Front. Hist. China 2007, 2(4): 493–512
DOI 10.1007/s11462-007-0025-5

RESEARCH ARTICLE

LIU Haifeng

Influence of China's imperial examinations on Japan, Korea and Vietnam

© Higher Education Press and Springer-Verlag 2007

Abstract China's imperial examinations greatly influenced the East Asian world. Japan imitated it during the eighth to tenth centuries; its subjects include *xiucai*, *mingjing*, *jinshi*, *mingfa*, as well as medicine and acupuncture. Korean imperial examinations are the longest and most comprehensive ones among other East Asian countries. Vietnam was the last to abolish the imperial examinations. All three East Asian countries imitated China in their imperial examinations, which greatly raised their cultural levels.

Keywords imperial examinations, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, *jinshi*

摘要 中国科举对东亚世界产生了巨大影响。日本曾在公元8–10世纪仿行过科举，取士科目主要有秀才、明经、进士、明法及医、针等。韩国(朝鲜)的科举是中国之外实行最长、也最为完备的。越南则是世界上最晚废止科举的国家。东亚国家效法中国建立科举制，有力地促进了本国文化水平的提升。

关键词 科举，日本，韩国，越南，进士

1 Introudction

Imperial examinations, as the first and foremost activity among ancient Chinese literati, significantly influenced not only China, but also the advancement of East Asia and human civilization. The western countries, such as Britain, France and America all set up their modern examination systems of official recruitment

Translated by Yang Chunyan from *Xueshu Yuekan* 学术月刊 (Academic Monthly), 2006, (12): 136–142

LIU Haifeng (✉)
Institute of Education, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, China
E-mail: liuhf@xmu.edu.cn

under the inspiration and influence of the Chinese imperial examination system. The three main East Asian countries that were mostly influenced by China's imperial examination system were Japan, Korea (Choson) and Vietnam. Japan imitated China's imperial examination from the eighth to tenth centuries; and in Korea and Vietnam, the imperial examinations had been implemented for a long period. This thesis illustrates specifically the influence of imperial examinations on these three East Asian countries (the westward movement of the imperial examination system is discussed in another article by the author[1]).

2 Assimilation and alteration of Japanese imperial examinations

Japan is the first one of these three countries to implement imperial examinations, but its duration was the shortest. Chinese legal systems were introduced into Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries and the examination of civil service was one of the systems introduced. Laws and decree systems were introduced into Japan from China during this time, among them the mechanism for civil service recruitment system was almost exactly the same as that of Tang era China. The subjects of examination for official recruitment include *xiucai* (cultivated talent), *mingjing* (understanding of the classics), *jinshi* (advanced scholar) and *mingfa* (understanding of the laws), as well as medicine and acupuncture.

The evidence of the implementation of imperial examinations in Japan can be found in contemporary poems about passing and failing in the examination, which are similar to those written by Tang poets. For example, there are several words and sentences referring to the examination in a poem by Sugawara Michizane "Ten quatrains—congratulations on *jinshi*" in *Nihon shiki* Vol. 17 (Japanese Poetry Vol. 17) like "*jidi*," "*longmen*" and "*dengke*," which all mean "passing the imperial examinations." A poem was written by Sugawara Atsushige when he passed the exam, "Recalling the hard days of preparing for exam, I feel the present happiness is greater than any other happiness; having passed the imperial exam, I feel my present standpoint is higher than any others." An analogy of that kind of excitement can be drawn between this poem and the one written by Meng Jiao, a Chinese poet, when he passed the examination of *jinshi* in the Tang Dynasty. Another example is the poem written by Miyoshi Yoshimune about his failure, "When I am alone, I cannot help thinking of successive failures in exams due to illness and inadequate talent, revealing the agony of those who failed."[2] In addition, some articles by Sugawara Michizane such as "Testing

[1] Liu Haifeng, 2001.
[2] Xiao Ruifeng, 1995.

current affairs as one issue of new regulations of *xiucai* exam," "Detailed standards of examination articles," "Chores for one alternate doctors in vacancy" etc., proved that Japan indeed carried out an imperial examination system similar to China's.[3]

The names of candidates who passed the *jinshi* ("shinshi" in Japanese) examination in Japan are still known today. The Japanese *Records of Palace Examinations* keeps an account of the advanced scholars who passed the exam in CE 916: Fuji wara Takaki, Ōe Koretoki, Harubuchi Yoshiki, Fujiwara Harufusa. "Biographies" in Vol. 13 of *Chou ya qun sai* (Collective records of the court and the society) records that Deputy Minister Sugahara Kiyotomo took part in the *jinshi* examination in May, CE 728.[4] Among the candidates in the eighth and the ninth centuries whose names are in record today, there are 196 bunshousei shinshi, including shunshi, bunshousei jushikensha, gi bunshousei; 35 monjou tokugyoushou, including *xiucai* ("shusai" in Japanese) and kyuryou gakusei; and 55 *xiucai* and shinshi jushikensha.[5]

Although Japanese imperial examinations gradually tended to be occupied and controlled by aristocracy, there had been some efforts to achieve fairness in recruitment exams. In CE 827, a *nagon* (councillor) wrote in his memorial to the throne that:

> The writ of *dajoukan* (cabine) ordered on the fifteenth day of last year said that "According to the Tang system, the students of *shoumankan* and *soumankan* should be selected exclusively from the sons and grandsons of the officials ranked above the third grade. The candidates who are allowed to be tested on writing poems in place of rhyme prose in the entrance exam of central university must be children from gentry's families. The outstanding ones among these people could be conferred the title of *shunshi* and exempted from a retest. As to the superior members among them, they are called *shusaisei*." If that writ which vests monopoly in the third tiered aristocrats and above were put into practice, the academic ethics would be harmed. The university, after all, is a place of learning and the home of intellectuals who are not all born with noble blood. Moreover, in order to select talents for the king's government, capacity of the candidates should be valued above all. Even some high-ranked officials were servants before. Why should the students be embarrassed by their birth? In my opinion this might severely discourage the talented candidates with inferior birth. The quota of admission among *bunshousei* was strictly prescribed: five *shunshi* and two *xiucai*; what is more, some candidates from

[3] Liu Nailiang, 1999.
[4] Dengkeji (jiaoyi), 11–13.
[5] Dengkeji (shiyi), 13–28.

