advisors to assist in governance. Centralization extended beyond the imperial court to the coordination between central and local governments, as well as grassroots management. In either case, the recruitment of qualified individuals was paramount.

Prior to the Imperial Examination System, China employed two other systems for talent selection: the Chaju System and the Nine Grade Official System. Originating in the Han Dynasty, the Chaju

System required local officials to identify and recruit individuals with exceptional abilities and virtues. However, this system eventually became monopolized by local elites aiming to consolidate their own power. The Nine Grade Official System, established during a turbulent era, the Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasty, involved central government dispatching assessment officials from the privileged aristocratic class to select talents based on social status and moral integrity. Consequently, this system also became a tool for the powerful to perpetuate their influence [1].

To address these shortcomings, the Imperial Examination System emerged as both a nullification and an innovation of its predecessors. It took root during the beginning of the Sui Dynasty, a period when the ruling elite required urgent consolidation of power. The waning influence of the aristocracy was increasingly at odds with the emperor's centralizing ambitions. Concurrently, a rise in the economic and political stature of common landlords indicated that the aristocracy's decline was inevitable. Faced with a plethora of challenges at its inception, the Sui Dynasty urgently needed capable individuals to guide its governance. Hence, the Imperial Examination System was conceived as a new, more equitable means of selecting officials.

## **1.2. The Content and Significance of the Imperial Examination System**

The Imperial Examination System was primarily centered on traditional Confucian classics, merging academics, examinations, and civil service into a unified framework. By excelling in regular, nationally administered tests, individuals had the opportunity to advance socially and professionally, thereby transforming their socio-economic status.

So, what sets the Imperial Examination System apart in terms of significance?

In the 1980s, scholars emphasized the importance of recognizing the unique attributes that distinguish the Imperial Examination System from other forms of official selection. As He Zhongli posited in one of his articles, there are three defining characteristics of the system. Firstly, it was an open system that allowed scholars to voluntarily "apply for and progress" through the examinations without needing special endorsements from ministers or local officials. This feature starkly contrasts it from the Chaju System. Secondly, the mantra "everything should be decided based on Cheng Wen" encapsulates the idea that recruitment and promotions were strictly based on examination performance. Thirdly, the primary institution for scholar selection was the Jinshi Academy, where regular examinations were conducted [2].

In analyzing historical Chinese literature, several key features emerge that further characterize the Imperial Examination System.

In terms of Selection Content, the examinations were organized into a variety of subjects, each designed to address the specific needs of different administrative, economic, and military sectors. This optimized both the relevance and the efficacy of the talent recruitment process.

Regarding Selection Methods, the system aspired toward a meritocratic framework, honing in on the candidates' innate abilities and acquired knowledge as the primary selection criteria.

When it comes to Principles of Selection, the Imperial Examination System was meticulously designed to uphold standards of fairness, transparency, and impartiality. This aimed to ensure a just and open recruitment process that was free from undue influence or favoritism.

Finally, concerning the Scope of Selection, the system was unique in its inclusivity, as it welcomed scholars from all social and educational backgrounds. This opened the doors to a more diverse and expansive talent pool for governmental roles.

The Imperial Examination System was a comprehensive and methodical means of recruiting officials, distinguished by its merit-based, transparent, and inclusive approach. This made it not only a vehicle for personal advancement but also a mechanism to ensure competent governance.

### 1.3. The Historical Significance of the Imperial Examination System

The Imperial Examination System stands as perhaps the fairest method of talent selection feasible in a feudal society. By absorbing individuals from various social strata into the ruling class, particularly during the Tang and Song dynasties, the system catalyzed national governance and stimulated significant cultural advancement, thereby shaping what many consider a golden era in ancient Chinese history [1].

Compared to other recruitment methods of its time, the Imperial Examination System is notable for its progressiveness and rationality. It facilitated social mobility and, to a certain degree, ameliorated the political climate of feudal society. Its rigorous and standardized procedures are lauded as a remarkable achievement in the annals of Chinese history. The system's provision for fair competition had unequivocal merits in galvanizing societal engagement and inclusively sourcing talent. Through the exams, both the governing authority and examinees found a transparent and equitable platform for recruitment, contributing to social stability and political clarity [3].

In a contemporary context, the Imperial Examination System has also exerted a considerable influence on Western civil service systems, making its relevance extend beyond China to impact the course of human history at large.

