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From Keju to Gaokao: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Educational Practice in China

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Abstract. This study investigates the impact of the legacy of China's imperial examination system (Keju) on modern-day educational policies and practices according to the theory of historical institutionalism. Research went through and collected significant academic writings on this topic, then arranged and figured out the main educational policy papers made by the Chinese State Council and Ministry of Education from 2014 to 2024. It was discovered that the social mobility logic based on exams created by the imperial examination system still exists today and is constantly reinforced by path dependence, self-reinforcement, and locking effects. At the school level, teacher level, and student/parent level, the examination culture exerts a significant impact on the policy objectives, leading to numerous reform measures being interpreted as "improving examination efficiency" in practice without making fundamental changes to the test-oriented approach. This study holds that education reform needs not only to change the formal institution by means of policy design but also to gradually change the examination culture at three levels: social concept, evaluation mechanism, and educational practice, so as to break the institutional inertia.

Keywords: Keju, Imperial Examination System, Examination Culture, Educational Policy, Historical Institutionalism

1. Introduction

The imperial examination system in China, as one of the earliest standardized selection systems in the world, is widely regarded as having shaped the logic of education and social mobility through "exam-based merit-based selection" in history; more importantly, recent research and review literature have shown that this influence has not disappeared with the end of the system but has continued in the contemporary era through cultural and behavioral pathways [1]. Therefore, the selection logic centered on examinations is not only a historical fact of China but also an important clue for understanding current educational practices.

Theoretically, the Historical Institutionalism framework emphasizes the dynamic of "path dependence - self-reinforcement - lock-in effect": once a certain selection mechanism gains increasing returns in society, its alternative costs will rise over time, thereby strengthening the existing path [2,3]. At the same time, the running of educational systems frequently displays a "coupling relationship" between formal institutions (laws, policies) and informal institutions (ideas,

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cultural scripts), with the latter exerting considerable influence over the execution of the former via social expectations and everyday activities [4]. So we have to watch how the old exam system shows up in today's schools by looking at what people write down about rules and how those rules work in real life at the same time.

At the policy level, over the past decade, China's education governance has continuously advanced a series of reforms in examination admission and basic education: for example, in 2014, the State Council of China issued the "Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Examination Admission System", laying the basic direction for the comprehensive reform of the college entrance examination; in 2021, the Ministry of Education carried out "double reduction" governance around the "homework - after-school training - examination evaluation" chain, and detailed the supervision and inspection requirements through multiple press conferences; in 2022, the new curriculum plan and standards for compulsory education were released, emphasizing core competencies and grade-level alignment; subsequently, the action plans for high-quality development of basic education and periodic effectiveness reports were also launched [5-9]. The common goal of these policies is to ensure the fairness and order of selection while promoting the evaluation system to shift from "only scores" to "multiple dimensions of competencies".

But there is still some structural tension between policy goals and school practice: On one hand, the reform stresses less burden, better quality, and all-around competencies; on the other hand, the "informal institutions" that have been established due to the high-risk and high-accountability examination culture and family education investment might cause teaching organization and students' strategies to revert to an exam-centered track [10,11]. And the most recent reviews show that the college entrance exam, which is a big nationwide test (NLSA), makes the rules for how we should be responsible, compare ourselves to others, and pick the best people even stronger, and it has had more effect on society than just inside classrooms [11]. So, the way to understand the "policy-practice dislocation" is by putting formal institutions and informal institutions into the same analysis system to look at how they interact with each other and under what conditions.

According to the above background, this paper focuses and converges on the following research questions: RQ1: What kind of historical logic did the imperial examination system have on the design and implementation of modern educational policies by way of path dependence? RQ2: At the level of informal institutions, how does the examination culture interact with policy reforms and then impact the teaching and learning practices? Therefore, in this paper, the method combines the literature review method (mainly English academic research results obtained from Google Scholar) and the policy analysis method (mainly public text materials on the official website of the Ministry of Education in the past 10-20 years). The framework adopted is "policy goals – governance tools – evaluation mechanisms – implementation feedback" to systematically compare the correlation and gap between the reform narrative and the actual practice.