> gentry's family, provided he is not an alternate *jinshi*, will be conferred a lower grade despite taking the same examination as the candidates from higher noble families....I strongly suggest that the old practice should be resumed by abolishing the title of *shunshi* and rehabilitating that of *xiucai* in order to achieve fairness.[6]

It can be seen from this quotation that Japanese imperial examinations and school systems followed the model of Tang era China and some words in this memorial like "value capacity above all" and "why candidates should be embarrassed by their birth" shows that the principle of examination is to recruit officials based upon capacity and fair competition.

As the imperial examination system of Tang era China developed, *xiucai* exams declined while *jinshi* exams became more prosperous; the situation in Japan after CE 730, however, was the opposite from China, where *xiucai* exams were more popular than *jinshi*. "Writ of *dajoukan*: rehabilitation of alternate *bunshousei* and *tokugyuoshou*" in *Honchou monzui* (Collection of contemporary articles), Vol. 2 wrote, "According to the decree, there should be two exams of *xiucai* and *jinshi* which are different in the degree of difficulty. Two *monjou tokugyoushou* will be selected based upon their capacity to take part in these two exams." The candidates for *xiucai* would be tested in *fanglüe* which, according to "*Kokalei*" (Commands of examinations) in *Ryou no gi ge* (*Interpretation of Commands*) Vol. 4, means essence of significant affairs as "*fang*" means "*significant*" and "*lüe*" means "essence." The entry of "*xiucai*" in "*Kokalei*" in *Ryou no shuu ge* (Collection of commands) Vol. 22 explains in quotation from *Ancient records* that "*xiucai* is actually *bunshoushi*; *fanglue* refers to general significant affairs. Learned people who have wide knowledge should be tested on strategies of handling the general significant affairs. For example, in exams there are questions like this: why there were more sages in the Zhou Dynasty than in the Shang Dynasty?"

Jinshi exams test candidates on their solutions to current affairs. The entry of "*jinshi*" in "*Kokalei*" in *Ryou no hi ge* Vol. 4 writes, "Current affairs refer to important issues of state governance like how to increase population and wealth of a country. The same entry in "*Kokalei*" in *Ryou no shuu ge* Vol. 22 explains more or less the same: current affairs means fundamental and effective ways of state-management. For example, Master *Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* is a collection of proposed solutions to state affairs. It tries to answer such questions as "what is the solution to robbery?" *Xiucai* and *jinshi* exams in Japanese imperial examination system developed towards an end opposite to that of Tang era China. The discrepancy between development trends of the two test subjects is mainly due to their different degrees of difficulty: *xiucai* exam,

[6] "Writ of dajoukan."

the simpler one, of course attracted more candidates to participate in and became increasingly popular and prosperous.[7] The explanations of solutions to significant affairs and currents affairs in Japanese historical records have not been discovered in Chinese documents yet, which might be explained by the loss of relative Chinese documents or the innovation of Japanese imperial system that is helpful to the research on *xiucai* and *jinshi* exams of the Tang Dynasty.

Sugahara Michizane, during his term of office in charge of examination and recommendation, expressed his thoughts about the importance of *xiucai* and the criteria for marking the answer sheet of *xiucai* test on strategies for significant affairs. That is, because *xiucai* is the pillar of the state government, the test of it, which emphasizes strategies for dealing with important affairs, should not be paid little attention. As to the criteria, he said, "'Koukalei' prescribes that candidates' articles in the exam with elegant writing-style and well-organized and logical argumentation can be ranked as the best ones amongst the superior candidates; articles good at either writing style or argumentation are in the middle level of the superior candidates; those at medium rank of both aspects can be graded as the lowest within the superior group; articles with commonplace style and argumentation are mediocre; those bad at both aspects fail. In my opinion, the above-mentioned description and classification of articles are clear and applicable to both the best and the failed; the mediocre ones are also easy to be defined according to precedents. The articles in the middle and low levels of the superior, however, are difficult to rank; for the prescription of these types is too vague, and there are no specific criteria in precedents. My suggestion, therefore, is that more detailed and specific regulations should be set up in order to avoid mistakes and ambiguity."[8] It can be inferred that Sugahara Michizane learned from his practice of marking papers that original criteria were too vague to be applicable and further specification was required to strengthen objectivity in the examination system.

Theoretically speaking, the Japanese imperial examinations were open to all, but actually only the students in central university consisting mainly of children of officials are allowed to sign up to take part in the exam. In Tang era China the imperial examinations were plebian while in Japan they were patrician. Due to aristocratic interference in politics and hereditary of education officials, since the tenth century, the central university of Japan had been controlled by the nobles and the university students are recommended to take the exam by the doctors based upon their reputation and record of service instead of capacity. Consequently, the imperial examination system lost its practical value and only the form remained; after the 11th century, though the exam was still

[7] Kao Mingshih, 2004.
[8] Sugahara Michizane, 1983.

held by the Ministry of Personnel, the candidates who were all nominated by dignitaries would pass the exam unconditionally.[9] Imperial examination system had changed fundamentally and gradually died out since then, thus many Chinese and even Japanese today may not realize that Japan had also introduced imperial examination system.

