

The Chinese Imperial Examination System's Historical Significance: Why was it administered?

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The reason for this article originates from the reading of “The Travels of Lao Can,” a significant work of fiction written by -Lie E- (1857-1909), during the late Qing Dynasty (1368-1644), highlighting the social and political issues of the time through the lens of a wandering scholar. In ancient Chinese society, emperors had to implement various policies and systems with the assistance of the bureaucratic government apparatus, so the need for knowledgeable officials was necessary. The goal of this paper is to analyse the imperial examination system objectively, to learn the reasons why it was administered throughout the one thousand three hundred years of its existence. The author hopes that this article will enable readers to understand reasons and their historical significances. This paper is divided into two parts; first, it will show the historical significances and selection criteria of many outstanding talents; and, second, it explores the positive and negative aspects of this imperial examination system from the early days to contemporary time. The competitive aspect encouraged a spirit of high standards and responsibilities among leaders which differs from today's bureaucratic challenges. As China faces the choice between fast modernization and keeping to its cultural roots, practices and beliefs, looking into the imperial examination system may provide an important lesson on using past knowledge to guide the future. Essentially, revising the history of the “kējǔ” (科举) enhances our grasp of an important era of China's long history, but also enables modern society to learn from its historical dedication to educate ethical leadership

Keywords: Chinese Civil Service; Imperial Examination - “kējǔ” (科举); Educational Policy; Standardised Testing; Meritocratic System.

Introduction

In ancient China, education historically served as the primary means for the lower classes to advance upwards in society. Education as a public good, played a crucial role in maintaining the harmonious function of society refining the social class structure. Using a multi-tiered competitive evaluation process, the ‘Imperial Examination System’ “kējǔ” (科举), allowed eligible candidates to obtain social recognition and positions as part of the official state (Figure 1, below). Therefore, as a means of achieving upward social mobility, the imperial examination system in ancient China gained prominence over thousands of years. Its practical relevance was to provide individuals with a realistic alternative for achieving social mobility (Chen et al., 2023). The traditional Chinese government's system of administration was known as the Chinese civil service, whose members were chosen through a

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competitive examination. For over a millennium the Chinese civil service system-maintained stability throughout the empire and served as a primary conduit for social mobility within Chinese society ("Chinese Civil Service", n. d). The imperial examination system was established during the Sui (c. 581-617) and Tang dynasties (c. 618-907), developed during the Song dynasty (960-1279) and reached its peak during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1644-c.1911/12), when the civil service system grew to what is widely regarded as its pinnacle (Wang, 2013). Family members of the imperial family were not allowed to hold high positions, as a result, public schools were established across the nation to aid the talented but impoverished candidates, and promotions were made on the basis of merit, with the person nominating another for advancement being held fully accountable for that person's actions. Its practical significance was to offer a potential solution for those seeking to improve their identities within the social rank. Evidence suggests that during the last of the imperial dynasties of China, the Qing dynasty (1644-c. 1911/12 CE) feudal authority was strengthened by the imperial examination system, offering a chance for the general public to surpass their social status (Chen et al., 2023). However, there wasn't a fair distribution of educational resources, and children from different backgrounds didn't have equal opportunities to pursue upper education. Gentry and nobility born with economic means had better access to educational opportunities resources, which made their ascent comparatively simple since they were raised in it. In contrast few low and middle-class commoners possessed the resources to give their children access to a high-quality education, not to mention unqualified tenant servants. For many, scholarly possibility through the imperial examination system represented not just a personal advancement but family honour and prestige.

