

A Study on the Revival and Abolition of the Imperial Examination System Based on the Response of Shanxi Common People (1894-1915)

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Abstract. In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, due to factors such as famine, conflict between religious believers, and collusion between officials and businessmen in Shanxi, common people accepted passively and resisted inwardly the abolition of imperial examinations and the rise of western-style schools. This article outlines the changing process of common people's attitudes in Shanxi divided into three stages. In the early period, common people generally accepted the imperial examination system, while in the middle period, their attitudes towards the reform of the examination system and the promotion of new learning gradually diverged. In the later period, common people exhibited a clear polarization in their attitudes towards the abolition of the imperial examination system and the promotion of new learning. Through the analysis from a Western perspective, this article argues that the contradictory reactions of the common people are due to the cognitive dissonance in rural societies during institutional reforms. However, the internal motivations behind their actions and their attitudes were remain highly aligned.

Keywords: The imperial examination system, Western-style schools, Shanxi, Diary of Tuixiangzhai, Liu Dapeng.

1. Introduction

In 1898, with the rise of the Wuxu Reform, the traditional imperial examination system in China was abolished. At the same time, the New Policies of the late Qing Dynasty promoted the establishment of Western style schools in China. The imperial examination system was divided into Te Ke and Chang Ke. Te Ke refers to examinations with fixed time and fixed subjects, including the annual examination, the college examination, the township examination, and the national examination. Chang Ke was temporary examinations held by the emperor without fixed time, commonly known as the special subjects [1]. The Qing government held two sessions to reform the imperial examination system in 1898 and 1900, adjusting the regulations, adding new disciplines, and ordering all provinces to transform academies into new-style schools [2]. In 1901, the Qing court abolished the eight-legged essay and policy discussion [3]. In 1902, Shanxi abolished the special subjects and established new-style schools. The provincial capitals set up higher learning institutions according to custom, and missionary Timothy Richard founded Shanxi University in Taiyuan [4]²⁹. In the 30th year of Guangxu (1904), Shanxi Jia Chen issued an imperial edict to suspend the imperial examination system. First, Taigu stopped the examination because of the Boxer Uprising, which killed foreign missionaries [5]. In 1905, the national imperial examination system was completely abolished, but its influence continued until the early years of the Republic of China.

The research on the social changes caused by the abolition of the imperial examination system and the promotion of new learning in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China has mainly focused on three issues, the dimensions of educational reform system, political history and social history. The academic community has conducted multidimensional research on this issue. For example, the institutional dimension of educational reform focuses on the modernization of educational institutions, including the reforms of the school system, the number of schools and students, and the content and purpose of education triggered by the abolition of the imperial examination system. Representative scholars include Hao Jinhua, Tian Zhengping, Luo Zhitian, and Guan Xiaohong [6-9]. Another example is the political history dimension, which focuses on the

mobility patterns and impacts of social groups after the abolition of the imperial examination system. It discusses the evolution of Chinese politics from different perspectives by using long-term research methods to place the abolition of the imperial examination system within the framework of traditional Chinese ruling order and modern social transformation. This type of research is most extensive, with representative scholars including Hao Jinhua, Wang Xianming, and Li Fagen [10, 11]. In addition, there is also a social history dimension that focuses on microscopic investigations into the impact of the abolition of the imperial examination system on changes in rural society, as well as issues such as power shifts in grassroots society before and after the abolition of the imperial examination system. Representative scholars include Yu Jianrong, Luo Zhitian, Li Fagen, and Tian Zhengping [12-15].

Overall, the academic research on the abolition of the imperial examination system and its impact is relatively rich, but the existing research does not fully investigate this important historical event from the perspective of gentry and common people, and there is also a relative lack of attention from a Western perspective. In addition, most of the existing research focuses on the investigation of southern regions and coastal provinces for trade, with less attention to inland provinces such as Shanxi. Due to the lack of direct records of gentry and common people's views in newspapers and magazines in inland provinces during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, this article attempts to trace back to the historical response of gentry and common people to the abolition of imperial examination system and the promotion of new learning in Shanxi region during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, in order to explore the internal causes and action logic of gentry and common people's response, by using Liu Dapeng's Diary and a small amount of the memoirs of Timothy Richard, one of the founders of Shanxi Academy.