In 1787, in order to enlarge *Shouheizaka gakumonjo* (Shouheizaka school), which served as a cradle of officials, the government of Edo Shogunate introduced periodic examination system called *sodoku kugin* and *gakumon kugin*. The so-called "*sodoku*" means reading original classic works in Chinese pronunciation. The Edo imperial examination system resembles the Chinese exams in many aspects: its subjects are selected from the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* of the Zhu Xi School or other Confucian classics like *Book of Filial Piety*; the exam procedures are also more or less the same as those of Chinese exams; as imperial examinations, this periodic exam is also a kind of competitive screening test with few differences in rewards—it only gave an honorary award, some winners of which, however, simultaneously won a fame and Shogun government's attention overnight. Despite the difference to Chinese imperial examination system, this Edo exam did not turn hindrance to social development; instead, it becomes the first cultural step of Japan's journey towards modernization.[10]

During the first decade of the Meiji Era, aiming at selecting talents and promoting a reform movement, a scholar Kanda Takahira in the new government wrote a letter advocating the establishment of a modern Japanese official recruitment system with Chinese imperial examination system as a model. Although the proposal had been passed, it failed to win the support of dignitaries and consequently fell out of favor; the examination system for selecting talents was finally replaced by a modern school system.[11]

3 Imitation and innovation of Korean imperial examinations

Korean imperial examination system is a veritable model among those of the three East Asian countries around China due to its longest duration and most comprehensive implementation. From CE 958 to 1894, the examination system lasted 936 years in Korean history.

Korea imitated Tang era China carrying out imperial examinations in CE 958. "Preface of selection history" in *History of Koryo Dynasty* Vol. 40 records that "before the period of three kingdoms there was no imperial examination system. Emperor Taizu of Korea initiated the foundation of schools, but it was not until

[9] Kao Mingshi, 1987, 65–102.
[10] Wu Guanghui, 2005.
[11] Amino Ikuo, 1983, 2–3, 56–59.

the regime of Emperor Guangzong that imperial examinations were implemented, who adopted the suggestion of Shuangji to select officials by testing candidates' capacity in exams. This practice might have been introduced from China and leads to their consequent prosperity of learning."

Korean imperial examinations are one aspect of their imitation of China. Shuangji "is a Chinese *xiucai* who came to Korea onboard a merchant ship and was promoted to be a *Hanlin* scholar. The examination system introduced by him is learned from the Tang Dynasty to recruit officials and other personnel specialized in *mingjing*, medicine and divine, etc. by testing candidates on poetry, rhyme prose, odes and essays on current affairs. The poems had a regulated form with ten rhymes and more than eight verses; with the rhyme prose being based on 'the praise of the eight righteous virtues'. Tang poetic prose is written in official rhyme and in a parallel style."[12] Shuangji was sent on a diplomatic mission to Korea by the Late Zhou court during the Five Dynasties of China. Emperor Guangzong of Korea highly appreciated his talent and requested Chinese court to leave him as a Korean official. The Korean king at that time perhaps had some knowledge of the imperial examination system, but lacked determination to carry it out. Shuangji, who was bold to turn the wheel of history, at this very moment stepped forward and converted the knowledge into action.[13] The importance of Chinese influence on the establishment of Korean imperial examination system especially in its early days can be inferred from the fact that a Chinese directly participated in the introduction and construction of the Korean imperial examination system and presided over three exams in succession. Korean Scholar H. W. Kang pointed out, the civil service examination system introduced in 958 by King Kwangjong of Koryo Dynasty (918–1392), constitutes perhaps the most engrossing case of institutional borrowing in traditional Korea. Aside from its long-range of consequences of Korean society and culture, the significance of this particular instance of institutional transplantation lies in the wholesale manner in which the borrowing was made, adopting the system complete with its Confucian examination content as well as its Chinese system of writing. The far-reaching social and culture implications of this undertaking and its great success as a cultural borrowing make this particular case a fascinating subject to study.[14]

"Mingshu· jinshi" in *Picture of mission to Koryo during the years of xuanhe* Vol. 19 written by Xu Jing in the Northern Song Dynasty of China records that:

> The candidates have diverse names: in the capital city they are called "*tugong*" and in other places they are called "*xianggong*." When the imperial

[12] Liu Shouheng, "Lun lizhi."
[13] Huang Yuese, 139–146.
[14] Kang H. W., 109–125.

> examination is held, hundreds of them will gather at the imperial university and be tested by the king himself on poetry, prose and argumentation essays; those who pass the exams will be recruited as officials. During the Zhenghe reign (1111–1118), some Korean students were sent to China and were bestowed a grade and title by the emperor; from then on, the Korean imperial exams were gradually inclined to present questions about the classics and current affairs; selecting candidates according to their scores. Students specialized in Confucian classics could often be seen wearing a coif with four belts, a black silk cloak and black leather shoes; if one is eligible to take the imperial exam, he will wear a cap in addition; if he passes the exam, then he will be granted servants and horses and parade under a green canopy in the city, as an honor.[15]

The same book records in Vol. 40 that:

> The Korean civil service recruitment system follows that of our country with some differences: the students take primary exams in the temple of King Wenxuan every year and the eligible ones are titled as *gongshi*; among them about 350 will be selected after another examination one year later; those people then will take a higher exam held in Ying'en accommodation; about thirty to forty people will be admitted and classified to five grades, which is similar to metropolitan examination of our country; the final exam will be presided by the king himself who will test them on poetry, prose and argumentation essays. I think it is ridiculous that there is no question about current affairs in the exam. Moreover, there is one subject of diction in the exam, though seldom held, valuing literary grace and rhymes more than essence of classics, which might be inherited from the malpractices of the Tang Dynasty.

Therefore, analogy can be drawn between imperial examination systems of Korea and China in the Tang and Song Dynasties.