However, the system was not without flaws. In its later stages, particularly post-Song Dynasty, it underwent a decline characterized by diminished intellectual creativity and generational degradation of talent. The autocratic rulers manipulated the system, transforming Confucianism into an ideological shackle that suppressed intellectual innovation. This led to ideological stagnation and bureaucratic excess while stalling scientific and technological advancement [4].

Therefore, the Imperial Examination System presents a dialectical narrative comprising both merits and drawbacks. The crux of this paper, and an idea that merits emphasis, is the equitable, transparent, and competitive ethos borne out of the Imperial Examination System. This ethos has enduring relevance, resonating strongly with modern China's primary educational framework—specifically, the college entrance examination system.

## 2. Features of Contemporary Chinese-Style Education

A focal point that stands out in the landscape of Chinese education is undoubtedly the college entrance examination system.

Firstly, it's imperative to acknowledge that the current form of education in China is optimally suited to the nation's unique conditions. An analysis comparing the merits and drawbacks of education systems across diverse countries and conditions would be beyond the scope of this discussion. In fact, there is no question of the superiority of the education in all the countries, but only the form of education that is in accordance with the development of their respective countries, which is in line with their own thinking pattern [5]. Hence, in considering Chinese-style education, the context of China's national circumstances is crucial. Given the country's large population, the college entrance examination system stands as an indispensable mechanism for broadening access to education on an unprecedented scale. The demographic enormity and consequent disparities in wealth and resources make universal access to high-quality education virtually unattainable. The emergence of the college entrance examination system, therefore, could be described as serendipitously timed. Armed merely with books and pens, students can elevate their prospects through sustained effort, gaining admission to prestigious universities and setting foot on a path toward greater opportunities.

So, what precisely constitutes Chinese-style education?

From the vantage point of curricular content, Chinese education underscores the holistic cognitive development of students and their adept application of knowledge. It aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals who are not only competent but also embody values and characteristics beneficial to

society and the nation. China's education on the essential values of socialism with Chinese characteristics has produced extraordinary outcomes in recent years [6]. Unlike the targeted focus on specialized subjects such as economics or psychology as seen in some other education systems, Chinese high school curricula generally cover fundamental subjects like physics and history. This strategy exposes students to a broad spectrum of knowledge early on, allowing them to better identify their areas of interest by the time they reach university. Chinese education is also deeply committed to nurturing qualitative attributes. In the study of the Chinese language, for instance, students engage with philosophical wisdom from ancient sages as well as modern understandings of the world, across diverse literary formats like poetry, novels, and drama. Similarly, the study of history isn't merely an exercise in factual retention; it's an exploration into thinking and interpreting events like historians.

However, when the conversation shifts to China's college entrance examination system, the predominant sentiment, at least among Chinese students, is one of arduousness and exhaustion [7]. In many Chinese cities, students as young as twelve find themselves immersed in rigorous academic routines, often exceeding ten hours a day. Their daily agenda consists largely of attentive listening, meticulous note-taking, and the completion of an endless stream of assignments and exam papers. Many even forgo restful evenings and weekends, opting instead for late-night study sessions that stretch into the early hours, along with supplemental tutoring classes. This learning model, though effective in its own way, risks sidelining the importance of experiential learning. Consumed by the rigors of academic grind, students may overlook the beauty and richness of the world at an age ideally suited for such exploration.

### **3. Tracing the Historical Roots: The Imperial Examination System and Modern Chinese Education**

While the imperial examination system and the college entrance examination system fundamentally serve different purposes—the former primarily aimed at recruiting civil servants for governance, and the latter designed as an academic assessment for university admissions—their impact on Chinese education cannot be entirely separated from their core essence.

#### **3.1. The Ideals of Fairness, Openness, and Impartiality**

The most pronounced connection between these two systems lies in the shared values of fairness, openness, and impartiality. China's population size has been substantial throughout its history, making equitable resource distribution a challenging task. Disparities in wealth and social status can make life exceedingly difficult for those at the lower rungs of society. The imperial examination system, in its time, was seen as a mitigating force against such disparities. Unlike systems in other nations that might favor wealth or social standing, China's imperial examinations allowed individuals to elevate their social status and make significant contributions to society and the state merely through intellectual effort [6]. The system was renowned for its stringent monitoring, making cheating virtually impossible and thus bolstering its fair competition aspect.

Modern Chinese education, as embodied in the college entrance examination system, continues to underscore this ideal of fairness. The country mandates nine years of compulsory education, ensuring every citizen, regardless of rural or urban background, the right to education. The execution of the college entrance examination is done with remarkable meticulousness. Test papers are printed under secure conditions, transported as state secrets, and candidates are thoroughly checked for any dishonest means before entering the examination hall. These measures are all in place to guarantee a level playing field, enabling a fair competition that is accessible to all, irrespective of their socio-economic standing.