2. Shanxi civilians' perception and reflection on the imperial examination system before and after the Sino-Japanese War

With the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese scholars in the late Qing Dynasty gradually reached a consensus on the abolition of the traditional imperial examination system. In 1894, the imperial examination system was the first to undergo changes in Beijing, but during the same period, it remained unchanged in Shanxi. The Western-style schools were not established or officially disseminated, which can be called the end of the imperial examination system. During this period, whether from the perspective of villagers, scholars, or the state, the entire late Qing society was full of hope and confidence in the imperial examination system. The state attached great importance to the imperial examination system, and "the situation is very big... The state's selection of people can also be said to be very serious. [16]" The imperial examination system was still regarded as the best means for the country to select talents.

Liu Dapeng, a *Juren* in Shanxi Province, and his fellow countrymen have always valued reading. The imperial examination and the scholar culture behind it still occupy a prominent position in traditional Confucian society. For example, when Liu Dapeng was a teacher, he was respected by his employer, which showed that teachers were treated with respect by their fellow countrymen at that time. At that time, there was also an incident in which a *Juren* in Yuyi was insulted by the gatekeeper. The county official ignored it and eventually the whole township of scholars reported it to the provincial government. The gatekeeper was punished with torture. "Everyone regarded the *Juren* as being insulted by the gatekeeper, saying that the county magistrate had indulged the gatekeeper and that the gatekeeper had abused too much. [16]" It can be seen that the villagers highly respect ancient scholars. As a scholar, he was full of expectations for the imperial examination. After Liu Dapeng himself failed in the imperial examination, he remained optimistic about it, believing that "the opportunity of the imperial examination have always existed [16]", and encouraged his son Jieer to participate in the imperial examination. At this time, due to its location in the interior, Shanxi Province was less affected by external interference, and there were still many imperial examination candidates, so the style of imperial examination was flourishing.

At the same time, the drawbacks of the imperial examination system in the late Qing Dynasty were accumulating. Some expressions of common people could reflect their perception, mainly reflected in four aspects. Firstly, before participating in the imperial examination, maintaining personal relationships and following red tape resulted in huge expenses. Liu Dapeng recorded that before he and his friend Ji Qing participated in the examination, they had to pay a lot of visits, including eight fellow countrymen who were officials in Beijing, eleven fellow countrymen who were merchants, and two main examiners. They also had to pay "four liang of gifts and six thousand gate fees. [16]" Liu Dapeng said, "The most numerous visits... This cannot be done in a few days... If you work hard here, it is too late. [16]" Secondly, the functionality of the imperial examination system itself weakened. In the later stage of the development of the imperial examination system, its formality was greater than its practicality for practical use. When Liu Dapeng entered Beijing to participate in the township examination, he observed a phenomenon that literati in the capital greeted each other by writing progress or not, rather than reading. "In the capital, all scholars take writing as the priority, followed by poetry and prose. [16]" Moreover, Liu found that all scholars only specialize in the eight-legged essay for exams, and "not based on classics and history [16]". Thirdly, the spiritual encouragement and guidance of "all things are inferior, only reading is high" provided by the imperial examination system weakened. Some scholars lost their morality due to their focus on profits, and "scholars who study only lose their morality and conduct for hundreds of money [16]", which is why "the style of scholars is deteriorating [16]". Finally, the practicality of participating in the imperial examination weakened. The population of the late Qing Dynasty experienced explosive growth, and there was a phenomenon of few officials and many examinees in the imperial examination system. Therefore, even if they passed the examination, there was no way to make a living for their families. As Liu Dapeng said, "Otherwise why would I go out to teach?" [16].