Figure 1. *Chinese Candidates taking the Civil Service Exams. A Detail of a 16th Century CE painted scroll showing Candidates taking the Civil Service Examination which were used to select government Officials throughout Imperial China (Yu Ren, Wu Yue, Beijing Palace Museum-Public Domain)*



The bureaucratic system created by the examination was one of the most advanced in the pre-modern world allowing the Chinese empire to effectively govern its vast and diverse territory. This system did not appear overnight but stemmed from previous political practices for recruiting officials for the governance of the Chinese society. The exams were rooted in Confucious' (Kǒngzǐ - 孔子; c. 551 - 479 BCE) philosophy, becoming an instrument not only for bureaucratic governance but also for social mobility, cultural integration and political stability. For over 1,300 years of processes and procedure, the imperial examination system influenced nearly every aspect of the Chinese culture and society, leaving an enduring legacy that is still relevant in modern discussions of meritocracy, education and governance (Csikszentmihalyi 2024).

In ancient imperial China, as in all strata of its society, the transition and transmission (shared culture) of culture and knowledge across the generations depended on learning values and skills within the family. Beyond the bond of kinship, more advanced knowledge was acquired through the teacher-student relationship, idealized along with family in the Confucian Analects (论语 - Lúnyǔ), which are the most-revered sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition. The Analects were probably compiled by the succeeding generations of Confucius's disciples during the early period of the Warring States (c. 481/403BC- 221BC) which describe the three centuries when various rival Chinese states battle viciously for territorial advantage and dominance (Cartwright 2017). As a result, the "Qin" dynasty, (221-206BC) was victorious and established the first unified Chinese state defined as the era of centralized government in ancient China (Mark, 2020). This period saw significant developments in society, commerce, agriculture, philosophy and the arts, setting the foundation for the subsequent flourishing of Imperial China (Csikszentmihalyi 2024).

The "Analects" are based primarily on the Master's sayings, preserved in both oral and written transitions, they capture the '*Confucian Spirit*' in form and content in the same way that the '*Platonic Dialogues*' embody '*Socratic Pedagogy*' (Weiming, 2024). Both modes of learning procedures retained their importance even after the expansion of formal educational institutions developed by the state.

The Pursuit of Talent

The corner stone of the imperial examination system was revolutionary in its core premise that human natural 'talent' rather than birthright or inherited privilege was the criterion for holding a position in the public office of the kingdom. In contrast to other contemporary societies where aristocracy and noble bloodlines determined the access to governance, China's examination system allowed men from even the humblest of backgrounds to aspire to high governmental offices. Theoretically, any male adult in China (no females, who were expected to remain in the homes as wives, and mothers), regardless of his wealth or social status, could become a high-ranking government official by obtaining a pass in the imperial

examination. These examinations comprised different categories: local, Shēngyuán (生員), also called Xiùcái (秀才), administered the exam at the county level and were performed each year; the provincial, Jǔrén (舉人) were performed every three years; metropolitan, Jìnshì (進士) were administered in the capital and performed every three years. At the national level, candidates were examined on their ability to analyse contemporary political problems, in addition to the usual examination on the classics. Occasionally, highly prestigious special examinations were held by imperial decree (Kong et al. 2022).

Candidates were tested on their knowledge of Confucian classics, the ability to write calligraphy and their understanding of the “Five Studies:” which comprised, military strategy, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography. The rules required a large number of intelligent and well-educated bureaucrats to successfully administer their domains. Five percent of those who took the imperial examination passed. This served to maintain cultural unity and consensus on basic values and ensured the identification of the educated elite with national, rather than regional goals and values. This system of civil service-administration became the means for creating such a body of capable officials who were not only competent administrators, but also capable moral leaders making it the ideological backbone of the Chinese state for the next centuries (Csikszentmihalyi 2024).

The meritocratic nature of these exams has been noted in Chinese history; during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE), about the 47% of those who passed the highest-level examination were from families with no official connections (Wang, 2013). Beyond the imperial university and other school or centres of learning, schools founded by families and clan-societies, and also by independent scholars and local government officials provided instruction geared to pass these examinations. From the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) onwards, the development of printing technologies and the growth of commercial publishing greatly enhanced access to education, expanding opportunities for many noble and gentry candidates; although competition remained fierce and examination success continued to be elusive (“Song Dynasty Summary” 2020).