2. Theoretical framework – North's institutional theory

Douglass C. North's institutional theory provides an important analytical framework for understanding the continuity and change of institutions. North defines institutions as "the rules of the game designed by humans", whose core function is to shape social interactions through a series of formal and informal constraints, reducing uncertainty and stabilizing behavioral expectations. Institutions not only include formal institutions like laws, regulations, and policies, but also informal institutions such as social norms, cultural beliefs, and behavioral conventions. This dual institutional perspective helps explain why institutions could provide order and stability yet also could be hindered by path dependence and prevent reforms [4].

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North's theory stresses that institutions possess historical and enduring traits. To put it another way, after they are created, institutions show a lot of stability because of path dependence; if a particular institutional setup provides good rewards and growing returns, leaving that institutional path gets harder and harder as time goes on, so the institutional logic gets stronger and stronger over a long period of time [2]. Institutions at the same time obtain endogenous stability via self-reinforcing mechanisms. People in society keep doing things according to the rules all the time, which makes them get some good things, and this helps make sure that the idea behind those rules stays around for a long time [3]. Finally, institutions often have a lock-in effect. Original institutional logic could be set in stone by cultural scripts and social practices, making change impossible. Mechanisms explain why many institutional changes are gradual and not in equilibrium, contrary to what policymakers expect.

In educational policy research, North's institutional theory is particularly suitable for analyzing the interaction between formal and informal institutions. China's educational reforms often use formal institutions as leverage points, such as a series of documents issued by the State Council and the Ministry of Education over the past two decades, including the Implementation Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System [5], the "Double Reduction" Policy [6], compulsory education curriculum programs and standards [7], and an inter-agency guideline to kickstart an action plan for improving basic education in the new era [8]. Formal institutions clearly express policy goals such as "double reduction", quality education, fairness, and high-quality development, trying to promote deep transformations in educational evaluation and school governance. However, policy goals do not always succeed in reality. The reason lies in that the informal institutions in the field of education (with examination culture, social expectations, school admission rate orientation, and parents' educational investment logic as the core) often "reinterpret" the formal institutions at the practical level, resulting in deviations between the reform goals and the actual implementation [1,10]. For example, policy texts require reducing the frequency of examinations, but schools still arrange mock exams and rankings to maintain the admission rate. Curriculum standards emphasize core competencies, but teachers generally interpret it as a new way to improve test scores. The government tries to regulate extracurricular training, but parents still believe that tutoring equals guaranteeing the future, forming a lock-in effect [11].

In this research, North's institutional theory will be applied to explain the historical continuity from the imperial examination system to the college entrance examination. The first is that the social mobility logic is based on the examinations created by the imperial examination system. Although the imperial examination system was abolished at the beginning of the 20th century, this logic has been inherited through culture and social expectations, and it has deeply influenced the modern education system. Secondly, the self-reinforcing mechanism makes schools, teachers and families keep deepening the test-oriented tendency under the present college entrance examination system, and the teaching practice is mainly focused on explanation of exams and doing exercises, and family investment is also concentrated on tutoring and improving scores. Lastly, the lock-in effect explains the problem of educational reform. Even though the government keeps introducing reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and reducing the burden, those goals get absorbed back into the test logic in practice, creating a conflict between what's supposed to happen and what actually does.

So North's institutional theory gives us some tools to look at how institutions stay the same over time and how changes happen inside them. In the analysis design of this study, formal institutions will be studied via textual analysis of the policy documents of the Ministry of Education over the last 20 years. Informal institutions are shown by the research of schools, teachers, and families that exist now. Comparing and interacting with each other will show the effect of institutional legacy on

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today's educational practices and why China's education reforms have always revolved around the "exam-oriented logic." That is, North's institutional theory is suitable for this paper. It can link the past and the present, policies and actions, and explain the situation and continuity of China's educational reform.

3. Method

This study employs two complementary methods: literature review and policy analysis, to ensure that the research is both based on academic accumulation and current policy texts.