It is understandable that there are also differences in the attitudes of the common people towards the imperial examination system. However, in the current historical environment, the dualization of differences is just in its infancy and is not noticeable. For some scholars and most rural people, the imperial examination system has a strong utilitarian tendency. Due to the limitations of the times, after failing in the imperial examination, even if they have the qualifications to become officials, there is a possibility that they will have no official to serve. After Liu Dapeng failed in the imperial examination, he temporarily cultivated land to make a living. However, passing villagers "pointed at him and looked at him with scorn" and ridiculed him by saying, "Are you still cultivating in the fields?" [16]. Some scholars "decreased their tuition fees by half due to the subsidy" [16], and even Liu himself admitted that "studying is originally for honor". There are also many scholars who believe that the imperial examination system is not only about obtaining fame and fortune, but also about spiritual guidance. Most of these people highly respect Confucius and Mencius's doctrine, and believe that utilitarian scholars who "wear Confucian caps and wear Confucian clothes in a grand manner" but "do not seek the essence of righteousness" and "look at what they do, they are careless and irresponsible" [16], are even ridiculed by "old farmers and big businessmen".

Throughout this period, even though there were some dissatisfaction with the imperial examination among the commoners in rural society, they generally recognized it in terms of both behavior and ideology. The awareness of the drawbacks of the imperial examination among commoners mentioned in Liu Dapeng's diary also foreshadowed the contradictory feedback from commoners on the abolition of the imperial examination.

3. Observation and response of civilians to educational reform during the Hundred Days' Reform

After the Qing government announced the reform of the constitution, Western-style schools were established in various provinces, and new subjects such as mathematics and technology were gradually incorporated into the teaching content. In order to select new talents, the government set up special examinations such as the Special Economic Examination. At this time, with the help of

Timothy Richard, Shanxi established the earliest national university, and various localities in Shanxi also began to establish new primary schools.

During this period, the centrifuge of commoners towards the imperial examination system was not rooted in the inherent flaws of the system itself, but often resulted from policy changes, which were somewhat passive. Liu Dapeng recorded in 1896 that there were rumors of "abolishing schools and abolishing the imperial examination" in the local area [16]. For a time, the people of the countryside were panic-stricken, and many people were resentful of this move, believing that the bureaucrats who proposed it would ruin the livelihoods of ordinary people after becoming officials. Due to their hard work on the imperial examination, the educated people were now faced with sudden changes and uncertainty. Most of them were stranded at home and had no means of livelihood. In 1899, the imperial examination for children scheduled to be held in Taiyuan was cancelled due to "the disturbance caused by foreign invaders", resulting in "the imperial examination in Shanxi Province being disrupted as well [16]". In May of that year, Jinyang Academy "cut half of its tuition fees due to the emperor's order [16]", and Jinyang and Chongxiu Academies cut their tuition fees by half twice in 1888 and 1889. As a result, students who remained at the academies "should not be allowed to attend classes [16]", showing that after the reform of the imperial examination system, the dissatisfaction of the educated people had intensified. Moreover, entering old-style schools was expensive, with a total cost of 57,600 Wen, which was considered extravagant [16]. The situation of the educated people became increasingly worse, and entering old-style schools made many families unable to make ends meet, gradually increasing the cost of education. In 1898, Shanxi Changke stopped selecting officials, resulting in a backlog of officials [16]. The way out for the educated people became increasingly scarce. Moreover, at that time, social donations to officials were prevalent, crowding out those who had passed the imperial examination. Liu Dapeng expressed his disgust with this phenomenon and once wrote, "The sons of wealthy families do not study but can be listed in the court, while the poor and humble people who hold knowledge are ultimately trapped in the grasslands. [16]" After the promulgation of the reform regulations for the imperial examination system, the status of the educated people rapidly declined, with many unemployed people. Most of commoners regarded studying as a "dreaded path" [16], and the effort and return of old-style education were not proportional. Under various factors, common people's interest in passing the imperial examination to change their destiny was gradually reduced, and their enthusiasm for it was also gradually extinguished.

