

Observation on Test-Oriented EFL Teaching and Learning in China---From a Perspective of Imperial Examination System and the Confucian Idea “Go into the Society”

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Abstract: The Confucian philosophy of “go into the society” emphasizes the involvement in social affairs and the practical use of knowledge. As the ruling thought of the feudal system after Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to A.D.220), this philosophical idea had motivated ancient scholars to shoulder social responsibility and actively participate in national affairs. Founded in Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581 to A.D. 630), the Imperial Examination System provided the perfect channel for especially ordinary Chinese male to move upward. Numerous ancient scholars became officials in local and central governments to manage the country with the Confucian education they received. This pattern of achieving social mobility through exams was inherited and represented by the contemporary national exams in China. To do well in exams like Gaokao means more opportunities to enjoy better educational and occupational resources. Though educational reforms are happening, test-oriented EFL teaching and learning is still prevalent in classrooms of China.

1. Introduction

Chinese students have been long well-known for their ability in taking exams. However, that reputation is mainly built on the training they received in a test-oriented education system. Though in recent years Chinese government has been shifting its educational focus to a quality-oriented system, national exams represented by College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) still dominate teaching and learning content in Chinese classrooms. EFL teachers and learners are inevitably influenced by the overall environment. English, as a communicative language, is taught with special focuses on grammar, reading analysis, writing and listening, which are exactly the testing objectives in national exams. However, teachers and students have adapted themselves to this test-oriented atmosphere and worked very hard in that environment. The major reason why they endeavor is that national exams represent the most straightforward upward social mobility. “Social Mobility” was proposed by Pitirim A. Sorokin in 1927. It defines the transition of social status of individuals and communities^[1]. In 2024 alone, 13 million 240 thousand students participated in Gaokao. In that context, a better score was equal to kicking more people out of the game and making better education resources more available. Here, questions are raised---Why do Chinese people treat

examinations as a symbol of social mobility? Does this conventional idea has a history origin? What kind of idea motivated ancient Chinese to move upward? The author is trying to analyze these questions from perspectives of Imperial Examination System and the idea of “go into the society” from Confucianism.

2. The Confucian Idea of “Go into the society”

The philosophy behind Confucianism was concluded as the thought of “go into the society”, which is characterized by a strong sense of social responsibility and practicality. Confucianism, as the core of education and ruling thought in ancient China, hugely influenced ancient Chinese with the idea that they were highly responsible for the country and people. Like Confucius himself, scholars thought they should apply what they had learned in social practices and actively participate in national affairs. Meanwhile, the best way to fulfill their ambition was to climb up the social ladder and become a government official. Therefore, the idea of “go into the society” became the motivation for ancient people to move upward.

2.1 Origin

Confucius was not only a great ideologist and educator, but also a practical social activist. He spent 14 years travelling and persuading different states to adopt his political views. His core ideas like “benevolence”, which aims to solve social contradictions, “righteousness”, which deals with interested relations, and “rite”, which is about maintaining the order, all served a practical purpose---serving the state and pacifying the people. Compared with the philosophical idea of “retire from the world” from Taoism, Confucian philosophy, known as “go into the society”, encouraged its believers to actively participate in national affairs. According to *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary*, “Go into the society” means “enter the society and experience the real world” while “Retire from the world” means “keep aloof from worldly affairs or abjure the world”^[2]. To some extent, Confucian education is a kind of humanistic pragmatism^[3]. Needham (1956) also concluded: “One of the most basic philosophical divergencies of these two religions is that while Confucianism presents a philosophy of human society, Taoism projects a philosophy of nature”^[4]. Figure 1 presents part of the philosophical differences between Confucianism and Taoism.

Different possible analyses of Confucianism v. Taoism				
		Mainly Concerned with:	Therefore would see Conflict as:	
Cultural Analysis	→	Ideological Phenomena	Confucian Rationalism and Humanism	-v- Taoist Mysticism and Naturalism
Political Analysis	→	Political Phenomena	Confucian State Bureaucracy	-v- Taoism and Subversive Orgs.
Socioeconomic Analysis	→	Class Phenomena and Property Relations	Confucianism, Social Control and Land ownership	-v- Taoism, Rebellion and the Peasantry
			↑	↑
			Dialectical Analysis	

Figure 1 Different possible analyses of Confucianism v. Taoism^[5]

2.2 Development

In 134 B.C., Confucianism was officially recognized as the ruling thought. As it became the core of ancient education, its philosophical idea was inherited by ancient Chinese scholars. In feudal society, more power meant more chance to decide national affairs. Throughout the history of China, numerous ancient Chinese scholars expressed their concerns about the country and people. Their sense of social responsibility originated from the idea of “go into the society”^[6]. In order to practice the philological belief, “becoming an official” became a prevailing pursuit among Confucians. Therefore, “go into the society” served as the motivation and driving force in pursuing the upward social mobility and the Imperial Examination served as the social ladder^[7].

