# Educational Reforms and Economic Institutions: Evidence from Imperial China

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the historical significance of the Chinese imperial examination system, or Keju, and its lasting influence on Chinese society and beyond. Originating in the Han dynasty, the system not only transformed the social and political structure of imperial China but also continued to shape institutions, governance, and cultural practices for more than two millennia. The study first traces the evolution of the examination system across key dynasties, highlighting how it adapted to political, economic, and intellectual shifts. It then investigates its economic, social, and cultural impacts, showing how Keju promoted meritocratic selection and upward mobility while simultaneously fostering educational uniformity and reinforcing social hierarchies. Both the positive contributions—such as talent cultivation, administrative efficiency, and cultural integration—and the negative consequences—such as excessive rigidity, rote learning, and systemic inequality—are critically evaluated. By synthesizing these findings, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of the Keju system and emphasizes lessons modern education systems, particularly in China, can learn from its historical strengths and limitations.

**Keywords:** Chinese imperial examination system; education; economic.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we are exploring the significance of the Chinese imperial examination system, also known as the Keju system, across the history of Chinese dynasties. As a nation with more than 5000 years of history, the implementation of the examination system in the Han dynasty changed not only the social structure of the nation at the time but also continues to influence the nation and even the world for more than 2000 years.

Specifically, we will explore how the examination system influences the economy and the society of imperial China and go across the positive and negative impacts of the examination system. First, we will go through the history of the examination system across the most significant dynasties; then, we will go through the specific impacts of the examination system; Third, we will evaluate the positive and negative components of the examination system based on its impact on society. Lastly, combining the previous parts, a conclusion of the examination system will be created on how significant the examination system is.

By evaluating the significance of the imperial examination system, this paper provides insight to how modern-day society could learn from the past society. The imperial examination system may offer some critical significance to the current education system which is argued by many experts to be too suffocating and strict to both the students and the teachers. Studying through the imperial examination system might point out some important deficiency of the current education system in China and how that could be potentially altered.

## 2. The Culture of Academic Advancement and the Imperial Examination System

Across multiple dynasties, the Chinese imperial examination system has largely remained the same. Since the establishment of the examination system in the Han dynasty, students from around China aging across 10 to 60 or even 70 take the exam to gain a job around the emperor as a governor. Officially in Chinese, this examination system is called the Keju Exam. Initially a way to provide

social mobility and recruit talented officials based on merit rather than birth, the system evolved over time. The Keju Exam established a powerful meritocracy that selected candidates for state bureaucracy, primarily through rigorous tests on Confucian classics and literature, creating a unified educated class of scholar-officials who governed China for centuries. This paper will go through the examination system of each dynasty of Chinese history since Han, and explore the similarities, differences, and the essential development of such system [1].

In Chinese history, there were three ways for men to work for the government. The first was inherited by birth, the second was suggested by local authorities, and the third was determined by imperial examinations. Priority was granted to aristocrats in hereditary posts in ancient China. In the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), recommendations were utilized when local officials recommended local talent that was deemed filial and incorrupt, prospering, knowledgeable about the classics, worthy and good, straightforward and upright. Anyone could take the imperial exams, which were administered by the central court [2]. The primary factor influencing a person's eligibility for a government position was their test scores.

The nine-rank system was eliminated during the Sui dynasty's Kaihuang period (581–600), and Emperor Yang (604–618) established the jinshi (metropolitan graduate) exams, which are often regarded as the inception of the imperial exam system. The exam's specifics are not thoroughly recorded. Despite the government's pressing need for qualified workers, no new tests were instituted when the Tang dynasty was created in 618. Emperor Gaozu (618–626) restored the Sui dynasty's imperial examination system in the fourth year (621) of the Wude era. Every year, official examinations were conducted. Taking the test was the only way for anyone who wasn't from high-ranking households to become official during the Tang dynasty [3].