Korea in the Koryo Dynasty of nearly five hundred years absorbed various merits from the imperial examination system of China in the dynasties of Tang, Five Dynasties, Song and Yuan. Specifically speaking, practices in Korean civil service recruitment which directly follow examples of the Sui and Tang Dynasties were the three tiered exams of the Rite Ministry, three-candle exams i.e. evening exam, spring exam in March and the imperial exam for foreign candidates, witchcraft exam etc. Those with immediate origins in the Five Dynasties and the Song Dynasty, the practices were as follows: the Rites Ministry are in charge of

[15] Zhang Li, 858.

the exam; subjects of test includes *jinshi*, *mingfa*, *mingshu* (understanding of calligraphy), *mingsuan* (understanding of arithmetic), *sanli* (rituals i.e. *Zhou ritual*, *Decrum Ritual* and *Book of Rites*), *sanzhuan* (interpretation of *Spring and Autumn Annals*, i.e. Kung-yang chuan, Tzo chuan and Ku-liang zhuan), etc.; candidates of *jinshi* exams are graded as A and B; emphasis on poem and prose writing; items in *mingjing* exam contain fill-in the blanks and questions from the classics; candidates' names on the paper were covered. The practices inherited from the Song Dynasty are military official selection exam and its candidates; rituals of potation at *juren*'s hometown and formal visit to Confucius Temple. The practices imitated from the Yuan Dynasty are the establishment of provincial, metropolitan and palace examinations. All above mentioned practices are more or less influenced by the recruitment systems of the Tang Dynasty. As to those learned from China in other dynasties include the three-year-internal of imperial examinations, higher position of officials with *jinshi* status, etc. Korea also made some innovations in its own examination system; for example, the subjects of divine, geography, *helun* and essence of politics, etc. in exams; supervision of staff from the imperial university; and the setup of a Buddhist test. Another special test of worshiping Confucius in the Korean examination system is derived from the ritual of worshiping Confucius of the Tang Dynasty of China, which, though losing the original intension of education and interchange, completely reveals the spirit of valuing Confucian ideas and thoughts to a greater extent than that of the hometown of Confucius—China was slightly inferior in this aspect.[16]

After the promulgation of imperial examinations edict made by Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty of China who sent envoys to Korea in 1371, the provincial and metropolitan examinations in Korea were held in the procedures of the Ming China. The subject of the first exam is to explain the *Five Classics* in more than five hundred words and the *Four Books* in more than three hundred words; the second one is about argumentation of the rite and ritual music in no less than three hundred words; the third one is a test concerning questions of current affairs in more than a thousand words with simple and direct writing style. After these exams, calligraphy, arithmetic and laws will be tested as well, all of which are meant to grade a candidate's capacity for writing, calculation and expression. Similar to its Chinese model, it is impossible for the imperial examinations in Korea to avoid disadvantages and later declination. "Selection history" in *History of Koryo Dynasty* Vol. 27 records that when the imperial examination system was newly founded, every aspect such as cultivation, selection and interpretation of relative laws was in a good order and was expected to benefit later generations. The academic atmosphere and enthusiasm for learning among Koran people were never inferior to those of China. However, it went downhill along with the

[16] Kao mingshih, 1999, 361, 370.

deterioration in domestic politics when dignitaries manipulated the court with bribery, leading to the collapse of the legal system and endless emergence of scandals in civil service recruitment.

Imperial examination system continued in Korea despite the replacement of the Li Dynasty for the Koryo regime in 1392. In the first year of his regime, Emperor Taizu of the Li Dynasty reformed the examination system by substituting presentation for questions of the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* in the first exam in order to break the dominance of convention in writing and select real talent steeped in classics. This reformation, nevertheless, was proved to be failed after several exams, for it cannot fulfill its goal of selecting outstanding talents; so under the appeal of Quanjin, the Lord of Jichang in 1407, questions of classics were restored in the first exam in place of presentation and the subjects of the second exam changed from ancient rhyme prose into constructing argumentation, a memorial to the throne and a court verdict. He also advocated strengthening the emphasis on knowledge of Chinese bureaucracy which was closely related with significant current affairs, and suggested that test of relative subjects of that knowledge like poem and prose, official writ, classics and Chinese language should be set up, and the names of successful examinees should be publicly announced as those who pass the imperial exam.[17] In addition, the rulers of the Li Dynasty enlarged the number of candidates who are eligible to take the imperial exam and entitle them "*sima*" according to the archaic terms in "System of King" in the *Book of Rites*.

The imperial examination system in Korea is a model among those implemented outside of China, whose frequency of starting exams and rate of enrolment both surpassed those of China. The imperial examinations were held every three years since the middle period of Koryo Dynasty; thirty-three candidates would be selected after the exam each time. In Li Dynasty, the examination held every three years was called formal examination and the enrolled candidates were also thirty-three and later the number of whom increased to forty or fifty. Some extra exams were usually held due to the occasional needs of the Li Dynasty, which were similar to "Examinations by Grace" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties of China when the emperor ascended to the throne, visited some place, celebrated his birthday, or when the concubine of the late emperor died, or when the crown price was entitled, conducted a capping ceremony, or went to school. Even some low grade officials were allowed to take the re-examination which was held every ten years. In addition, there were other exams like *zengguang*, *yesheng*, *chuntangtai* etc., the enrollment quota of which ranged from three to forty, but usually more than ten. A famous Confucian scholar in Korea, Ding Chashang, once pointed out that candidates selected after each imperial exam in China had

[17] "Taizong qinian sanyue wuyin tiao."

been not more than three hundred, sometime there were only thirty, from the Tang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty. Korea is only as large as two provinces of China which itself consists of thirteen provinces, but the number of successful imperial examinees is more than that of China: two hundred *jinshi* and thirty-three candidates who are eligible for the palace exam will be selected after each imperial exam; let alone the candidates who take part in other exams every year or more than one once a year. The whole country was full of candidates who pass examinations.[18]

Imperial examinations were held almost every year, the frequency of which was considerably higher in comparison with those in China at that time. "Civil service recruitment relies on imperial examination system only."[19] The imperial examination in Korea is as important as that in China. In the Ming Dynasty of China, the imperial examination system was considered as the most impartial system in the world so that the saying came into being, "the imperial examination system is the most impartial in the world…if not, what else on earth can be impartial."[20] In 1589, the Director of the Chinese Ministry of Rites Gao Gui said,"Justice of our court in the past two hundred years rests upon the imperial examination system."[21] There was a similar saying in Korea during the regime of Lord Guanghai that "the justice of our country is fully revealed by the imperial examination system."[22]

