

The Enlightenment of the Imperial Examination to the Modern Examination System

Yijun Zhou^{1,a,*}

¹*School of English Studies, Chengdu Institute Sichuan International Studies University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 611844, China*

a. vmay71962@student.napavalley.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The imperial examination system was a political system for selecting talents in China from the Sui Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, as well as an examination-based educational system. This paper will explore the role of the imperial examination system as an inspiration for the modern examination system through an objective analysis of the system, including its positive and negative effects. Its success helped greatly in the building of feudal society in ancient China, and laid the foundation for the examination and selection system of officials in China today. The imperial examination system gave people equal and fair opportunities to fulfil their ideals and contribute to the building of the country. At the same time, the imperial examination system also had a role to play in the reform of education. It inspired people that the comprehensiveness of the examination content was very essential. By more profoundly studying the imperial examination system, it can continue to improve the modern examination system and add to the construction of the country and the spread of national culture.

Keywords: the imperial examination system, reform, the modern examination system

1. Introduction

The imperial examination system is a system of selecting talents through strict examination subjects. The essential function of the system was to identify those exceptionally talented male citizens who had mastered what was considered at the time to be the knowledge and skills to ensure the continuation of the empire [1]. It was founded in the Sui Dynasty, developed in the Tang Dynasty and completed in the Song Dynasty. After more than 1,300 years, the imperial examination was a system of selecting civil and military officials and reserve personnel in feudal dynasties. The imperial examination system was actually a system of selecting officials. It consolidated the rule of the feudal dynasty and was constantly improved with the needs of successive emperors, laying the foundation for the political, economic and cultural development of each dynasty. Before the Sui Dynasty, the system of selecting officials based on the “Nine Ranks” system made it impossible for ordinary people from poor families to enter the civil service, and the Sui Dynasty began to change the system to the Imperial Examination System. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial examinations were gradually rigidised and were abolished at the end of the 20th century.

This paper will be divided into two parts. Firstly, it will discuss the impact of the imperial examination system, including positive impacts, such as the selection of many outstanding talents, as well as increased cultural exchanges; and negative impacts, such as restricting people’s thinking

patterns, and leading to the emergence of the problem of official corruption. Secondly, it explores the inspiration of the imperial examination system to the contemporary examination system. For the examinations nowadays, it has some similarities; while when it talks about modern college entrance examinations and civil service examinations there will be some differences.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the imperial examination system objectively, to learn from the lessons of its decline, and thus trying to make little improvements for the examination nowadays. Although the contemporary examination system is relatively perfect, there is always a possibility that it can be improved. The author hopes that this article will enable readers to realise that no system is perfect and that it is in need of constant improvement. The success of the imperial examination system provides a good chance for the contemporary generation, and there are still a lot of aspects that can be taken into consideration which have not been extensively elaborated.

2. The Impact of the Imperial Examination

2.1. The Positive Impact

2.1.1. Selecting the Talented People and Promoting Mobility Between Social Classes

In ancient Chinese society, emperors had to implement various policies and systems with the help of bureaucracy, so knowledgeable officials were very necessary. The history of the imperial examination system shows that it has been successful, surviving for hundreds of years. The imperial examination system has a lot of reasonable points that people can learn from modern society.

As an example, Zhang Juzheng was a great man in the history of the Ming Dynasty who devoted a lot to his country. He was a gifted young man, good at learning and taking exams, and at the age of twelve, he passed the Xiu Cai exam. Although his father was only a poor Xiu Cai, he later became the first minister. Zhang Juzheng was a good leader in his position, not only indifferent to fame and fortune, but also in his work, he was very serious, committed to improving the law, and actually doing things for the country and the people. It is because of the imperial examination system that a child of a poor scholar's family was able to enter the officialdom. It is also because of the imperial examination system that the commoners who had experienced the hardships and understood the real social problems had the opportunity to work for the rulers.

Zhang Juzheng's deeds can well illustrate why the imperial examination system was able to maintain feudal rule. Because it was able to select not only intelligent and educated people, but also people who understood the real problems of society, and who would make continuous efforts to solve the problems, and for the sake of fewer people suffering their own misfortunes. At the same time, the imperial examination system allowed poor people to enter the "upper class" and interact with high-powered officials. These officials might be able to realise the difficulties of the poor scholars, and through them, they could better understand the problems of society and adjust their policies according to reality. On the other hand, some sons and daughters of officials might be reduced to commoners because of their failure in the imperial examinations. Therefore, the imperial examination system promoted mobility between members of different classes [2].

