



## Education In Ancient China

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

**This research** paper examines the education system in ancient China and the influence of Confucian teachings on it. The system was mainly designed to instil integrity, administrative skill, and cultural continuity among the Chinese people. It examines the rise of a hundred schools of thought during the Zhou dynasty and the contributions of many philosophers to ideas about governing society and educating its citizens, with the intention of maintaining peace and harmony within the Chinese state and society. During this period, Confucius, one of the most influential philosophers, introduced his ideas, which gradually gained popularity and came to underpin the Chinese education system across nearly all dynasties.

#### **Scientific Novelty:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the structure, values, and development of the education system in China. It explores educational practices in China and how philosophy has become a crucial component of the country's education system. It also analyses how traditional Chinese education determined the development of Chinese history.

**Conclusions:** This paper finds that philosophical thought is an integral part of the Chinese education system. Additionally, the ancient Chinese approach to education was to endure the influence of knowledge ethics and to shape Chinese youths and society.

### INTRODUCTION

Education has been a vital part of China since its earliest dynasties. Notably, philosophical ideas have played a central role in the educational system. The dynastic history of China is generally believed to have begun with the Xia dynasty. However, Xia is often considered a mythical dynasty, as there are no written records to confirm its existence. It is widely believed, nevertheless, that the practice of writing originated much earlier, with written records dating back to the Shang dynasty. The historical record of China is said to have started with the Shang. In Shang, evidence is found in records on oracle bones and tortoise shells. Later, during the Zhou dynasty, when many prominent philosophers guided China, the ideas of Chinese thinkers began to influence the state and society, contributing to the shaping of the stage and concept of society. The ideas of these philosophers were widely accepted and supported by the state. Since then, political thought has remained a key aspect of the Chinese education system.

### Evolution of the writing system

In China's history, traces of education can be found dating back to the earliest dynasties, mainly beginning with the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BC). However, according to the Bamboo Annals, the Xia dynasty existed before the Shang dynasty. Nevertheless, there are no written records or writings from this period. The Shang is known as the period from which the Chinese writing system is believed to have originated. During the Shang period, markings of Chinese characters were written on oracle bones, marking the beginning of the concept of expressing ideas through writing. At that time, as experts explain, it was primarily used for divination purposes. However, this was the period when the concept of Chinese writing was introduced, and it later evolved into a formal writing system.

## **Hundred Schools of Thought**

By the time of the Zhou dynasty, the ideas of reading and writing were already well established. Institutionalised schooling for children, mainly from aristocratic families, began then. They received education in martial arts, knowledge of rights, and music during the Warring States—later in the Spring and Autumn periods. The chaotic situation of that time gave rise to numerous philosophers who later became influential figures in Chinese society and governance. Confucius was one of them; his writings and teachings were so widely followed that he was regarded as a problem-solving messiah for society at that time. After his death, his doctrines were continued and circulated by his pupils. His ideas and teachings started to dominate the state and society.

## **Unification of the Chinese writing system under Qin**

When the Qin dynasty came into power, it was founded on the principles of Han Feizi, a philosopher who was a legalist, and his school of thought, known as legalism. During this period, Confucianism was criticised for its perceived contradictions, and many books were burned. This era is also known for the centralisation of the writing system. However, it was a short-lived dynasty. Legalism may not have been suitable for the Chinese state and society.

## **Introduction of the Civil Service Examination**

The Han dynasty was established, and this dynasty supported Confucianism. It was during this time that the Imperial Civil Service Examination was introduced. From then until the end of dynastic rule in China, nearly all dynasties considered this imperial examination the primary means of gaining entry to the bureaucracy. We are mainly conducted on three levels: local, county and district levels, provincial level, and on the metropolitan level. Although this system brought a centralised and uniform system, it also introduced a centrally administered education system.