During the Ming Dynasty, the reality was that the process of studying for the imperial examination tended to be time-consuming and very costly (especially if the candidate’s family were to hire tutors). As a result, most of the candidates may have come from relatively wealthy land-owning gentry. However, there are a number of examples in Chinese history of individuals who moved from a low social status to political prominence through their success in the imperial examination. Those who hoped to pass the imperial examination system received their titles; only a small fraction of those who attempted these examinations failed to pass and they did not lose their wealth of social standing; they, as dedicated believers of Confucian orthodoxy still served without the benefit of the state appointments.

This system created a theoretical ideal to elevate a lower-class candidate to the ranks of the empire’s elite, where equal opportunity was given despite the real

socioeconomic challenges. This contributed to the development of a civil culture where learning and scholarly accomplishment were highly revered. This also fostered the belief that through dedication, study and moral discipline, one could achieve greatness, reinforcing the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation (Csikszentmihalyi 2024).

Centralized Control and Bureaucratic Efficiency

One of the most salient themes of the imperial examination system is the tension between meritocracy and hereditary privilege. This paradox persisted throughout the history of Chinese civilization. The examination system was an effective tool of centralized governance; by standardizing the entry criteria into the bureaucracy machines, the imperial state was able to maintain a uniformed group of civil service people as loyal individuals. This loyalty ensured the integration of the Chinese state and countered tendencies towards regional autonomy and the breakup of the centralized power and system of governance (Elman 2013)

Contrasting to European monarchies, where the aristocrats held significant administrative government power, Chinese emperors were able to restrain the influences of local elites by appointing officials based on merit, rather than other hereditary privilege. The examination system distributed its prizes according to provincial and prefectural quotas, which meant that imperial officials were recruited from the whole country in numbers roughly proportional to each province's population. Therefore, even candidates in the disadvantaged peripheral regions, had a chance at succeeding in the examination and achieving the rewards of holding office (Zhou 2023). Another issue worth mentioning here is the social nature of this examination system which served to maintain cultural unity and consensus across the social stratus on basic social values. Those values might be represented as 'uniformity of the examination content' where the local elite and political and social candidates across the whole of the empire were inculcated into believing and practising similar values (Zhou 2023)

Brief History of the Early Form of the “kējǔ” (科举) System

The “kējǔ” (科举), system was a method for selecting capable group of individuals and scholars after an ‘Imperial Examination System’ was applied to them. While other examination systems did not exist in Western countries until approximately the 18th to 19th centuries (Xin, 2010), in China, its early form appeared during the Han Dynasty (202-220 BC). The emperor himself would read the answers and promote the most outstanding individuals to be his officials. This group of candidates were based on recommendation, and it was not open to common people. During the Han dynasty, Confucius was already an authoritative figure in a number of domains such as history, rituals and proper behaviour. He proposed the necessity of human source selection. This proposal was later supported and

developed by other famous philosophers such as Mencius (c. 372-289 BC) and Hsun Tzu (c. 310-220 BC). The system continued to develop in the following years. In the early 4th century 'Ge-Hong' first proposed the necessity of unified examinations, he pointed out that a person's language level and skills are basically in accordance with his ability and educational level (Xin, 2010). By the end of the Han dynasty, the basic framework and theoretical basis for the "kējǔ" (科举), system were established although there were still many insufficiencies.

During the short period of the Sui dynasty (581-618), two events of historical importance occurred; The first was the separation of religion from education; the second, was the category of recommended candidates for the mandarin in the imperial examination system. This is considered as the beginning of the "kējǔ" (科举), system. During the Tang dynasty (618-907) emphasis on writing itself, those who passed an initial writing examination could take the last examination in which political and military strategies would be tested (begun from 618), the purpose for this change was to prevent plagiarism among the candidates. Many of these officials were at the time famous poets and writers whose works have been passed down to the present day. During the Song dynasty (960-1279) the "kējǔ" (科举), system came to its maturity, the people's social status was no longer decided by lineage or class origin but whether a candidate could pass the imperial examination. Also, there was an unprecedented number of candidates taking the examination and a set of systematic countermeasures were taken to prevent fraud or plagiarism.