Under the influence of policy changes, people began to drift away from the imperial examination system, but this did not fully translate into the acceptance of new learning by mainland gentry and commoners. From the Diary of Tuixiangzhai, we can see that there were indeed many scholars or literati from the countryside who successfully transitioned to new-style schools as teachers or received training in new-style education for the purpose of finding a way out. For example, Liu Dapeng's fellow countryman and scholar Hu Haifeng also actively transitioned to become a teacher at the provincial university and embraced the idea of reform. In 1899, the state's selection of scholars for the special examination made Westernization superior to traditional learning, and scholars tended to favor Westernization. For Liu Dapeng, the support of new learning among scholars was not due to their observation of the world situation, or it can be speculated that Liu Dapeng did not understand or value China's international situation. For example, when he talked about current affairs with fellow countryman Yang Junmo, Yang said that tax increases were originally military salaries, and the people should understand and cooperate. The abolition of imperial examinations was a problem. It can be seen that at least during this period, due to Shanxi's relatively closed information environment, villagers did not fully understand the real reasons for the creation of new learning and the main crises facing the country as well as its international situation. It is undeniable that there are also a small number of enlightened people who can "open their eyes to the world", such as Feng Jichuan and others who recognize China's international environment and the main contradictions it faces, and thus choose to learn new learning [17].

Some gentry and commoners did not turn into a group that supported the new learning. The reasons for their reaction can be divided into two aspects: first, the constraints of the social and historical background; second, the drawbacks of the new learning itself. First of all, the problem of the times is mainly rooted in various groups taking advantage of the rise of the new learning to increase the burden on the people. The positive response of commoners to establish schools was not to save the country, but only to cater to the ideas of bureaucrats. "Every school must raise a lot of funds and levy on the people. Those who follow the trend only seek to cater to the hearts of bureaucrats, regardless of the grievances of the masses. If people's livelihood is not fulfilled, how can education be implemented? [16]". Commoners in all states and counties are all paid by donations, and they are in constant competition and flattery... They use official power to benefit themselves and harm the people... They squeeze the people's fat, and they are called gentry, but they are actually mercenaries. Not only local officials and gentry will benefit from it, but also many book dealers in the late Qing Dynasty will hoard textbooks and examination books related to the new learning and profit from it. "Books on current affairs are voluminous, and all those who take exams buy them at bookstores. Book dealers raise their prices high, which is all about fame and fortune. People come and go in large numbers. [16]" In addition to the numerous benefactors, in the late Qing Dynasty, China's doors were opened wide, and Western missionaries entered Shanxi and other inland provinces to spread Christianity. At that time, Shanxi was experiencing the most vigorous period of development of the Boxer Uprising. Therefore, missionaries, believers, and local Boxer fighters have been in constant bloodshed and conflicts. In addition, the "demolition of the capital gate and disturbance of China" within the capital have led to a negative attitude among people towards Westerners [16], their religion, and culture. They believe that preaching Christianity is deceiving the ignorant and belittling Christianity.

On the other hand, the unacceptance of the new learning by the common people was also influenced by the drawbacks of the new learning itself. Firstly, the common people believed that the new learning was "seeking quick results" and "spared no effort to implement Western methods" in terms of reform content and speed [16], which was too radical. They abandoned Confucianism and accepted the new learning without exception. Moreover, the school was extravagant and costly, resulting in a lack of talent [16], the gentry and the people did not dare to speak out about the New Deal, and those who occasionally spoke out were often stubborn parties, and in serious cases, they were guilty. Secondly, for the old-fashioned faction represented by Liu Dapeng, because the new learning ignored ethics and morality and studied end arts such as mathematics, emphasizing the exquisite craftsmanship, it was devoting oneself to the end at the expense of the beginning, and establishing the new learning was a collapse of knowledge. Therefore, in the eyes of conservatives such as Liu Dapeng, students who are learning new knowledge "dance and dance when they talk about Western learning, but in fact, they dress up as vulgar ears and eyes, and do not understand the reason why Western learning is natural. However, in terms of flesh and blood, they are actually very obedient, and their lack of virtue and filial piety can also be seen" [16], which can be summarized as poor character, poor qualifications, mediocrity and vulgarity, and admiration for foreign things.