Similar to China, there were also some evils in the Korean imperial examinations and consequent controversies over about whether to abolish this exam:

> The imperial exam in Korea differs from the Chinese one in ten aspects: first, candidates participated in the metropolitan exam without necessarily passing the provincial exam and the number of recruitments was not fixed; second, with no officials in charge of the examination the educational affairs were disorderly; third, various tests, large or small, make the candidates unable to specialize in one subject; fourth, accidental success is inevitable in military tests; fifth, the time of exam is too long to avoid cheating; sixth, manipulated by personal intensions of dignitaries the exam cannot select the real outstanding talents; seventh, it is hard to verify the superiority and inferiority of papers for they are never published; eighth, over-frequent exams reduces study time of candidates; ninth, Examination by Grace is too frequent and the gate of fortune

[18] Ding Ruoyong.
[19] Zheng Shangji.
[20] Zhang Xuan.
[21] Wang shizhen.
[22] "Xuanjukao," Kezhi si (Imperial examination system IV).

is opened; tenth, the examination centered on classics is not suitable for diverse official positions.[23]

The saying that the disadvantages of recent imperial examinations are too many to list[24] in Korean history indicates that the problems of imperial examinations in Korea is no less than those in China, leading to incessant proposals for reforming that system.

The imperial examination system, however, is an advanced and reasonable way of talent-selecting. Korean scholar Li Chengmao remarked that as bureaucracy developed a great wall was emerging that obstructed the promotion of ordinary people in civil service; imperial examinations, nevertheless, played a role in breaking this obstruction for the common persons. As an institution of examination, it brings objectivity into play in civil service recruitment, free from being manipulated by certain dignitaries or powerful groups.[25] Contemporary public opinions also agreed that imperial examinations started open recruitment of officials and selected truly learned people.[26] That explains why the imperial examination system was not abolished until 1894 in spite of unceasing appeals for reform. Without pressure from Japan, Korea's imperial examination system would have continued.

4 Imitation and adjustment of Vietnamese imperial examinations

Vietnam, the imperial examinations of which started in 1075 and ended in 1919, is the last one among the three East Asian countries to implement and abolish this exam. The same as Korea, Vietnamese imperial examinations were similar to those implemented by many separatist regimes in the Five Dynasties period of China. Vietnam officials had noticed the positive effect of imperial examinations on talent-selecting and social stability before they put them into practice.

The first imperial examinations were held in 1075 during the regime of Emperor Renzong of the Ly Dynasty; throughout this dynasty there were only four imperial exams which recruited a few officials and produced limited influence. Later when the Tran Dynasty was set up, in 1232 Emperor Taizong gave an exam to academic students to select superior ones as *jinshi* and grade them according to their scores. After ten such exams, in order to enlarge the scale

[23] Ding Ruoyong, Vol. 10.
[24] "Xuanjukao," Kezhi wu (Imperial examination system V).
[25] Li Chengmao, 143–144.
[26] Zheng Daocheng.

and influence of imperial examinations, Emperor Ruizong decided to implement *jinshi* exam and fifty *jinshi* were recruited in 1314.

Since the Le Dynasty, Vietnam began imitating Chinese imperial examinations. In 1370 Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty of China sent envoys to promulgate the edict of imperial examinations, allowing candidates form Vietnam, Korea and Champa to participate in provincial examinations in their own countries before they went to the capital of China to take part in the metropolitan examination. In 1401, An Nam was absorbed by China again, called Giaochi Province. In 1427, the Ming court withdrew its troop and Chinese settlers and Vietnam got independence again. In 1428, Le Loi proclaimed himself emperor and named the country as Great Viet. In 1436, he was conferred as the King of An Nam by the Ming government and imperial examinations consequently flourished.

Regarding the imperial examinations during the regime of Emperor Shengzong of the Le Dynasty of Vietnam, "History of the Le Dynasty" in *History of Dai Viet,* Vol. 3 records that a national exam was held in March of 1472 and twenty-six people passed. This examination consisted of four tests. The first one was about the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*: there were four questions concerning *The Analects of Confucius* and four about *The Mencius*, among which candidates could select four to write relative passages; there were three questions about each classic in *The Five Classics* and candidates could select one to answer; as to *Spring and Autumn Annals* there was one question concerned. The candidates were required to write three articles in the format of an imperial order, edict and memorial to the throne respectively in the second test. The third one consisted of two questions about poems and rhyme prose, the latter should be in Li Bai's style. The last one is a question about current affairs concerning differences of essence of classics and success and failure of policies in previous dynasties, etc. Then, it can be inferred from the record that contemporary imperial examinations in Vietnam were more or less the same as those in China, in both form and subject.

Provincial examinations were started in the Nguyen Dynasty in imitation of that in the Qing Dynasty of China in 1807. Examinations by Grace at the metropolitan level were given for the first time in 1825, the procedures and subjects of which are like these: first, a seal of metropolitan exam should be cast; then an examination hall should be built up in the south of the capital city with inside and outside areas and two zones within which there should be separate examination rooms for each candidate with a number and name-plate hung over them…in the first test there are five questions about classics and one about biographies; the second one requires candidates to do writings in the format of imperial edict, imperial order and memorial to the throne; in the third test the candidates must compose a regulated poem with more than eight verses and a poetic prose with eight rhymes; the fourth one asks one question about current affairs, questions about ancient writings of more than ten paragraphs and

questions about contemporary writings of three or four paragraphs. There should be a red table in the examination hall to enshrine the emperor's inscription. Examination supervisors and scribes must write with black and red ink respectively on paper used for official documents only with red lines printed on it. On the day of examination, each examination room should be watched by an armed guard all day long. The supervisors must write in standard script rather than cursive style. Examination papers should be submitted before dusk. After collecting papers, officials of outside area should send them to be sealed and then numbered, copied and proofread each piece of papers. The papers in black ink will be left in examinational institution and those in red ink will be sent to examiners. Each paper should be marked and graded into four ranks by two examiners together and then fetched by outside officials for double check.[27] Regulations of palace examination were also formulated at the same time. The seal of that exam was cast by silver with four characters "*lun cai sheng dian*" (ceremony of talent-selecting) in seal style inscribed on it. It was ordered that the tablets with inscription of *jinshi*'s names should be set up on both sides of the gate of Confucian Temple. Then, similarities of form and subject between the imperial examinations of Vietnam and China were confirmed again. In 1832, even the eight-legged essay was introduced into the Vietnamese imperial exam.