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644), confined examination subjects to the four books of five Confucian classics (五經; Wǔ jīng) which can be described in term of five visions: metaphysical (Yi-Ching, 易經 - Yì jīng - Classic of Changes) (Hon, 2024), political (詩經 - Shī jīng classic poetry. This presents kingship in terms of the ethical foundation for a humane government. The purpose of the government is not only to provide food and maintain order but also educate society), poetic vision (which underscores the valuation of common human feelings), social vision (禮記 - Lǐ jì) which shows society not as an adversarial system based on contractual relationship but as a community of trust with emphasis on communication. Society is based on four functional occupations: the scholar, the farmer, the artisan and the merchant), and finally, the historical vision (書經 - Shū jīng, which identified the significance of collective memory for communal self-identification). The Classic of Music (樂經 - Lè jīng) is sometimes referred to as the sixth classic, but this was lost by the time of the Han Dynasty (Weiming 2024).

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) brought stricter measures to prevent fraud and plagiarism such a body search before entering the exam hall. In brief, the eight-legged essay had to have eight sections (the Opening, Amplification, Preliminary exposition, Initial argument, Central argument, Latter argument, Final argument and Conclusion); examinees had to follow the given topics and imitate the tone that Confucius, Mencius or their disciples had used, the supposed addressee was the

emperor, the word number was limited to 300-700 characters. There was also a limitation on sentence numbers in certain sections, and topics were all from such sources as the Confucian Analects, the Four Books and the Five Classics. This type of essay helped to quantify and standardize the examinations. During the last Qing dynasty (1636-1911) examination officials instituted strict regulations on body searches, invigilation, examination halls and its administration (Figure 2, below). This paradigm appealed to those critics of the civil service examination who believed that pedagogical and moral problems associated with the examination culture could best be tackled through examination reform (Weerdt 2006)

As the deficiencies of the imperial examination system and essay practices and other problems in this system gradually became beyond redemption, the court announced the abolishment of the eight-legged essay style in 1901 and finally its conclusion in 1905. Thus, the “kējǔ” (科举) system that had lasted for more than 1,300 years was abolished (Weerdt 2006).

Figure 2. *An Examination Hall in Suzhou where Candidates sat for the Civil Service Examinations, which were conducted throughout the History of Imperial China. Painted scroll by Xiu Yang, 18th century CE. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang, China. (Domain Free)*



During the decades of invasion from European powers, Japan and domestic wars, the whole education examination system underwent continuous and fragmented reforms. Content and method changed from region to region and from school to school. Foreign language education, which aimed to train translators, technicians, and diplomats also took place within the Qing dynasty bureaucracy (Gan 2008).

Literature Review

From the time the first “kējǔ” (科举), imperial examination was offered during the Sui dynasty (c. 581-605 AD, onward), the imperial examination system was used as a political system to recruit government officials for the next 1,300 years, until it was abolished in the earliest years of the 20th century. A large number of publications from and about the imperial examination were produced during this period. This includes imperial documents, official dynasty histories, private publications, literary works, gazettes, genealogies, etc. although countless materials were lost or destroyed over time, a large number of historical archives and classic literature have been discovered, preserved, and restored. Many materials have recently been reprinted and compiled into collections in China. Reading classical Chinese literature without knowing its history would be a tedious task for the untrained reader. Other publications included English publications, a small portion of non-Chinese publications written by travellers, religious missionaries, trained scholars, foreign diplomats, journalists and merchants from around the world who witnessed the examinations in the nineteenth century; these publications recorded valuable details and information and provocative views about the Chinese Imperial Examinations from firsthand experiences.