3. Imperial Examination System

Founded in Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581 to A.D. 630), Imperial Examination System is a milestone in Chinese history. By passing Confucianism-based national exams, ordinary Chinese could rise in social status and possess a position in government, which was exactly the pursuit of scholars who were influenced by the philosophical idea of “go into the society”.

3.1 Development

Wikipedia defines the Imperial Examinations as a civil service examination system in Imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy. Imperial Examination System was established in Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581 to A.D. 630) and fully implemented in Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 to A.D. 907). The major goal of the system was to select talents to work in central and local governments. Starting with the Song dynasty, the system was regularized into a roughly three-tiered ladder from local to provincial to court exams. Test content was narrowed and fixed on texts of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy developed by Zhu Xi. By the Ming dynasty, the highest degree, the jinshi, became essential for highest office, while the holders of the initial degree, shengyuan, were not granted a position in the government but enjoyed social privileges. The influence of the Chinese examination system spread to neighboring Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Korea, Japan and Ryūkyū^[8].

3.2 Imperial Examination System and Social Mobility

The establishment of Imperial Examination System was considered as a remarkable achievement in the six century since it focused on ability rather than privilege^[9]. Chinese male adults got a channel to rise with their hard works and became a government official by passing the exams, which indicates that the system significantly helped improve social mobility^[10]. Scholars who were dedicated to the idea of “go into the society” gained an official way to rise in social ladder and practice their belief by participating in national affairs. Successful examples includes Wang Anshi who proposed reforms to make the exams more practical, and Zhu Xi, whose interpretations of the Four Classics became the orthodox Neo-Confucianism which dominated later dynasties^[11].

4. Contemporary National Exams

Imperial Examination System has a significant influence on contemporary national exams. Its major design feature-rewarding with social mobility, was inherited by today’s exam system. By getting high scores, students nowadays are granted for access to better schools, which plays an essential part in climbing up the social ladder. And as a result, the idea that “national exams

symbolized the upward social mobility” became a convention and an exam-oriented education system was fostered in China.

4.1 Contemporary National Exams and Social Mobility

When Imperial Examination System was designed, the objective of it was purely the recruitment of government officers^[12]. Successful candidates became government officials and their glory would be shared by their family^[13]. Social mobility was considered as a reward realized in the form of official positions. With a little alteration, contemporary national exams, represented by National College Entrance Examination, generally followed this principle and rewarded better scores with better education resources. Therefore, education is the most important avenue for social mobility in twenty-first century when higher education credentials have become the gate keepers for professional jobs and leadership positions^[14].

4.2 Preparing for Contemporary National Exams

With the idea that education is the only path of not only self-improvement, but also the most important avenue of social mobility, helping students do well in national exams became a common pursuit among parents and schools^[14]. Thus an education system focused on how to succeed in exams was formed. In China, high schools' sole purpose is preparing students to pass the gaokao^[15]. Getting a high score is the priority of students, parents, teachers, and school principals, because this is seen as the only equitable way assess their achievement^[16].

5. Test-oriented EFL Teaching and Learning

As the test-oriented education system was fostered, China's EFL teaching and learning were both influenced hugely in content and method. Teaching and learning contents are designed with a test-based principle. Special attentions are paid to improve student's listening, reading and writing skills which are the exact testing objectives in national exams. Grammar translation and memorization are widely applied in teaching and learning process. Speaking skills are generally ignored by schools. On the other hand, the limited higher education resource and the huge population of examinee bring unimaginable pressure to teachers and students and even strengthen the test-preparing atmosphere.

Test-oriented education system results in an atmosphere of test-preparing in China's EFL classrooms. The goal of school education remained learning for examinations, rather than for communication^[16]. Teachers tend to teach the test items in terms of vocabulary, grammar, reading analysis, writing and listening. Though in recent years, new methods like student-centered and task-based CLT were introduced to classrooms, grammar translation is still applied in English teaching in order to make students have a better understanding of the internal structure of the language. Memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules are common ways for students to learn English. Speaking ability is ignored by schools since it is not the testing objective in national exams and the reason is that national examinations don't test on communicative ability^[17].

Every year, millions of Chinese students compete in National College Entrance Examination for limited higher education resource. A higher score makes a better higher education more available. Urging by the severe pressure from competition, teachers and students focus even more on the test-taking skills rather than the learning process.

6. Conclusion

Confucianism was officially recognized as the ruling thought in Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to A.D.220) and since then its philosophical idea of “go into the society” has driven ordinary people pursuing an upward social mobility. In A.D. 621, the Imperial Examination System was officially implemented to the whole country. From then on, as it was ended in 1905, this system served as the major channel to realize social mobility for 1284 years. Even abolished, its design feature was inherited by the contemporary exam system. As a result, a conventional idea that people can move upward through exams was shape and the test-oriented education system was formed. Together with the limited higher education resource and huge examinee population, test-oriented education eventually resulted in an emphasis on test preparation, and thus influenced the content and method of EFL teaching and learning in China.

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