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Jie Xiong  
*University of Alberta, Canada*

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# An Exploration of How the Confucian Notion of Scholar-Official has Impacted Chinese People's View on Careers

Jie Xiong  
University of Alberta, Canada

**Abstract:** This paper reveals that scholar-official has impacted Chinese people's view on careers by the imperial examination system for a long history. Tensions between higher education expansion and college student employment, the meaning of scholar-official and the imperial examinations, and the implication for developing tertiary vocational education in China are discussed.

Since the expansion of Chinese higher education in 1999, unemployment of college graduate has become an important issue in Chinese society. While more and more graduates are unemployed, industries are facing shortage of qualified high-level skilled workers (XinhuaNet, 2006). However, the position of high-level skilled worker is not included in the seven most favourite careers college graduates prefer, of which civil servant is the most favourite one for all college students (XinhuaNet, 2006).

Why is the position of civil servant so attractive to Chinese people? Why has the shortage of high-level skilled workers been a social problem in Chinese society? In order to answer these questions, this paper explores how Chinese people have been impacted by the unique view on careers—to be a scholar-official, one of the core notions of Confucianism. The discussion is comprised of four parts. In part one, I discuss the tension between higher education expansion and college graduate employment. Part two explains the Confucian notion of scholar-official as an elite social class. Part three discusses the imperial examination system as the major way to be a scholar-official and its influence on selecting civil servant in current China. The implications of this research on developing tertiary vocational education in current and future China are discussed in the final part.

## Expansion and Employment

Expansion is regarded as an important theme of higher education reform in the world (Johnstone, Arora, and Experton, 1998). According to Trow (2005), higher education experiences three phases of development via changes in the *gross enrollment rate*. The first phase is *elite higher education*, which is characterized as a stage when the gross enrollment rate is less than 15% of the age group. *Mass higher education* is the second phase when the gross enrollment rate is more than 15% and less than 50%. The third phase is *universal higher education* with the gross enrollment rate more than 50%. “By the 1980s, the transition from elite to mass system in higher education had become prevalent in most Western countries (Reiko, 2001).

As the result of *Action Plan for Promoting Education Towards 21st Century*, expansion of Chinese higher education started in 1999. According to statistics of National Ministry of Education (MOE), the gross enrollment rate of Chinese higher education reached 15% in 2002, which indicates the emergence of a mass higher education system. From 1996 to 2005, the gross enrollment rate of Chinese higher education has increased from 7.2% to 22% and the number of students enrolled has increased from 1.13 million to 16.60 million (MOE, 2006).

In the same time range, the number of college graduates increased from 878.30 thousand to 3.38 million. From 2003 to 2005, the employment rate of college graduate is targeted at no less than 73% (MOE). However, the number of college graduates increases annually from 2.12 million in 2003, 2.8 million in 2004, to 3.38 million in 2005 (RenminWang, 2006). It is expected that in 2006, the number will be close to 4 million. Ever since the National Ministry of Education posted employment rate of 71 universities in 2002, employment rate has been used as a standard to evaluate university and college. This has resulted in false report of employment rate, which covers the severe situation of unemployment of college graduate. Thus, the unemployment of college graduate has become a big issue for Chinese society.

On the other hand, there exist the shortage of high-level skilled workers, such as technicians and senior technicians. Statistics of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security show that among 270 million employers in cities and towns across the country, only 87.2 million employers are qualified skilled workers. There are only 3.6 million high-level skilled workers (senior technicians and technicians) among these qualified (XinhuaNet, 2006). Apparently, the component of high-level skilled workers is very low among employees in China. It is regarded that the shortage of high-level skilled workforce is challenging the advantage of “Made in China” (XinhuaNet, 2006) and the upgrade of Chinese industries (Zhang, 2006).