During the Song dynasty, the Tang exams were still utilized, albeit with considerable changes. There were three levels to these triennial exams: municipal, provincial, and palace. The location was guarded during the exams, and neither candidates nor anyone else was allowed to leave. In order to prevent the examiners from identifying the candidate's handwriting, test papers were submitted anonymously and copied before being delivered to them [4]. The Song dynasty is noted for its well-known procedures, such as the way the emperor announced the exam results and how the winners were promptly given offices without needing to attend a review process while wearing special clothing.

During the Song dynasty, the most significant method for those without a family background to enter the public service was through the recruitment of officials through imperial exams. Kou Zhun (961–1023), Fan Zhongyan (989–1052), Wang Anshi (1021–1086), and Yu Yunwen (1110–1174) were among the many notable Song dynasty ministers who began their careers in government in this manner. People from different ethnic backgrounds (such as Mongols, Central Asians, Han Chinese, and Southerners) were enrolled separately (the first two ethnic groups on the right-hand side, and the others on the left-hand side) in the exam system during the Yuan (1271–1368) dynasty, which followed.

The examination methods were improved and made more stringent under the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, although the underlying structure and curriculum remained largely unchanged. It carried on the ancient custom of testing the content of the "Four Books", the "Five Classic", and the eight-legged essay format. The essay's breadth, allowable responses, and essay types were all strictly constrained by the eight-legged essay. The exam consequently grew extremely stale and cumbersome [5, 6].

The court attempted in vain to improve the test during the end of the Qing dynasty, but these reforms failed because of the general decline of the government. 1300 years after its creation, in the thirty-first regnal year (1905) of the Guangxu emperor (1875–1908), the imperial examination system came to an end rather than evolving into a contemporary system for government recruitment.

## 3. The Impact of Academic Advancement and the Imperial Examination System on Socioeconomic Development

Under the Chinese imperial examination system, or Keju, academic advancement promoted a meritocratic system by allowing gifted people to enter the bureaucracy, which in turn promoted socioeconomic development through social mobility. But the system's focus on Confucian texts caused economic and technological stagnation in comparison to other countries. Its inflexible structure stymied innovation by not adjusting to the demands of contemporary science and technology. These factors ultimately led to the system's abolition and the collapse of the Qing dynasty. In this paper, an overview of both the positive and negative effects of the Keju system had on the economy and society of Imperial China will be presented.

First, the examination system allowed individuals, even those from poor backgrounds, to rise in social status and enter government service based on merit rather than birth. National exams are particularly important for China and the rest of the world. For 1300 years, Chinese imperial examination system allowed for nearly universal participation and greatly increased upward social mobility for commoners. This system had a significant impact on surrounding nations; Japan and Vietnam subsequently implemented comparable systems, while Korea adopted China's example, keeping its own imperial examination system for more than 900 years. In contrast, many other cultures throughout the same historical period continued to use lineage-based systems, which limited educational options for the public and lacked competitive examination procedures completely, whereas Europe primarily relied on hereditary nobility. Over centuries, the imperial examination system progressively developed into a complex and fair selection process, firmly establishing the ideas of educational and exam fairness in Chinese culture. In the present era, this customary method evolved into the College Entrance Exam. Despite outward distinctions, especially regarding updated exam content that reflects modern society, both systems have one constant: they are both large-scale, competitive, government-administered, countrywide exams with many comparable fairness-oriented regulations. This study therefore takes a historical stance, examining almost 70 years of Gaokao policy while also expanding its analytical purview to encompass the antiquated imperial examination system. The goal is to present a thorough overview of Chinese competitive exams spanning about 1400 years.

Second, the pursuit of academic success through the Keju system promoted a widespread ethos of reading and education, vital for the cultivation of moral and intellectual life within society. The Chinese imperial examination system fostered a culture of learning by making education the primary pathway to government office and social prestige, creating a widespread respect for scholarship and establishing a meritocratic ideal. The system established a standard curriculum based on Confucian classics, incentivizing families to invest in their children's education to climb the social ladder. This created a circular structure where the need for educated officials led to the promotion of learning, and the pursuit of education led to greater opportunities, thus embedding a deep cultural value for education that persists even today.