In the framework of the college entrance exam, individual capabilities become the linchpin for future success. It suggests that meritocracy is still a deeply rooted value in Chinese educational philosophy, echoing its historical antecedents. Like the imperial examination system, the college entrance examination also serves as a social equalizer, offering each individual an avenue to rise above their initial circumstances solely through their own efforts.

Thus, while their immediate objectives may differ, both systems stand as monumental efforts in the pursuit of a fair, open, and impartial society. Their influence is far-reaching, affecting not just educational policies but also the broader social fabric by offering a pathway for social mobility and fulfilling individual potential.

### **3.2. Regional Differentiation and Adjustments**

Another striking similarity between the imperial examination system and the modern Chinese college entrance examination system is the nuanced approach to regional differentiation in education and testing.

China's extensive geographical landscape, marked by varying natural environments and cultural customs, inherently leads to uneven development levels and educational resources. For instance, candidates in remote regions like the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau often grapple with issues such as inconvenient transportation and a shortage of educational talent. Recognizing these challenges, both historical and contemporary Chinese systems have made adaptations to address regional disparities.

In the Ming Dynasty, for instance, there was a clear acknowledgment that the developmental level in the south had outpaced that of the north. Consequently, the rulers implemented a north-south grading system. This system entailed the use of different examination papers for the two regions and established a ratio for the recruitment of officials from each area, thus ensuring that talents from less developed regions still had opportunities for upward mobility.

Fast-forward to today, China's college entrance examination also incorporates similar regional considerations. Test papers may be either national or local, and specific regions like Shanghai and Beijing even have their own unique examination methods and content, calibrated to the region's specific needs and challenges. Moreover, the level of difficulty in the examination papers varies depending on the region.

At the level of day-to-day educational practice, regions also show differentiation. For example, in Hebei Province, known for its rigorous approach to the college entrance examination, the educational model includes a morning-to-evening schedule along with militarized management. In contrast, cities like Shanghai offer a more relaxed learning environment and diverse subject choices, reflecting different developmental levels and societal openness.

Such regional adaptations demonstrate China's nuanced approach to achieving a balance in educational resources. While this system enables access to education across diverse landscapes and developmental levels, it also highlights an area where Chinese education continues to seek improvement: the quest for modernization and rationalization to better serve its large and varied population.

### **3.3. The National Spirit: A Lasting Legacy**

A third noteworthy connection between the imperial examination system and contemporary Chinese education lies in the deeply ingrained national spirit that has evolved over millennia.

The imperial examination system, while designed for fairness, also imposed a grueling commitment on the part of its aspirants. Exams were held only once every three years and aimed to select the absolute best from a nation of millions. This often meant years, if not decades, of rigorous study with no guaranteed outcome. Such a system inevitably fueled an "official standard ideology"



where academic success and officialdom were considered the ultimate life goals. This led to an extreme societal belief that only academic pursuits were valuable [8].

This spirit persists in modern China, albeit with its own set of challenges. Due to a combination of historical inertia and information gaps, many people today remain excessively focused on academic study at the expense of practical skills and life experience. The college entrance examination, while aiming for fairness, has become a high-pressure crucible for students. In an effort to address this, China has tried to implement a “double reduction policy,” aimed at reducing homework and after-school tutoring. However, the problem of educational “involution”—or excessive internal competition without actual progress—continues to be severe. Schools often still arrange long study hours, and underground tutoring classes persist despite official bans.

The inward-looking national psychology isn’t inherently detrimental; it represents a dedication to self-improvement and the pursuit of excellence. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that this effort is not only intense but also effective and enriching. Moving forward, the Chinese education sector needs to find a way to marry this traditional focus on academic rigor with a more balanced approach that also values practical skills, creative thinking, and overall well-being. The goal should be to evolve from a narrow, examination-focused system to one that cultivates well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society and the world at large.

### **3.4. The Role of Examinations: A Double-Edged Sword**

Another commonality between the imperial examination system and the current Chinese educational paradigm is the outsized emphasis placed on exams as the primary mode of evaluation.

Historically, the imperial examination was a make-or-break event that occurred once every three years. This high-stakes environment led candidates to invest years, often decades, of rigorous study into preparing for this single, defining examination. In modern times, the echo of this historical legacy can be found in the current educational system, particularly in the way the college entrance examination is conducted.