2.1.2. Contributing to the Development of Culture

As an indispensable part of traditional Chinese culture, the imperial examination system is one of the basic components of traditional Chinese culture [3]. Poems blossomed in that era due to the imperial examination system's installation, which helped Chinese traditional culture spread by giving people the chance to showcase their talents [4]. The establishment of the imperial examination system gave the lower class a hard-to-refuse outlet, while the upper class would actively engage in the examination when they saw how hard the commoners were working. However, the imperial examination system

was extremely difficult to pass. Only a very small percentage of people were able to modify their fate via reading, and studying diligently while shivering in front of frigid windows did not guarantee a gold medal. However, the culture of encouraging reading as a means of altering one's destiny was advantageous for society as a whole [5]. Not only did society as a whole start to seek progress, but many of these unsuccessful scholars were also brimming with wisdom and knowledge. They may not have had the luck of officialdom, but because they scattered among ordinary people, they were still able to use their talents to the fullest to advance folk culture.

2.2. The Negative Impact

2.2.1.Restricting People's Minds

The imperial examination system is a system of selecting officials implemented by the government, and the main body of implementation is the government, so the examination questions are also set by the government. The imperial examinations' material cannot readily be updated or changed because it is quite stiff and inflexible.

However, the fact is that the propositions of the Four Books and Five Classics simply could not adapt to the needs of social transformation. On the contrary, they prevented the majority of students from grasping the knowledge of the modern world, leading to the fact that China's education system at that time lagged behind that of the rest of the world. The goal of the imperial examination system was to identify talents that would support the autocratic system of the imperial dynasty. The cultural foundation of this system was its exclusive respect for Confucianism and exclusive unity of officials and teachers, which hardly represented the advanced culture of the time and constrained the minds of the scholars. They learnt from books and were very fluent in answering questions about Confucian culture, but when it came to situations that were really linked to social problems or the current state of the country, most officials did not have a good way of dealing with them.

2.2.2.The Corruption among Officials

The problem of corruption among officials was because the establishment of the imperial examination system gave the children of humble families the opportunity to rise to the regime class, where they could enjoy status and money. As the children of the humble family lacked money themselves, they would inevitably be seduced by the intoxicating life of the upper ruling class once they rose to the power class, and would then become corrupt and accept bribes. With the development of feudal society at that time, the imperial examination became the main way for scholars to enter the civil service [6]. Once they were successful in the examination, it meant that their status would be improved and they could enjoy all the glory and wealth, so in order to achieve their goal, they would even cheat in the examination. This just fulfilled the wish of some candidates who wanted to speculate and enter the examination hall by trading money with officials, hiding cheat sheets or switching examination papers. Moreover, since the passing rate of the imperial examinations was very low and very few people could pass the examinations, this resulted in some outstanding talents not getting the opportunities they deserved, whereas some people who were relatively less outstanding but from good families might get the opportunity to enter the officialdom through other means, which was really unfair. Some bureaucrats and businessmen and capitalists will also come to flatter officials.

3. The Enlightenment of the Imperial Examination System

3.1. Similar Enlightenment

For the examinations nowadays, it has some similarities. The selection of officials is a national event, and in China's long-standing feudal society, successive rulers have placed great importance on the cultivation and selection of talents in order to cement their dominance. The imperial examination of the modern examination also has a lot of inspiration; however, despite the abolishment of the imperial examination, the examination of this method of selecting talents has not and cannot be replaced [7].

3.1.1. The Fairness Is Significant

In every country, there are many examinations at different levels, some about professions, like the civil service examination, the bar examination and the teacher qualification examination; and some about professionalism, like the English professional grade 4 examination and the computer examination. However, if people sit next to each other in the examination room, they can see other people's answers at a glance; the teachers in the examination room do not supervise strictly, chatting or sleeping when supervising the examination, etc., all these will affect the fairness of the examination. If the credibility of the examination is lowered, it will bring a lot of inconvenience to enterprises and schools. For major enterprises, it may not be clear whether the candidates have comprehensive professional knowledge or not, which will lead to the whole enterprise's various departments being affected, such as low efficiency. The fairness of examinations is important not only to society but also to individuals. If children from rich families can use the money to buy certificates, then this will firstly create a sense of inferiority and powerlessness within the children of poor families, and secondly, affect their outlook on life.

3.1.2. The Need for the Comprehension and Variety of the Content

The imperial examination system focused only on book knowledge and did not adapt, and the feudal society at that time was not willing to exchange cultures with other countries in the world, which was one of the fundamental reasons leading to its abolition. If the content of the examination is only learned by rote memorization, then when people who have obtained the certificate encounter real problems in society, they may not know how to apply the knowledge to solve the problems. Because of the fixed content of the examination, it is impossible to select people who are really suitable for the workplace. So it is necessary to add more knowledge of the field in the modern examination, and the examination not only needs to conduct a written test but also an interview [8]. In the written test, the questioner can add different fields of knowledge to examine the candidate's knowledge reserves; in the interview process, the examiner should also pay attention to the candidates' comprehensive ability to assess, such as how to cope with emergencies in a certain situation or how to use their own ideas to persuade others and so on.