"Selecting talents by imperial examinations was significant."[28] Emperor Shengzu of the Nguyen Dynasty paid more attention to imperial examinations than other emperors of this dynasty. He proposed and took many measures to reform this system and once said that the first place in palace examination which is the most valuable can neither be in vacancy nor be admitted in a large number, for the former situation indicates inadequacy of talents and the latter will disappoint students and scholars. When he noticed that to answer in the exam is more difficult than to assign exam topics—for the examiners can use books as reference in assigning topics while the candidates have to answer from memories,[29] he ordered those sent to China to buy books for domestic scholars. In addition, he himself made a lot of specific suggestions on regulations of imperial examinations such as their sessions, subjects, requirements of answers, format and the limitation of candidates' ages. He also dined the newly recruited *jinshi* frequently. The imperial examination system, therefore, grew increasingly exact and formal attributable to the reformation measures carried out during the regime of Emperor Shengzu of the Nguyen Dynasty.

Vietnamese imperial examination system was set up on the base of Chinese model. As tangerine in the south bank of Huaihe River becomes trifoliate

[27] *Da'nan shilu zhengbian dierji*, Vol. 14.
[28] Ibid., Vol. 189.
[29] Ibid., Vol. 154.

orange when transplanted to the north bank, imperial examination system, when carried out outside China, would be inevitably localized due to different social environments, even if Vietnamese completely copied the Chinese model. Some distinctive features emerged in the implementation of imperial examinations in Vietnam, to name but a few.

First, some new systems were set up. The exam of premier academic students, exam of *raoxue*, going over examination papers with the "forty-point method," "core" etc., were invented by the Vietnamese.[30] Another regulation different from the Chinese system prescribed by the law of provincial examination of 1429 was that before the formal four exams there was a test in advance for elimination.[31]

Second, there were exams of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. According to *Complete History of Dai Viet*, in May of 1429 Emperor Taizu of the Le Dynasty decreed that Buddhist and Taoist monks who had a good command of scriptures and fame for integrity and caution must take examinations at City Hall of each province on the twentieth day of this month; those passing the exam would remain as monks while those failed had to resume an unreligious life. Although Confucianism took predominance in ideology over Buddhism and Taoism, the exams of "Three Religions" were held at intervals in the dynasties of Ly, Tran and Le, which in possession of the Vietnamese feature is an active adjustment of the Vietnamese imperial examinations to national conditions.[32]

Third, elephants were used to prevent cheating. *Main body of veritable records of Dai Nam* Vol. 215 records that elephants had been used to supervise examination halls outside capital till 1843 when the emperor said it was not necessary to use elephants which were often applied in battles in the examination halls to invigilate. Armed guards would be well enough, so from then on elephants should not be sent to examination halls. This way of preventing cheating seemed to be over-exaggerated; that is why it was abolished at last. It is a unique phenomenon in the East Asian history of using elephants to supervise the examination halls, which can be taken as a manifestation of diversity of different national imperial examinations.

Generally speaking, the Vietnamese imperial examinations were inferior to Chinese exams in terms of normality, authority and extent of fulfilling executive functions and promoting mobility among social strata.[33] In comparison with Japanese and Korean imperial examinations, the Vietnamese did a better job in imitating the Chinese model in some aspects. For example, Korea did not build

[30] Takeda Ryuuji, 132–188.
[31] *Yueshi tongjian gangmu*.
[32] Luo Changshan.
[33] Alexander Barton Woodside, preface, 4–5.

special examination halls as "*gongyuan*" in the long run,[34] while Vietnamese not only adopted eight-part essays in their exams but they also set up special examination halls with good organization and strict regulations, similar to "*gongyuan*" of China in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Moreover, several candidates' strikes also occurred in the history against peace-making and divulgence of examination questions. Compared with Korean imperial examinations, the later Vietnamese resemble more the Chinese model.

5 Imperial examinations circle in East Asia

The imperial examinations of these three East Asia countries, to some extent, are dependent on the Chinese civil-service system.[35] Especially, Korea and Vietnam as dependent countries took China as the model. For example, chronological table in *History of Koryo Dynasty* was divided into two columns: the upper one is the chronological table of the standard and the lower one is Korean. Therefore, the Chinese imperial examinations can be interpreted as the model imperial examinations. "Xu xi'nanyi" (Foreword of southwest minorities) in *Sun Qiao ji* Vol. 7 recorded that candidates from a distinguished family from Silla often came to China to participate in the imperial examinations. Sun was a *jinshi* in the ninth year of Dazhong (855) during the regime of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty of China, and later he was promoted to Secretary of Policy-making Ministry. What he said in the preface referred to the foreign candidates who took part in the Chinese imperial examinations. "Selection history II" in *History of Koryo Dynast* Vol. 74 records that in February of the fourth year of Emperor Suzong, Song government of China allowed foreign candidates to participate in imperial examinations; in January of the first year of King Zhongsu, the Yuan government of China promulgated the edict of imperial examinations, ordering to select three qualified candidates for metropolitan examinations; in June of the 19th year of King Gongmin, the Ming government of China also promulgated an edict that allowed foreign candidates to take provincial examinations at home and not limit in number could went to the capital of China for selected metropolitan examinations. Under that circumstance, it is natural for Korea and Vietnam to follow the Chinese model of imperial examinations.