However, there are also significant drawbacks to the imperial examination system as well. Though it contributed a lot to the growing economy and society at different times, the Keju system limits the extent in which citizens learn knowledge as the test requires specific knowledge from very narrowed fields of studying. Furthermore, it also excludes women for all dynasties, demonstrating the significance of gender inequality in imperial China.

The Keju system requires knowledge based on a very limited number of subjects. Unlike the mathematics, world history, and science taught in middle and high schools, the Keju system focused solely on knowledge of classical Confucian texts, literature, poetry, ethics, and policy essays. Since the underlying curriculum tended to vary little, the material input was generally transparent and always available to applicants and their teachers, but the examination's substance was tightly regulated by the government from the beginning. There could be no shocks on test day. The modifications described here are more related to the input that the questions were based on than they are to the questions themselves. Candidates were obviously expected to know the original texts very

well. Policy focus was always incorporated in the exams, even though the Keju saw many modifications over the years in terms of the questions that were asked. Essay topics with a policy focus were designed to generate lengthy answers about thoughts regarding government policies, either based on historical or contemporary occurrences. Over time, test results also changed from poetry to essays to prose. However, the essay response was supposed to follow a very strict pattern. This became known as the "eight-legged essay", also referred as baguwen. Originally created during the Song dynasty, the format was adopted as the standard mandatory response format by the Ming dynasty. Along with these structural requirements, the eight-legged essays also impose a few rhetorical restrictions, such as the need to provide complementary proposition pairs, balanced character and clause pairs, and the ability to mimic the viewpoints of figures like Mencius and Master Xun, as demonstrated in the example. This rigorous framework was justified on the grounds that it prevented candidates from writing rambling, unfocused narratives and made it easier for examiners to rank and assess essays because they were primarily concerned with how well applicants adhered to the genre guidelines. It resulted in an emphasis on organization and appearance (for example, well-presented essays are today considered to be calligraphic art). Candidates were unintentionally restricted to meaningless, uncritical answers because of the pressure to adhere to appearance and structural standards and the idea that test-takers should represent mainstream political beliefs. As a result, the eight-legged essay has long been employed as a method to limit candidates' thought processes.

Moreover, the rule that women are not allowed to join the Keju system also leads to significant social impacts. Women were denied public positions, political influence, and the main route to social mobility that the Chinese imperial examination system provided for men, reinforcing Confucian social norms that kept women in the home. Even though women bore the financial difficulties since their husbands were preoccupied with their studies, this ban cemented patriarchal systems in which their power was restricted to the home and private sphere. Any male adult in China (no women, who were supposed to stay in the households as wives and mothers), regardless of his income or social standing, might theoretically pass the imperial examination and rise to a high position in the government. On the other hand, women at the period had virtually no social or political rights equivalent to men because they were not able to enter the examination system. However, by carrying out those traditional gender roles, those women were able to participate in both their men's private and public lives, so they were not entirely cut off from the examination system that did not allow female participation. Without questioning Confucian gender rules, gentry women used their considerable informal authority in home affairs to further their own interests and the welfare of the family. Most women followed the Confucian ideals of virtuous women and created a positive learning environment for their kids. One discernible shift over time was the rise in the number of gentry women with the ability to affect their husbands' choices. So, at some extent, women might influence the examination system's growing environment, but looking at the larger picture, there are no women participated in the examination at any time.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be determined that the civil examination system indeed contribute a lot to the development of the Chinese society. Though there are significant negative effects of this examination system, it contributed to the nation's growth and development both socially and economically for the past thousands of years. The examination system contributed greatly to the overall social development of imperial China. By allowing people of different social backgrounds to change their social classes with their knowledge, the examination system not only offers chances of a high royal position in the government to normal citizens but also provides enough talented people to be used by the emperor. Though, at some extent, it also limits the development of the empires as women are forbidden from taking the exam and the fact that curriculum of such exam is very narrow. In the future, studies could focus more on how specific curriculum of the examination system at different dynasties could direct

or might even manipulate the thoughts and ideas of the citizens at different dynasties based on the will or intention of the emperor.

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