3.1. Literature review method

The literature review method is a systematic review and integration of existing research results, aiming to clarify the conceptual framework, identify research gaps, and provide theoretical support for subsequent analysis [12]. Different with traditional narrative reviews, systematic literature reviews emphasize transparency in search methods and replicate the methods [13]. In educational policy research, literature reviews not only present different perspectives of the academic community on "historical institutional legacy" and "exam culture", but also help to form a comparative framework for explaining current educational practices.

In terms of operation, this paper mainly relies on Google Scholar to search for English academic works from 2000 to 2025, with keywords including "keju", "imperial examination", "exam culture", "gaokao", "path dependence", "institutional legacy", etc. First, focusing on the long-term impact of the imperial examination system on contemporary educational culture and policies. Second, involving empirical research on the Chinese education evaluation system and exam culture. Third, having a clear application of historical institutionalism in theory. Through screening, the core literature includes Chen, Kung, and Ma's quantitative study on the long-term effects of the imperial examination system, O'Sullivan and Cheng's historical analysis of Chinese exam culture; and Cheng and Hamid's review on the social impact of the college entrance examination. The review results show that existing studies generally emphasize the continuity of the imperial logic in social concepts and educational practices.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Historical roots of the legacy of the imperial examination system and the logic of examinations

The imperial examination system, as the most important selection system in Chinese history, had an impact far beyond the political structure of the imperial era. Research shows that the imperial examination established the institutional logic of "determining social status through examinations". It also internalized this logic as the core belief of social culture. During its long operation, the imperial examination system developed several key features: Firstly, standardized examinations became the legitimate channel for talent selection, creating an imagined fairness through institutionalization. Secondly, the mechanism of return on educational investment was established, and individuals and families generally believed that learning and taking exams were the only way to improve social status. Thirdly, cultural legitimacy was strengthened, with the concept of "All are of low status, but only learning is of high status" supporting educational practice, forming a deep social psychological foundation.

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And those characteristics were still around because of path dependence even though the system had been abolished. O'Sullivan and Cheng pointed out that the examination culture in China is not an accidental result of modern education, but a long-term inertia caused by historical institutional inheritance. Also, according to Cheng and Hamid's review, the college entrance exam has similar functions to the imperial exam in terms of social stratification, resource allocation, and individual fate. So, the current Chinese educational practice is not totally new, it follows the old path. This is quite close to what North emphasizes about institutions having history and following paths.

4.2. Informal institutions and contemporary examination culture

Though the Chinese government has been making educational reform efforts for the past ten years with an emphasis on quality education, reducing the burden, and promoting high-quality development, the examination culture, as an informal institution, still strongly influences the practical logic within schools, teachers, students, and families. This part will combine policy texts and literature evidence to analyze it.

4.2.1. School level

As for policy objectives, the Ministry of Education has always stressed the importance of lowering the weight of single-score evaluations and encouraging the identification of all kinds of talent [5,7,8]. But how schools do things is still based on how many kids get promoted. From research it can be seen that although the intention is to reduce exam stress, school rankings, mock exams and other kinds of tests keep happening [6]. This means that the schools reinterpret the reform goals into "improve the test score more effectively" without changing their basic logic. It shows how the system sustains itself. Schools in a competitive education setting must show that they are good by taking tests.

4.2.2. Teacher level

Policy texts stress that teachers need to promote inquiry-based learning and interdisciplinary instruction in classrooms to develop students' core skills [7]. But teachers' daily work doesn't fit this picture. Many empirical studies show that teachers pay most attention to teaching key points and doing practice questions during classes [11]. Teachers have to consider the students' exam preparation because their performance will be assessed according to the students' score. In other words, what the policy promotes as "quality-oriented education" is also "exam-preparation" for teachers. This phenomenon also supports North (1990)'s locking effect. Reform goals are eaten up by current incentives; thus, they cannot be achieved as intended.

4.2.3. Student and family level

The educational investment behaviors of students and parents further reinforced the exam-oriented logic. Although the "double reduction" policy aimed to reduce the burden of extracurricular training, research and news reports both indicated that parents still generally believed that tutoring and practicing problems were necessary means to ensure future social mobility [10]. Students also regarded "interest development" and "quality education" as secondary goals and focused their main efforts on improving their scores. This family and individual-level practice reflects the powerful influence of informal institutions: even though formal institutions hope to promote all-round development, the social consensus will still fix the educational goal as "priority on grades".