Besides inherent evolution, the Korean imperial examinations were frequently influenced by the Chinese example, the changes and transforms of which would

[34] The name of "gongyuan" indeed appeared in Korean history, but it was an administrative institution, different from that of China in the Ming and Qing Dynasties referring to a special examination hall. In Korea where there was no local examination hall, common halls and squares often converted into temporary examination halls.

[35] Liu Haifeng, 2005, 379.

immediately be echoed in Korean examinations. As mentioned in "A study of selection 1 of *Supplementary documents for investigation* Vol. 184 records, in the 17th year of Emperor Renzong (1139), the examination administration bureau of the Rite Ministry presented a memorial that Fan Zhongyan once said candidates should be tested in classics to exam their basic talent followed by poetry and prose to check their comprehensive qualities; the result of the former would be used as a yardstick for recruitment and the latter would be used for grading purposes. That is the major principle of selecting talents. In our exam, however, the test of classics is set in the third one, followed by that of solutions to current affairs written in a style free of rhyme and rhythm, so the study of poetry and rhyme prose gradually declined. From then on, the first one should test the classics, the second should be on providing solutions to current affairs and the third be poetry and rhyme prose. In the end of the same book, it reads that officials in charge of imperial examinations had been publicly announced before the exam. On the 46th day of the regime of King Gongmin, the old practice was replaced by the Chinese method that the officials were not nominated until the very day before examination. It can be seen that Korea paid close attention to reforms of Chinese imperial examinations in order to imitate and draw lessons from them promptly. The imperial examination system in "A study of selection" of *Miscellany* by An Dingfu records that practices of contemporary imperial examinations were different from those of the Koryo Dynasty except sealed papers; officials in charge of collecting papers, sealing, *zhitong* and the practice of *yishu* were imitated from the Yuan system of China.[36]

The imperial examinations in Korea and Vietnam, on the one hand, were driven by an inner impetus, developed in accordance with their own respective laws and rules; on the other hand, it also continued to absorb new methods from China to optimize itself. The subjects in Korean examinations, such as geography, *helun*; tests of *kaijing* and Seoul; activities at the seventh evening of the seventh month; exams for the premier academic students, *raoxue* exam, went over examination papers with the "forty-point method," "core" etc. In the Vietnamese imperial examinations there were several native innovations. Despite the fact that imperial examinations of each country developed increasingly more independently, they, generally speaking, rarely got rid of Chinese influence completely. Scholars in the Li Dynasty of Koryo once said that subjects of our exams such as *yingjun* and

[36] "Imperial examination system" in "A study of selection" of *Supplementary documents for investigation* Vol. 184 also records that Zheng Daochuan of the Li Dynasty said imperial examination was popular…in the Sui and Tang Dynasties it was called *xiucai, jinshi* and the subjects were diverse. This examination system has been implemented since the regime of Emperor Guangzong under the suggestion of Shuangji. The officials in charge of the exam were called *zhigongju* or *tong zhigongju*. The exam subjects were mainly poems and rhyme prose. It follows the Yuan models of China from the time of King Gongmin.

dengjun were actually the test of "knowledge and diction" in the Tang Dynasty of China; the selection of able and virtuous people was in fact the recommendation of officials to criticize emperors in the Han Dynasty of China.[37] Although the names of subjects and regulations are different, most of them can be traced back to China.

"Despite of different practices and regulations, the imperial examination system was implemented in different countries."[38] The Tang government set a good example for the rest of the East Asian countries to understand and establish an imperial examination system by setting up imperial examinations for foreign *jinshi* to favor oversea candidates. Later, even a small country like Ryu Kyu in East Asia carried out this system. From the twelfth to the nineteenth century, China, Korea, Vietnam as well as Ryu Kyu constituted a unique East Asian cultural circle of imperial examinations. This civil-service recruitment system tended to be cosmopolitan within the East Asian world. These countries followed China by implementing their own imperial examinations, which greatly promoted the improvement of national culture and education; meanwhile, Chinese civilization was disseminated to neighboring states along with the spread of imperial examinations, which can be regarded as a beneficial aspect of this system.

References

Amino Ikuo 天野郁夫. *Kaoshi de shehuishi* 考试的社会史 (Social history of examination). Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1983.

Da'nan shilu zhengbian dierji 大南实录正编 第二纪 (Main body of veritable records of Dai Nam, Book II), Vol. 14. Tokyo: Yurindou, 1961.

"Dengkeji (jiaoyi)" 登科记 (校异) (Records of palace examination <collation>). In: Koukusho itubun kenkyukai, ed. Koukusho itubun kenkyu 国书逸文研究 (Study on the anecdote of National History), 1985, Vol. 16.

"Dengkeji (shiyi)" 登科记 (拾遗) (Records of palace examination <supplementary amplification>). In: Koukusho itubun kenkyukai, ed. Koukusho itubun kenkyu, 1991, Vol. 24, 13–28.

Ding Ruoyong 丁若镛. *Jingshiyibiao* 经世遗表 (Files about managing the state affairs), Vol. 15. Seoul: Mingwenku, 1977.

Huang Yuese 黄约瑟. "Shi gaolichao de houzhou guanren shuangji" 仕高丽朝的后周官人双冀 (Shuangji, an official of the Koryo Dynasty from the Later Zhou China). In *Huang Yuese SuiTangshi lunwenji* 黄约瑟隋唐论文集 (Collected papers on the history of the Sui and Tang by Huang Yuese). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997.

Kang, H. W. "Institutional borrowing: The case of the Chinese civil service examination system in early Koryo." *Journal of Asian studies*, 1974, 109–125.

[37] Zhao Zaisan.

[38] Zhang bin.

Kao Mingshih 高明士. "Riben meiyou shixing guo keju ma?" 日本没有实行过科举吗 (Was there no civil service examination in Japan?). *Xuanzang renwen xuebao* 玄奘人文学报 (Hsuan Chuang Humanities Journal), 2004, No. 3.