According to Trow (2005), mass higher education is the ascendancy of technical and vocational education over liberal and general education. However, technical and vocational education has not been prevalent in Chinese society since the emergence of mass higher education in 2002. On the contrary, it is reported that, in 2006, there are 383,008 people applied for about 10,000 positions of civil servants through participating in *Chinese Civil Service Examination* (Wang, 2005). Civil servant has been ranked as the most favourite job for all college graduates (XinhuaNet, 2006). In current Chinese society, undoubtedly, the position of civil servant is more attractive than that of skilled worker fostered by technical and vocational education. To obtain a good understanding of such a phenomenon, it is necessary to know what civil servant means in Chinese society.

### **Scholar-Official: the Elite Social Class**

Generally, a civil servant is an employee working in a government department. This position has a long history in China. In imperial China, civil servants were named as scholar-officials, who were appointed by the emperor to perform day-to-day governance. Scholar-official is a very important core notion of Confucianism in Chinese society. Confucianism is a system of philosophical, ethical and political thought based on the teachings of Confucius, which has been the dominant ideology of China ever since the West Han Dynasty. Although Confucianism is no longer used as the state ideology today, “the Chinese education system and indeed the whole society, bear the decisive mark of Confucianism” (CEDEFOP, 1987, p. 20).

“The imperial China was administered by members of a ruling class who were educated as scholars of the classics and were experts in morality, rather than in any particular (technical) field (such as agriculture, law, commerce, or, later, industry and science)” (Ogden 1995, p. 19). “In the social hierarchy of the Confucian state, [scholar-] officials occupied the highest position, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants” (CEDEFOP, 1987, p. 23). “In the Chinese bureaucracy, the generalist held a position superior to the specialist” (Nivison & Wright, 1959, p. 163). “[They] were the elite class in Chinese history by virtue of their mastery of literary skills, particularly the texts of the Confucian Canon” (Thompson, 1979, p. 112). As the basic element in the preparation for a career of scholar-official, classical (general) education was preferred rather than specialized education (CEDEFOP, 1987).

When talking about reasons for choosing civil servant as careers, a stable and remarkable income, health insurance, pension, and high social status of civil servant are major factors attracting college students (XinhuaNet, 2006). It indicates that the civil servant is still a similar elite social class in current China as the scholar-official in the past. According to Weber (1964), qualification of a scholar-official is mainly determined by examinations.

### **The Imperial Examination System: Selecting Scholar-Officials**

The examinations for selecting scholar-officials were called *imperial examinations*. Success in the imperial examination brought opportunity for an official career, which means status of privilege and success. Thompson (1979) regards that majority of Chinese students are motivated by such an ambition to be a scholar-official.

Imperial examinations include a series of examinations at different levels. Although the imperial examination levels vary according to different dynasties, the imperial examination system is comprised by examinations at three levels. Xiucai (cultivated talent) examination is at the entry level of the examination system. People passing xiucai examination are called xiucai, who are entitled to participate in Juren (provincial graduate) examination, which is held at provincial level every three years. Then Juren are qualified for Jinshi (capital graduate) examination, which is held in the capital city every three years. Jinshi examination is the highest level of the imperial examination system.

“In the examination system, moral values always played a more significant role than specialist knowledge, and the examination texts were interpreted by the candidates in accordance with the prevailing opinion of the times” (CEDEFOP, 1987, P. 24). The examination system involved interpretation of canonical texts. They mainly include “Five Classics” and “Four Books”. “Five Classics” are Shi Jing (the classic of poetry), Shu Jing (the classic of history), Li Ji (the classic of rituals), Yi Jing (the classic of changes), and Chun Qiu (the Spring and Autumn annals). “Four Books” are Lun Yu (The Analects of Confucius), Meng Zi (The Mencius), Da Xue (The Great Learning), and Zhong Yong (The Doctrine of the Mean). It is from Song Dynasty (960 to 1279) that the “Four Books” had become major text books with the “Five Classics” for imperial examinations as the orthodox doctrine under the influence of Neo-Confucian philosophy, which had absorbed mystical elements of Taoism and Buddhism. Focusing on Confucian classics and Neo-Confucian commentaries, the imperial examinations guaranteed that Confucianism was at the heart of Chinese education at that time.