Aim/Objective

The primary objective of this research is to examine to what extent the Chinese Imperial Examination's System made significant benefits to the governance of the Empire and the reasons for it to be administered throughout the social strata of Chinese society; what were the social and cultural outcomes of the imperial examination system and the impact on the cohesion, values and traditional norms of these classes and societies. It is well known that the “kējǔ” (科举) stands as one of the most significant institutions in Chinese history, having shaped the trajectory of Chinese governance, social structure and intellectual life for over a millennium. The system was designed to select the most talented and learned individuals to serve the bureaucratic government positions, thus offering a mechanism for the central state to recruit capable administrators.

Methodology

The discourse-historical approach (DH-A) is used in this research to analyse the phenomena under the present title: *The Chinese Imperial Examination's Historical Significance: Why was it administered?* This suggests that the present discussion relies on textual data and explains the complexities of the events under

inquiry. A concept of triangulation is introduced to compare the history of the imperial examination system; its development, changes throughout the millennia and the reason it was administered. The object of discourse is not a static semiotic entity, but rather a dynamic semiotic entity which aims to investigate to what extent the Imperial examination system made significant benefits to Chinese society; how this system created new reforms and communicated meaning which may be susceptible to future re-interpretations and generate new discussions. Finally, this article also offered a general view, explanation and description of various terms used under this research.

Discussion and Results

Ethical Considerations and Negative Effects Faced by The Imperial Examination System

In ancient Chinese society, emperors had to implement various policies and systems with the assistance of knowledgeable officials to maintain the bureaucratic and political machinery of the kingdom (Zhou 2023). Originally created as an apparatus to select and recruit meritocrats to serve the imperial government, for over a thousand years the imperial examination system became a social nexus and impacted every aspect of the Chinese society (Wang 2013). Although the imperial examination system has been considered the fifth great invention of the Chinese people, within the bureaucratic apparatus it also posed some ethical challenges such as the redistribution of scarce resources, creating social elites and benefiting a small privileged group at the expense of the interests of the majority of ordinary people; serving more as a system of cultural, political, and ideological control of the state, with Confucian philosophy as its core nature, believing that a society should be hierarchical, harmonious, and ordered. Ethically Confucianism, representing the mainstream culture became a dominant ideology unifying the social system; however, the social elite groups created under such a conservative social and cultural belief system, became increasingly ineffective when facing national crises and modern challenges in the 19th century. To add to the ethical consideration discussion, it is necessary to touch on the subject of “fairness.” Although “Fairness” may be very difficult to define, in the midst of different opinions, “fairness” is a concept and institutional norm with eternal value in human society, and examination fairness is of great significance to ensure the healthy operation and development of society (Zhang 2015). Any gentleman who had passed the imperial examination was entitled to some form of privilege, allowing the upper elite to be satisfied with a hierarchical structure of power, wealth and prestige, while the lower elite held out the hope that this system exam mechanism would alleviate social injustice.

Any type of tests or examinations have historically been the primary means of translating cultural capital into a professional identity and consequently the

institutional guarantee of lifetime welfare. According to related research, the primary source of the significant negative effects of the imperial admission exams was the large concentration of political risks and personal or family interests, as well as the overwhelming weight and responsibility of the government elite. To achieve a positive distribution mechanism based on the examination to make it more equitable and reasonable, the concentration of dispersion of interests and the distribution of interests based on the examination are ultimately what truly achieve the negative after-effects, including the fairness of the examination (Zhang 2015).