———. "SuiTang gongjuzhi dui riben xinluo de yingxiang" 隋唐贡举制度对日本、新罗的影响 (Influence of civil service examination in the Sui and Tang era China on Japan and Silla). In *Gudai zhongrihan guanxi yanjiu* 古代中日韩关系研究 (Studies of relations among ancient China, Japan and Korea). Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1987.

———. *SuiTang gongju zhidu* 隋唐贡举制度 (Civil service examination system in the Sui and Tang era China). Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1999.

Li Chengmao 李成茂. *Gaoli Chaoxian liangchao de keju zhidu* 高丽朝鲜两朝的科举制度 (Imperial examination system of the Koryo and Choson dynasties). Beijing: Peking University Press, 1993.

Liu Haifeng 刘海峰. "Keju dui xifang kaoshi zhidu yingxiang xintan" 科举对西方考试制度影响新探 (A new probe into the influence of the Chinese imperial examination system). *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中国社会科学 (Social Sciences in China), 2001, No. 5.

———. *Kejuxue daolun* 科举学导论 (Introduction of study of imperial examinations). Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 2005.

Liu Nailiang 刘乃亮. "Ye tan riben de keju zhidu" 也谈日本的科举制度 (Talking about Japanese imperial examinations). *Shiyou daxue xuebao* 石油大学学报 (Journal of China University of Petroeum), 1999, No. 3.

Liu Shouheng 柳寿恒. "Lun lizhi" 论丽制 (Comment on Koryo institution). In *Yushu* 迂书, Vol. 10.

Luo Changshan 罗长山. "Yuenan keju sanjiao kaoshi wenti chutan" 越南科举三教考试初探 (Primary investigation of exams of "Three religions" of Vietnamese imperial examinations). *Dongnanya zongheng* 东南亚纵横 (Around Southeast Asia), 1993, No. 2.

Sugahara Michizane. "Qing xiucaikeshi xinlifali zhuang" 请秀才课试新立法例状 (New regulations of xiucai exam). In: Lu Xinyuan 陆心源 ed. Tangwen xushi 唐文续拾 (Supplement of Prose of the Tang Dynasty), appendix of Quantangwen 全唐文 (Complete prose literature of the Tang Dynasty). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983.

"Taizheng yingbu wenzhangsheng bing deyesheng fujiuli shi" 太政应补文章生并得业生复旧例事 (Writ of dajoukan: Rehabilitation of alternate bunshousei and tokugyuoshou). In *Honchou monzui* 本朝文粹 (Collection of contemporary articles), Vol. 2. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1992.

"Taizong qinian sanyue wuyin tiao" 太宗七年三月戊寅条 (Entry of "the seventh year of Emperor Taizong"). In *Taizong shilu* 太宗实录 (Veritable records of the Emperor Taizong), Vol. 13.

Takeda Ryuuji 竹田龙二. "ベトナムの科挙制度と学校" (Imperial examination system and school in Vietnam). In: 近世東アシア教育史研究 (A study of modern East Asian education history) by Taga Akigorou. Tokyo: Gakujutsusho shuppankai, 1970.

Wang Shizhen 王世贞. "Keshikao" 科试考 (Study of imperial examination system), Vol. 4. In *Yanshantang bieji* 弇山堂别集 (Collected essays of Wang Shizhen), Vol. 84. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985.

Woodside, Alexander Barton. *Vietnam and the Chinese model*: *A comparative study of Vietnamese and government in the first half of the nineteenth century*. Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 1988.

"Writ of dajoukan: Rehabilitation of alternate bunshousei and tokugyuoshou." In *Honchou monzui*, Vol. 2. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1992.

Wu Guanghui 吴光辉. “Kejukaoshi yu riben” 科举考试与日本 (Imperial examinations and Japan). *Dongnan xueshu* 东南学术 (Southeast Academic Research), 2005, No. 4.

Xiao Ruifeng 萧瑞峰. “Riben youmeiyou shixing guo keju zhidu—du riben hanshi xianyi” 日本有没有实行过科举制度—读日本汉诗献疑 (Was there imperial examination system in Japan—questions arousing in reading Japan’s Chinese poems). *Wenshi zhishi* 文史知识 (Knowledge of Literature and History), 1995, No. 7.

“Xuanjukao” 选举考 (A study of selection). In: *Zengbu wenxian beikao* 增补文献备考 (Supplementary documents for investigation), Vols. 187, 188. Seoul: Dongguo wenhuashe, 1964.

Yueshi tongjian gangmu 越史通鉴纲目 (Outline of comprehensive mirror to Vietnamese history), Vol. 19. Taipei: Zhongyang tushuguan, 1969.

Zhang bin 张蠙. “Song youren jidi gui xinluo” 送友人及第归新罗 (To a friend back to Silla after passing imperial examinations). In *Quan Tang shi* 全唐诗 (Complete Tang poetry), Vol. 702. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986.

Zhang Li 张礼. *You chengnan ji* 游城南记 (A travelogue of the southern part of the town). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993.

Zhang Xuan 张萱. “Xuanju: Kechang” 选举·科场 (Selection: imperial examinations). In *Xiyuan wenjianlu* 西园闻见录 (Collected essays of Zhang Xuan), Vol. 44. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999.

Zhao Zaisan 赵在三. “Binbie kejulei” 丙别科举类 (Binbie of imperial examinations). In *Songnan zaishi* 松南杂识 (Miscellany of Songnan). Seoul: Yaxiya chubanshe, 1986.

Zheng Daocheng 郑道成. “Gongjulun” 贡举论 (Comment on imperial examination system). In *Sanfengji* 三峰集 (Collected works of Zheng Daocheng), Vol. 13. Seoul: Compling Committee of Korean Collective Series, 2003.

Zheng Shangji 郑尚骥. “Dingke guiyong jianpi” 定科规用荐辟 (Making the regulation of exam by recommending). In *Nongpu wenda* 农圃问答 (Questions and answers of agriculture). Koryo Chinese ancient book edition.