Timothy Richard held a completely different view from the common people. He remained positive and optimistic about the reform of the imperial examination system, believing that education in China was beginning to improve. The main difference between the views of the common people was reflected in the establishment of Western-style schools. Timothy Richard believed that the establishment of Western-style schools and missionary work were a salvation for the Chinese people rather than a means of making money and causing harm [18]. He actively signed various contracts for the renovation and preparation of Western-style schools, equipped them with new school facilities, recruited teachers, and even surprised himself that the Qing government allocated funds for the establishment of Shanxi University that were equal to the money he applied for. He believed that the Qing government's move to convert temples into Western-style schools and allocate a large amount of funds was very noble [18]. It can be seen that although he could feel the dissatisfaction of common people in inland provinces and some bureaucrats about abolishing the imperial examination system and establishing Western-style schools, he did not delve into the real reasons for their dissatisfaction.

The polarization of the common people towards the reform of the imperial examination system and the establishment of Western-style schools has already emerged, and their public opinion trends have not significantly tilted towards either side. In Liu Dapeng's diary, the people's "passive" centrifugal force towards the imperial examination system, and Timothy Richard's observation of the common people's rejection of Western-style schools. Although the two systems of Western-style schools and imperial examinations were originally intended to maintain the rule of the Qing government, the ethical concepts underlying them were completely different and even incompatible. The common people rejected the concept of Western-style schools, and they cherished the ethical values advocated by the imperial examination culture, but they had to rely on Western-style schools for their livelihood. The conflict of cognition and imbalance of behavior began to emerge at this stage.

4. The observation and acceptance of the Western-style learning by the common people before and after the Revolution of 1911

In October 1905, Shanxi Province received a notice to "stop the imperial examination". "(Shanxi's) old academies... Since the abolition of the imperial examination, they have been transformed into secondary, high and primary schools, with additional funding and teachers appointed to teach science. As an official school, it is different from the previous scale. [19]" After the abolition of the imperial examination, the school system changed, and national education was mainly based on primary schools. Primary school teachers began with junior normal schools. In the third year of Xuantong, Shanxi prepared to establish schools and set up normal schools. Since then, new-style schools have been established in Shanxi.

The feedback from common people is divided into two factions, with the conservative faction becoming less and less and the reformist faction becoming more and more. Most of the reformist gentry and common people believe that reform is in line with the times [16]. The common people mostly regard the Confucian scholars who revered Confucius and Mencius at that time as discards and despise them, while others learn from foreign studies. Students who have graduated from Western-style schools have a wide range of opportunities, such as becoming officials or bureaucrats "Nowadays, many overseas travelers are returning and being appointed as officials after graduation [16]", and teaching after class. For example, the Qin's School, which is widely known among the rural population, has hired a teacher who returned from studying abroad in Japan. Students in Western-style schools have played a positive role in many social and public events by fighting for the Jin Province coal mine movement and joining the Revolution of 1911 to promote the concept of equality. Many scholars also believe in new learning, such as Wu Sisan, who "believes deeply in new learning, and whenever he speaks, he always cites Western learning as evidence, while ignoring Confucianism and Mencius. [16]" Even conservative factions like Liu Dapeng would send their children to attend Western-style schools.