With a history of 1300 years, the imperial examination system came to an end for various reasons in 1905. Most people regarded that the examination subject was the major reason for the abolition of imperial examination system. Such a point has been critiqued by Liu (2005), who regards the promotion of western-style schools is the most important reason for the abolition. In addition, Liu (2005) also reminds people that the Western influence on China in Qing Dynasty is another important factor should not be ignored, especially the foreign missionary, the foreign army, and many unfair treaties for China.

Liu (2005) commends that the imperial examination system provides an infrastructure for fair competition and fosters a learning society at that time. While giving many people the opportunity to pursue power and honor - and thus encouraged serious pursuit of formal education, the examination system provided upward social mobility for all males regardless of age or social class (Wikipedia, 2007). Although in principle, under this examination system, access to official posts was open to all, it entailed many years’ intensive study of the canonical texts in order to pass the examination. Hayhoe (1992) highlights that “the pathway to be a

scholar-official through the examination system was the narrowest and most difficult (way to success)” (p. 12). The examination system, however, was still looked upon as the major way to improve social status for common people.

Although the imperial examination system has been abolished for more than 100 years, examinations have been kept as a method to select civil servants in China. According to Liu (2005), the National College Entrance Examination was the major way to select civil servants in China before 1990. College graduates were all titled as “cadre/official” then. After 1990, this examination has been replaced by Chinese Civil Service Examination. In recent years, most positions of civil servant require a doctoral or at least master’s degree. In this sense, to get a position of civil servant, the student needs to pass a series of examinations: Junior High School Entrance Examination, Senior High School Entrance Examination, College Entrance Examination, Graduate Study Entrance Examination, Doctoral Study Entrance Examination, and Civil Service Examination. For those who do not study in the formal education system, they can get their degrees through Self-Study Examinations.

The examination system used for selecting civil servants in current China is quite different from the imperial examination system in ancient China. The subjects of Civil Service Examination include arts, science, engineering, business, medical, etc. while arts is the major subject for imperial examinations. It results in the distinction between civil servant and scholar-official though both have a similar function in Chinese society.

### **Implications**

Given this understanding of the scholar-official and the imperial examination system, it is not difficult to understand why the position of civil servant is so attractive rather than the position of skilled workers. However, this situation is challenged by the rising of mass higher education in current China.

Chinese higher education has become a mass higher education system since 2002, when the gross enrollment rate reached 15%. In explaining higher education expansion, Scott (1996) reveals that access to higher education was expanded through one or both of two ways: “First, existing universities were expanded and new ones were created. Second, greater emphasis was also placed on less traditional forms of higher education” (p. 38). Developing tertiary vocational education (TVE) is regarded as the most important approach to realize the expansion of Chinese higher education (Wu, 2004). TVE refers to vocational education at post-secondary levels similar to community colleges in North America. TVE was formally created as a new sector of higher education in China in 1996. Modeled after the successful experiences of Western countries in developing TVE, *vocational & technical colleges* in China have increased in number since then. Aimed at fostering the high-level skilled workforce demanded by a booming economy, TVE focuses on fostering technical/practical-oriented skills training. This system is still under developing towards a future universal higher education system.

The shortage of high-level skilled workers and the heat Civil Service Examination indicate that [tertiary] vocational education is less attractive in Chinese society. It shows the profound influence of the Confucian notion of scholar-official. However, Trow (2005) concludes that the differences between mass higher education system and elite higher education system are not just quantitatively but also qualitatively. He points out that such differences result in different student’s careers. This means that elite higher education fosters a relative small group of future leaders (including civil servants) of the society while mass higher education train young people for specific occupations (mainly refers to high-level skilled workers). In this sense, developing

TVE is a wise policy for China. TVE will be more attractive to college students by improving employment situation.

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