The downside of the imperial examination system was the rigidity and inflexibility of the exam material. The fact is that the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism could not prepare students to adapt to the need for social transformation, preventing the majority of students from grasping knowledge of the modern world, which caused the Chinese education system to fall behind the rest of the world (Zhou 2023). The cultural foundation of the imperial examination system, with its exclusive respect for Confucianism as a philosophical cornerstone of its foundation, hardly represented the advanced culture of the time and constrained the minds of the candidates and scholars (Zhou 2023). With the development of feudal society at the time that the examination system was developed, this form of exam could lead to corruption and the acceptance of bribes. Entering the civil services, scholars could be seduced by the enticing privileges of the upper ruling class enjoying glory and wealth. Instances of academic dishonesty were prevalent, and the pass rate was low, resulting in some outstanding candidates not gaining the opportunity they deserved. If the credibility and quality of the examination was lowered, it could jeopardise the seriousness and fairness of the exam; if the candidate possessed less professional knowledge, it could affect the efficiency of the various departments or government offices.

Is There an Imperial Examination or Similar Civil Service Systems in Other Countries?

China's imperial examination system greatly influenced the East Asian world. The Chinese and Japanese systems differed more in spirit than in details. Japan imitated it during the 8th to 10th century, including Chinese medicine and acupuncture; the Korean imperial examination was the longest and most comprehensive along with the Vietnam examination system. All three East Asian countries imitated China's examination system, which greatly raised their cultural level (Liu 2007).

When Japan's first epoch of modernization began in the 7th century, a civil service examination system was one of the institutions borrowed from the Tang dynasty. The Han dynasty had used examinations to supplement an appointment system based on recommendations by influential men, mostly from aristocratic society. It is unclear when the examination was founded. Japan had a strong sense of hierarchy long before it first contacted Chinese civilization (Spaulding, 1967). In Japan, after 220 years of reclusion some elements of the Imperial Examination

System were introduced again during the Meiji Restoration in 1868, known as a political transformation. Influenced by Western models and Japanese traditions, the Meiji Restoration allowed Japan to develop into a modern industrial nation-state. The political system allowed people to pursue new opportunities, better education, and increased rights. Japan was committed to keeping pace with Western developments, it quickly became recognized as a world power (Barker 1982).

The imperial examination system also played an important role in Korean history and culture. It served as a means to reinforce the king's rule and reduce the influence of the powerful clans and families (Ko 2017). The Confucian style examination was known as "Gwageo" which mirrored the Chinese examination, shaping the bureaucratic landscape for centuries (Han 2017). It was established in 958, during the reign of Gwangjong as a means of breaking the hold which a few powerful families held over the government. Although, during the Great Joseon dynasty founded by Taejo of Joseon in July 1392; Joseon encourage the entrenchment of Confucian ideals and doctrines in Korean society. The system lasted for 500 years, during which time the different dynasties retained this character of strengthening the throne against the aristocracy. In Korea, the imperial examination ensured that loyal, local intellectuals upheld the throne and its government institutions (Ko 2017).

The major examinations were literary and came in two forms: a composition written document (jesul eop), and a test of the classical knowledge (myeongyeong eop). These tests were officially to be held every three years, but in practice it was common for them to be held at any other time as well. In the course of the various dynasties, some 6000 candidates passed the composition examination, while only about 450 candidates passed the classic examination.

Similarly to the other Asian imperial examination, the history of the Vietnamese Confucian examination system began with Tam Truong (three rounds), an examination to select the "Bright Learned Men," held in 1075 during the reign of King Ly Thanh Tong (1009-1225), which was the first of the three great dynasties of Vietnam. A Chinese style administration was one of the most significant changes brought by the later King "Ly", through this system the local lords were replaced by a nine-tiered hierarchy of civil servants and state officials, and an institution for the training and learning of the civil service was established. This centralized form of government enabled King "Ly" to also establish a military service, which kept the invading Chinese and "Champa" (an ancient Kingdom of Indochina) at bay for almost two centuries. This administrative system also served to develop the great Red River Delta system with dikes and canals, preventing summer flooding and winter drought making this region one of the most fertile-growing areas in the world ("Later Ly Dynasty" 2015). Examinations were of three types: interprovincial, pre-court and court, with the last conducted in Thang Long (nowadays the city of Hanoi) the capital city (Han 2017). Exams were increasingly competitive, and the most prestigious titles were awarded to those who completed higher-level exams. Successful candidates obtained administrative (government) position at the

village, provincial and central government levels. This rigorous selection process to cultivate a dedicated and educated administrative class, reflects the lasting impact of the Chinese form of governance and philosophies.