In the process of the continuous dissemination of new learning, the attitude of common people towards new learning was ambivalent. On the one hand, most gentry and common people recognized the utilitarian benefits brought by new learning; on the other hand, they resisted the new ideas that accompanied new learning. For example, common people thought that the Japanese teacher of Qin's school mentioned above had no shame for cutting his braids and changing to Western clothes. In Taigu City, a student of a new school named Meng Jialin was regarded as a foreigner by everyone and treated as an alien by his clan because he wearing Western clothes. It can be seen that most gentry and common people had an essentially exclusive and negative attitude towards the culture represented by Western learning. The resistance of gentry and common people towards the culture represented by new learning mainly focused on the loss of ethical norms brought by new learning, such as gender differences, monarchs and fathers. At that time, a graduate surnamed Xu in Pingding County called his father equally, which caused a "great uproar among the people [16]". In the village of Chewang in Yuci, a women's school was established with male teachers. The local gentry and common people believed that "the difference between men and women is not emphasized [16]". Therefore, it can be

seen that Shanxi gentry and common people did not adopt a one-sided positive or negative attitude towards new learning. Their reactions were complex and full of contradictions, which cannot be simply explained by the perspective of group ideological opposition.

During this period, as the new learning continued to develop, its own drawbacks and the criticism of conservative gentry and civilians became increasingly prominent. The conservative faction's criticism of the new learning was mainly due to the fact that the new learning failed to prevent what the conservative faction considered to be domestic malpractices: selling official positions, profiting from officials, and frequent civil unrest. Instead, the construction of Western-style schools cost a lot of money, which exacerbated the above malpractices [16]. At the same time, there were problems with the Western-style schools themselves, and their "newness" often only existed in form, with a problem of "new wine in old bottles". For example, Liu Dapeng entered the new school to teach, but his teaching content was only Chinese literature and self-cultivation [16]. It was not until the county magistrate came to inspect the management effect of the new school and ordered "only allowing Western-style schools to be handled, not allowing reading of scriptures" that Liu Dapeng "moved away" [16]. Since then, there were still primary schools asking him to teach at the school, and Liu Dapeng "took this as a way to make a living and survive in this chaotic world" [16]. On the one hand, we can see that the Western-style schools were difficult to effectively cultivate useful "new talents" due to the lack of teaching staff and oversight of examination management, which could not solve social malpractices. They also had to plunder people's wealth, which exacerbated people's hardships and was therefore hated by conservative gentry and civilians. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the conservative faction's misjudgment of "malpractices" and national conditions.

During the same period, in the view of Timothy Richard, the conservative officials represented by "Lu Chuansen" were stubborn, but their patriotism was self-evident. Timothy Richard believed that the conservative faction was only confined to their fixed opinions and followed the rules, making it difficult for them to form a correct understanding of foreign things [18]. He pointed out the problems of the conservative faction among the people in a to-the-point manner.

After the abolition of the imperial examination system, public attitudes became polarized, with most people advocating Western learning and viewing old learning as "abandoned learning." Public opinion showed a clear tendency towards Western learning. Under the reform of abolishing the imperial examination system and promoting new learning, gentry and civilians began to try to accept new learning ideas in order to reduce cognitive dissonance caused by two nearly opposing ethical views. Although civilians in Shanxi did not fully understand new learning, their cognitive dissonance was not fundamentally resolved, but it was precisely this dissonance that provided a psychological opportunity for the subsequent transformation of gentry and civilian thinking.

5. Summary

The abolition of the imperial examination system and the rise of new learning had far-reaching effects. However, many scholars were surprised by the "exceptionally calm response from all social classes at that time" [20, 21]. As can be seen from the above, commoners in Shanxi were in a passive position in this educational reform. It is not difficult to see that there was some resistance when commoners passively accepted this change. They also faced resistance in practical actions, reflected in their dissatisfaction with the drawbacks of the change between old and new policies. Their resistance at the ideological level was reflected in the conflict between old and new moral values. This resistance was also related to factors such as famine, conflicts between religious believers, collusion between officials and businessmen, etc. The reaction of commoners in Shanxi can be described as a combination of factors of the times, policy factors, and social thinking patterns. They stood at the intersection of abolishing the imperial examination system and promoting new learning in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. Their attitudes and opinions on this important educational reform provide us with important references for re-examining the historical scene at that time.

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