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4.3. Tension between policy and practice and its significance

From the above analysis we can see that there is a huge conflict between formal institutions and informal institutions. Policy goals stress good education, less burden and different kinds of assessment. But the practices of schools, teachers, and families keep adding them to the exam-oriented logic. This tension both explains why reform goals are hard to implement and shows how deep the institutional problems are in Chinese education.

From an institutional theory view, it is consistent with North's (1990) institutional evolution logic: historical legacies affect the present via path dependence, and social actors' incentive structures support the existing logic, thus causing institutional lock-in. This implies that any reform that does not change the deep cultural and social expectations of informal institutions can be reshaped by the exam culture.

And it will also create huge consequences for making new school rules in the future. First, reforms can't just be written down on paper; they need to consider changing things that aren't official rules, such as how schools operate, how teachers are evaluated, and what families desire. Secondly, the legacy of the institution needs to be recognized. Education reform takes a long time and a more systematic institutional design to gradually reduce the impact of the examination system. Lastly, it was found out that instead of opposing the test system, perhaps we could find other methods to evaluate students.

5. Conclusion

This paper uses historical institutionalism as its theoretical framework, and it integrates literature review with policy analysis to study how the legacy of the imperial examination system continues to influence modern Chinese educational policies and practices via the interaction between formal and informal institutions. The study found that the "social mobility logic centered on examinations" established by the imperial examination system not only persisted for over a thousand years in history but has also continued to this day through path dependence and cultural habits.It is becoming an important institutional root explaining the difficulties of China's educational reform.

At the formal institutional level, since 2014, the Chinese government has continuously introduced examination and recruitment reforms, new curriculum standards, quality-oriented education, and burden reduction policies, clearly expressing the goals of optimizing educational equity, improving educational quality, and reducing students' burdens [5-8]. However, at the informal institutional level, examination culture, the orientation of academic performance, the logic of parents' investment in education, and the pressure on teachers' performance still constitute powerful social constraints. These factors not just counteract the policy goals but also make the reform be reinterpreted in practice as "more efficient examination preparation". This phenomenon confirms the path dependence, self-reinforcement, and locking effect emphasized by North, and is consistent with the conclusions of existing academic research.

The contributions of this paper are mainly manifested in three aspects. First, theoretically speaking, this paper brings in the concept of historical institutionalism to the study of China's educational reform, showing that education culture and practice are not separate from history, but rather have been greatly affected by institutional heritage. Secondly, on the empirical level, this paper shows the conflict between reform texts and educational practices via policy analysis, revealing the complicated relationship between formal institutions and informal ones. Thirdly, from a normative perspective, this paper points out that in order to break through the reform impasse, the

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design of policies should not only pay attention to the updating of institutional texts, but also need to change people's social concepts and behavioral logic.

From a policy perspective, if educational reform is to achieve the transformation from "only focusing on scores" to "multiple elements of cultivation", it requires more systematic institutional support and cultural guidance. On one hand, it should further promote the diversification of evaluation methods, such as increasing the weight of comprehensive quality evaluation in admissions and promotions, and weakening the single distribution power of scores. On the other hand, it should gradually change the social consensus that "scores determine the future" through teacher training, school governance, and parent education, breaking the institutional "lock" at the informal institutional level.

Future research will have 3 ways to go. First, this paper mainly relies on the analysis of literature and policy texts. After that, researchers may discover more about how schools, teachers, and families respond to policy demands through field interviews or case studies. Second, it can compare the differences in educational practices in different regions to see how history appears differently under the circumstances of regional development disparity. Lastly, it could compare China's experience with those of other nations that have exam systems (South Korea, Japan, etc.) to better understand the connection between institutional legacies and education reforms across nations.

To conclude, the difficulty of China's educational reforms isn't just about today's policies; it has its roots in history through the imperial examination system. To know such an institutional way and cultural custom is quite important for knowing the limits and chances of today's education rules.

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