Beyond East Asian empires, merit-based civil service examinations have emerged in various formats but, in order to better understand this term, it would be useful to give a definition of the British Civil Service. The most widely used definition of a civil servant is the one proposed by the Tomlin Commission in 1931: "Servants of the Crown, other than holders of political and judicial offices, who are employed in a civil capacity and whose remuneration is paid wholly and directly out of moneys voted by Parliament" (Castellini 2018). The term was first used in the late eighteenth century to distinguish the covenanted civilian employees of the East India Company (through which India was governed until 1858) from military personnel (Kim & Massey 2024). This use of the adjective "civil" to connote "not military" carried over into the context of the early nineteenth-century British Civil Service but was gradually adopted to convey the crucial distinction between holders of permanent posts and those whose jobs changed hands when there was a change of government (Castellani, 2018). However, for instance, in the United Kingdom, the civil service selection was arranged through the patronage until the publication of the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report, which led to the establishment of a competitive examination system during this process; missionaries, merchants and diplomats had learned about the Chinese government system and disseminated it to Europe (Kim & Massey 2024).

Likewise, in India, the word 'civil service' (India Civil Service-ICS), originated during the days of the government of the East India Company (sometime between 1600-1858), which called its employees working on the civil side as 'servant' to differentiate from those employed for military and naval duties (Gonsalves 2019). The system was organised into four categories: president, merchant, factors (a business agent) and writers. In this scenario the British colonial administration established the Indian Civil Service examinations, which have subsequently evolved into the current Union Public Service Commission exams, utilizing a comprehensive selection process that continues to influence modern governance. It was not until well into the 19th century that political and permanent officials clearly emerged as two separate and distinct species of public servant. Hence, the terminology is of quite recent origin. And, even in the hundred years or so that 'civil servant' has been part of the day-to-day vocabulary of public affairs, the precise content of the term has never been defined (Castellini 2018).

In an overall view, the legacy of the imperial examinations system is evident as a worldwide system introduced since its early origins, demonstrating a global inclination towards meritocracy in public administration. Despite regional differences in implementation and cultural contexts, this system shared a common goal: to foster capable and representative governance through the diligent selection of qualified public citizens.

The Imperial Examination System and the Far-Reaching Challenges to Dismantle It

As the imperial examination system's aim was to recruit candidates (Human capital) to fulfil administrative duties from all strata of the society, it encountered far-reaching challenges that in due course called into question its efficacy and relevance (Chen et al. 2023). Various concerns were presented as follows: First, the primary concerns in the administration of the exam to candidates was its structure and rigidity, which often prioritized repetition and memorization of the Confucian classical texts over practical and critical thinking skills. This often resulted in a common consequence that a bureaucratic elite was well-versed in recognizing and practicing Confucian doctrine but at the same time, were not adequately prepared to address the dynamic needs of an evolving and developing society; secondly, those candidates well-off or well-connected aristocratically or with better access to educational materials, had a better chance to out-perform those coming from other levels of society; thirdly, the examination system inadvertently reinforced the Chinese social stratification by favouring those with better resources, leaving little room for meritocracy (Zhou 2023).

The long-held belief that civil service should be obtained only through examination was challenged when calls for reform grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as literacy rates among the lower classes started to increase. Furthermore, the imperial bureaucratic structure's obvious shortcomings were exposed by the disruptions prompted by both domestic unrest and foreign involvement during this time. Intellectuals and reformers pushed for a more inclusive and practical administrative approach as a result of the system's diminished credibility due to its incapacity to adjust to the needs of contemporary government and the globalising world (Zhou 2023).