3.2. Different Enlightenment

3.2.1. Enlightenment for the Modern College Entrance Examination

There are similarities between the administration and implementation of the examination process of the rural examination in the imperial examination era and that of the modern college entrance examination, both of which are aimed at selecting talents through the examination [9]. Both the imperial examination system and the college entrance examination system are competitive talent selection systems, and linked to the social and education system. They profoundly reflect the requirements of political, economic and cultural aspects of the society. So, the imperial examination

is like the ancient college entrance examination; the college entrance examination is like the modern imperial examination. The study of the historical examination system can provide a reference for today's college entrance examination reform [10].

Firstly, it is necessary to increase the opportunities for national education. When the ancient imperial examination system was better developed, the rulers had already realised the importance that people should take the examination regardless of their status. This was also a reflection of the fairness of the imperial examination system. Regardless of family background, everyone could sit for the examination, and only under such circumstances would talents not be buried. As a matter of fact, some children from poor families will work a hundred times harder, so all they need is a chance to prove themselves. While the Advanced Level Examination is also a universal examination, there are cases where students in remote areas cannot receive education. The Government should still pay more attention to the problem of inequality in education and strive to give more students a fair chance.

Secondly, it should learn from the education systems of overseas countries. For example, in the United States, the American college entrance examination consists of two parts, Science Assessment Test (SAT) and American College of Trades and Crafts (ACT), and also includes high school grades and letters of recommendation. China's college entrance examination only has one chance to take the test in June every year. Compared to the Chinese college entrance examination, the American college entrance examination gives students more space to play, because it combines cultural knowledge and non-theoretical knowledge, and comprehensively examines students' ability. This way of assessment also gives more students the opportunity to make up for their cultural achievements with extracurricular activities if they are not that good.

3.2.2. Enlightenment for the Civil Service Examination

When it comes to the civil service examination, the main purpose of both the civil service examination and the imperial examination system is to select outstanding talents to assist in the management of the country, thereby serving the community and maintaining national stability and peace. The imperial examination system also has something to learn from the civil service examination.

Firstly, exams are a useful tool for selecting civil workers. The examiners can rapidly and thoroughly understand the examinees' attitudes and professional abilities through the test. Furthermore, it might be challenging for administrators to choose the finest candidates for civil service posts from among the large pool of applications. Setting exams can help them make this difficult decision.

Second, for instance, temporary borrowed examination venues, which typically have more pupils in them and are in poorer condition, might have an impact on regular school classes, and are not helpful in preventing fraudulent behavior in the examination venues. To give candidates a comfortable testing environment and improve exam fairness, the government should pay more attention to the selection of testing locations.

4. Conclusion

The consolidation of a regime cannot be separated from the construction of various systems. And the imperial examination system contributed to the development of politics and culture in ancient Chinese society, and also enlightened the contemporary examination system. The imperial examination system not only maintained the stability of the society, but also gave scholars the opportunity to work together to build a better country. The imperial examination system fundamentally promoted the social change and cultural inheritance of the time, and laid down the system of selecting officials in the later generations of China. Its experience and wisdom are of great historical significance.

References

- [1] O'Sullivan, B., Cheng, (2022) *L. Lessons from the Chinese imperial examination system. Lang Test Asia* 12, 52.
- [2] Fan, XuePing. (2020). *Evolution and impact of the imperial examination system in ancient China. Encyclopaedic Knowledge* (36), 2.
- [3] Li WF. (2022). *A study of the imperial examination system and the spread of traditional Chinese culture. Couplet* (16),34.
- [4] Liang Yan & Li Wanbo. (2019). *On the Implications of the Ancient Imperial Examination System for China's Modern Civil Service Examination and Recruitment System. Farmers' Counsellor* (17),168.
- [5] Zhang, Xijuan & Jing, Ligu. (2023). *Analysis of the development and characteristics of the imperial examination system in the Song Dynasty. Yanhuang Geography* (02),26.
- [6] Wang Yuanfen. (2022). *Exploring the evolution and development of the ancient imperial examination system. Times Report (Benliu)*(11),90.
- [7] Liu Qinghua. (2022). *Reflection on the cultural function of imperial examination system. Hubei Admission Examination* (03),16.
- [8] Lan Jie, Xing Wang & Zhang Zixiang. (2019). *A comparative study of the Northern Song imperial examination system and the modern civil service system. Modern Business Industry* (30),90.
- [9] Yuan, Jinshan. (2021). "Overview of the 20th International Symposium on the Imperial Examination System and Science and Technology". *Education and Examination* (06), 52.
- [10] Liu Qinghua. (2019). *Historical Traceability and Realistic Rationality of the Reform of College Admission Criteria. Education and examination* (02),56.