Most Chinese educational institutions do not use a Grade Point Average (GPA) system, nor do they consider homework or other project-based assignments in grading. The focus remains sharply on exams, which serve not as a comprehensive measure of a student’s abilities and talents, but rather as a preparatory stepping stone for the college entrance exam. This funnel-like concentration of importance on a single test can have devastating consequences.

The intense study regimen and high level of psychological stress leading up to the college entrance examination may severely affect students’ mental balance, thus hindering their ability to perform to their full potential when it matters most. For some, this leads to a lifetime of regret, as the examination is seen as a culmination of years of hard work and sacrifice. While re-taking the exam is an option, it comes at a substantial cost, both physically and emotionally.

This all-or-nothing approach towards examinations, while rooted in historical practices aimed at fairness, needs reevaluation in today’s context. The current system, despite its merits, runs the risk of reducing education to a singular focus on test preparation, overlooking the multi-dimensional aspects of learning and human development. It is crucial to strike a balance that retains the rigor of the exam but also provides room for other forms of assessment and skill development, thereby offering a more holistic approach to education.

## **4. Future Directions for Chinese Education: Reimagining the System**

The imperial examination system serves as a historical touchstone that provides valuable lessons for the modern Chinese education system. Drawing from this history, several areas can be targeted for reform [9].

#### 4.1. Reevaluating the Significance of Learning

The first step is to change the perceptions of what learning should be. Chinese education has often equated learning with hardship, instilled by the rigor and brutality of the imperial exams. While hard work should indeed be encouraged, the notion that “learning is suffering” needs to be revisited. True education should inspire curiosity, a love for knowledge, and a thirst for understanding the world. Instead of suppressing individual personalities in the name of academic rigor, education should cultivate each student’s unique skills and interests. Making education a joyful process should be a priority, drawing from the human instinct for curiosity and exploration [10].

#### 4.2. Skills Beyond the Written Word

The second point of reform should address the over-emphasis on rote memorization and written exams—a vestige from the imperial examination system that valued literary talent but often neglected practical skills. Modern education should reflect the needs of contemporary society, which demands a balance between academic knowledge and practical skills. Even if the system continues to use exams as a measure of competence, these should be designed to test a broader range of skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability.

#### 4.3. Incorporating Practical Experience

Building on this, educational reform should emphasize hands-on experience and real-world applications. While China has been slowly introducing comprehensive practical activities, the mindset of prioritizing exams hampers the effectiveness of these measures. Practical skills should not be viewed as extracurricular or secondary, but as integral components of a well-rounded education. This could include more laboratory work, field trips, internships, or project-based learning, better preparing students for real-world challenges.

#### 4.4. Reducing the Weight of Entrance Exams

Finally, there is a need to diminish the overwhelming importance placed on the college entrance examination. With its make-or-break nature, the exam can overshadow other critical elements of education, such as character development, social skills, and extracurricular achievements. By reducing its decisive role in determining a student’s future, the system could allow for a more holistic evaluation process, making room for other talents and skills to be recognized and developed.

In a word, the goal of these reforms should be to provide a more balanced, holistic, and enjoyable educational experience, aligned with both the socio-economic realities of modern China and the broader needs of human development. By learning from its historical roots yet adapting to contemporary needs, the Chinese education system has the potential to forge a new path forward.

### 5. Conclusion

The imperial examination system, a cornerstone of Chinese history, has cast a long shadow that reaches into modern China, shaping its educational philosophy and practices. It’s a system that reflects the complex interplay of culture, governance, and social dynamics, and its impact resonates in the lives of every Chinese student today.

Learning history is not just an academic exercise. It’s a pathway to understand the human society better. It allows people to glean insights into their present condition and offering lessons that can guide future reforms. It necessary to exmaine the past critically while engaing with it—accepting its strengths, recognizing its shortcomings, and adapting its most valuable aspects to suit contemporary needs. The need for ongoing reform in Chinese education is evident. To develop an educational system

that is aligned with the evolving requirements of our time, it's important to promote a balanced and inclusive approach that values both academic and practical skills. In order to modernize the educational system, the aim should be to transform it into a tool for empowering all individuals, instead of just a mechanism for selecting the elite.

In the end, education should serve as the great equalizer, providing each individual with the opportunity to realize their potential and contribute meaningfully to society. By embracing the essence of educational fairness and adaptability inherited from the imperial examination system while innovating to meet modern needs, China can work towards fulfilling the true purpose of education—enriching lives and advancing society as a whole.

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