Therefore, both real-world governance failings and shifting societal dynamics helped pave the way for the removal of the Imperial Examination System, which reflected a larger demand for a more efficient and equitable method of choosing public officials. A major turning point in Chinese history was the system's final elimination in the early 20th century, which made way for new forms of government that attempted to strike a compromise between tradition and the need for modernisation. It has long been acknowledged that the Imperial Examination System, a government-mandated test for applicants to the civil service in ancient China, had a crucial role in determining social mobility and bureaucratic governance.

Restoring Chinese History Through the Imperial Examination System

Restoring the Imperial examination system, known as “kējǔ” (科举), might have grounds for a resurgence. This meritocratic approach not only allowed for social mobility among the educated elite but also promoted bureaucratic efficiency,

establishing a foundation for centralized governance that would endure through successive dynasties. By emphasizing Confucian education and literary skill, the examinations fostered a class of scholar-officials who were entrusted with the moral and administrative responsibilities of the state. This rigorous examination system was designed to select candidates for the civil service based on merit rather than birthright. As social sciences researchers debate its legacy and application, it has become evident that this system served as vehicle for cultural continuity as well as national identity of the Chinese dynasties and its people. The Confucian ideals were the central awareness in creating and sharing intellectual culture amongst government officials; classical texts and ethical governance instilled a sense of common purpose among the candidates and educated laypeople. Another crucial role played by the examination system was the contribution to the preservation of Chinese literature and philosophy, where the ideals of virtue and governance were transmitted from generation to generation. While scholars may reconstruct some aspects of this framework and history, it also brings a rich tapestry of cultural heritage (Zhou 2023).

The Imperial examination system is becoming increasingly recognised as a lens through which to evaluate societal shifts and cultural growth in conversations about reconstructing and comprehending Chinese history today. An important turning point within Chinese history was when this system of examinations collapsed during the socio-political changes of the 19th century, which coincided with the expansion of Western influence and modernisation initiatives. The Xinhai Revolution (1911) was a widespread uprising that sought to overthrow the last Qing dynasty and establish a republican government in China. Debates concerning traditional versus modern values and the function of education in promoting national identity were sparked by this change.

Modern academics and decision-makers can learn about contemporary educational systems and the continuous pursuit of a harmonious fusion of tradition and advancement by looking at the historical development of the Imperial examinations. As a result, reconstructing Chinese history via the Imperial examination system emphasises the long-lasting influence of learning, education, meritocracy, and cultural continuity in forming the identity and government of the country.

Conclusion

The Chinese imperial examination system was a foundational element of early imperial Chinese society and subsequent governances, covering various aspects of the daily life of the Chinese people, such as intellectual life, society, ethics, virtue cultivation, belief, shaping its development for over a millennium. Although the examination offered social mobility and meritocratic opportunity, it was also highly exclusive. For example, women were prohibited from taking the exam, and certain ethnic minorities faced discrimination or were outright excluded from

participating. Unlike in the European monarchies of the time, where aristocrats held significant regional power, the Chinese emperor was able to restrain and limit the influences of local elites by appointing officials based on merit rather than hereditary privilege. The Confucian moral governance and education left an indelible mark on Chinese civilization. The system provided a means for talented individuals to ascend to the rank of government official, promoted social stability, fostered cultural unity, and shared intellectual traditions. Despite some limitations, the system remained a significant historical example of how ideas about governance, education and the role of intellectual and moral rigor could play in public service. The competitive nature of the “kējǔ” (科举) promoted a sense of high standards and duties among its leaders. As China confronts the decision of rapid modernization versus maintaining its cultural traditions, exploring the imperial examination system could offer valuable insights on leveraging past knowledge to shape its future. In essence reviewing the history of the “kējǔ” (科举) not only deepens our understanding of a significant period in China’s extensive history but also allows contemporary society to draw lessons from its historical commitment to cultivating ethical leadership.

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