## **Curriculum**

The curriculum included the Confucian classics, the Five Classics, and four additional texts. Many imperial academies were established to train scholars for the civil service examination. The focus was primarily on Confucian teachings and literary skills. An examination system existed that promoted talented scholars to qualify for the exam. Social mobility was based on ability rather than birthright. It certainly fostered intellectual culture among bureaucrats and reinforced conservative values. Those who passed the exam and joined the bureaucracy gained high respect in society. In addition to attending these imperial academies, families were also expected to instil moral values in their children and prepare them for the exam. Many private academies and tutors emerged, mainly aiming to prepare students for this examination. For many Chinese youths, passing this exam was their primary life goal. Although the examination system is credited with creating uniformity, providing a shared cultural foundation for Chinese youth, and offering meritocratic pathways for social mobility, it also contributed to the development of modern values among bureaucratic classes.

## **The Motto**

Apart from producing competent bureaucrats, the main aim of traditional education was also to cultivate moral values in citizens. As described in *Analects* <Lun Yu>, “In all days, the main study is for the sake of one's self nowadays, it is for the sake of showing off to others.” This famous sentence from the *Analects* illustrates how China has always perceived education as a means for personal well-being and development to foster moral values. This well-known saying from Confucius suggests that education is for one's own benefit, for personal growth. Other ancient Chinese philosophers also support this view. Mencius promoted a sense of self-realisation, and he maintained an uncompromising attitude towards model perfection. Confucius and Mencius are the most celebrated philosophers who shaped Chinese thinking on education. They both aimed to build an ideal society with ideal citizens characterised by moral values and moral ethos. Although Sun Zi has a different approach towards education, he also supports Confucius and Mencius' ideas of self-learning and learning for the sake of personal improvement. Confucius, whose theories dominated China's educational pattern for many centuries and many of his principles are still in practice, also discussed various relationships within family and society, and how one should adhere to these principles to maintain peace and harmony in society. He spoke of duties and responsibilities which guided society and, to some extent, brought stability. Some of his ideas are criticised for being biased, particularly towards specific actions concerning the lower strata of society and women. However, some scholars believe that, given the country's vast size and complex history, Confucius' ideas were suitable for both the state and society and to some extent, some of the theories are still applicable in the case of China.

### Some disadvantages

However, it had several disadvantages. It was limited to the elite, and lower social classes lacked access. It reinforced socio-economic inequality, as wealthy families had the resources to support their children's exam preparation.

Additionally, many youths failed the exam or faced an oversupply of degree holders unable to find suitable employment, leading to downward social mobility or disillusionment. Another issue was the rigid curriculum, leaving little room for innovative ideas. The focus on memorising and reciting classics often suppresses free thinking and creativity. The intense academic process through this examination system also, at times, caused extreme stress among Chinese youth, mainly in those candidates who could not pass the exam or those who, even if they passed, struggled to find appropriate jobs.

Despite its disadvantages, the Chinese education system, grounded in philosophies of self-cultivation, has fostered a strong moral sense among its citizens. Consequently, Chinese culture is characterised by a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Buddhism, all of which stress self-cultivation.

### The Legacy

The legacy of these great philosophers from ancient China endures. The early development of civic education laid a strong foundation for Chinese citizens. It fostered a great sense of consciousness. Many times, their ideas and philosophies helped the Chinese nation develop an understanding of patience and self-reliance, and with these qualities, it has saved the nation numerous times. Their doctrines and teachings have also motivated the nation and helped it stay united in various situations.

### Conclusion-

Through the introduction of the imperial civil service examination, China established a systematic and organised education system, demonstrating that the Chinese bureaucracy was highly educated. This education system was undoubtedly very influential, rooted in Confucian philosophy, and imparted knowledge while aiming to cultivate moral values in Chinese citizens. It also supported social order and a meritocratic bureaucracy, which was strong and educated. However, this education system faced criticism, as it was mainly accessible to the privileged class. Additionally, very few women participated in this examination and education system, as it perpetuated existing societal gaps and reinforced social hierarchies. Nonetheless, China is credited with creating a highly structured education system since ancient times, which has become a model for many civilisations. Even today, elements of this education and examination system are still followed in China. This ancient model of education in China influenced its neighbours. Many of these countries in East Asia adopted the Chinese model of education.

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