

"Learning for the Self" and "Instrument for Self-Interest" ***—A Study of the Value Orientations of Ancient*** ***Confucianism and Contemporary Exam-Oriented Education***

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Abstract. Contemporary exam-oriented education is deeply mired in involution, and its value orientation is often decried as an "instrument for self-interest." In contrast, the "learning for the self" advocated by pre-Qin Confucianism emphasizes inward self-cultivation and the pursuit of moral perfection. The apparent sharp tension between the two creates fertile ground for further educational-research dialogue. This study focuses on the two value logics of "learning for the self" and "instrument for self-interest," examining the structural connections and functional deviations within the contemporary educational field. It asks whether exam-oriented education inevitably degenerates into a mere instrumental tool, and whether Confucian resources can offer possibilities for non-utilitarian transformation. Drawing on textual interpretation and historical-institutional analysis, this research uses the Four Books and other Confucian classics as core texts, combines them with China's Gaokao reform policies and classroom-practice cases, and conducts cross-cutting analysis via the three-tier "idea-institution-practice" analytical framework. The study finds that the two are not simply opposed but exhibit a deep paradox of "formal approximation but purposive divergence": the examination mechanism partially inherits the Confucian examination tradition in its evaluative form yet replaces "self-perfection" with "competitive success" in its spiritual orientation. However, some teaching practices have revealed a subtle reconciliation of "using examinations to promote learning, and using learning to fulfill the self," indicating that "learning for the self" has not been entirely obliterated but is embedded in fragmentary forms within the interstices of the system.

Keywords: learning for the self, exam-oriented education, value orientation, Confucianism

1. Introduction

As competition in contemporary social examinations intensifies, learning motivation has gradually shifted from intrinsic(knowledge-seeking) to extrinsic (utilitarian gains). This phenomenon has prompted sustained scholarly reflection on the value orientation of education. Research shows that the growing prevalence of "involutionary" behaviors has rigidified students' social contexts, hindered upward mobility, worsened employment prospects and intensified job competition, with 55.7% of adolescents citing academics as their top source of worry [1]. Meanwhile, the pre-Qin

Confucian ideal of "learning for the self," which emphasizes inward moral cultivation and the perfection of virtue, has been frequently invoked in contemporary discourse as a critical intellectual resource against exam-oriented education. However, the theoretical tension and practical entanglement between "for the self" (ji) and "for self-interest" (li ji) are by no means clear-cut. How the two have interpenetrated throughout historical evolution and how they coexist and collude within the contemporary educational field still await systematic investigation. Value orientations do not emerge from a vacuum; they are manifested in the value judgments and choices of subjects, shaped by both internal characteristics and external environmental factors [2]. Classical Confucian "for the self" points toward the moral self-awareness of "knowing oneself, cultivating oneself, establishing oneself, and perfecting oneself," with its ultimate concern being "how to become who we are" [3]. Comparing traditional Confucian "learning to become oneself" with modern meritocratic "learning to benefit oneself" reveals the modern prevalence of the "score elite" learning goal and the "judging others by oneself" individual strategy. This study does not simply make a value judgment of opposition between "for the self" and "for self-interest," but rather asks how the two have been persistently entangled throughout history. It focuses on the two value logics of "learning for the self" and "instrument for self-interest," examining the structural connections and functional deviations between the ancient Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and the realistic orientation of contemporary exam-oriented education. It asks whether the examination mechanism must inevitably become a purely instrumental-rational vehicle, and whether the Confucian tradition contains non-utilitarian educational resources that can be transformed. This paper reveals the deep "formal convergence but purposive divergence" paradox between the two and provides historical references and intellectual resources for the critical transformation of educational values.

2. "Learning for the self": the logic of self-cultivation in ancient Confucianism

2.1. What is "for the self"

In pre-Qin Confucian thought, learning aimed not at pursuing external fame, merit, or elevated social status, but at cultivating and enriching one's inner spiritual world. Confucian culture is a culture of learning for the self and self-cultivation; "learning for the self" is the fundamental premise of the Confucian theory of self-cultivation. The idea of "for the self" first appeared in the *Analects*, put forward by Confucius [4]: "The scholars of ancient times learned for their own sake; those of today learn for the sake of others." This statement is not merely a comparison between past and present but also contains a profound value choice. The core meaning of "learning for the self" lies in treating the pursuit of learning as an intrinsic need for self-improvement and self-fulfillment. This perspective particularly values the conscious development of moral rationality in the process of seeking knowledge and helps learners gradually forge an independent and unyielding spiritual backbone. Its ultimate concern rests on "perfecting oneself"—enabling a person to achieve a self-sufficient and fulfilled state in both ethical conduct and the spiritual realm. Such learning motivation originates entirely from the individual's sincere aspiration for morality and genuine pursuit of a virtuous life. It is for this reason that it constitutes the purest and most sublime spiritual foundation of the ancient educational ideal.

2.2. The value paradox of the imperial examination system: the tension between ideal cultivation and utilitarian pursuit

While "learning for the self" is theoretically an ideal path of self-cultivation, it inevitably falls into a practical paradox once it encounters the imperial examination-centered official selection system. The implementation of educational ideas into educational institutions also requires substantial learning content and carriers. Only Confucianism possessed the corresponding conditions: its classical canon gradually expanded from the early Five Classics to the Thirteen Classics with accompanying commentaries and sub-commentaries, and the Four Books became the primary texts for study [5]. At its inception, the imperial examination system did indeed assume the ideal function of breaking the monopoly of aristocratic families over officialdom and selecting virtuous and talented individuals to govern the state. It also attempted, through institutional means, to promote the social trend of "those who excel in learning should become officials." However, as the system evolved over history, its strong orientation toward material gain gradually distorted the true purpose of learning. "Ranking high in the imperial examinations" became almost the sole measure of a person's worth, and "learning" transformed from a state arising from intrinsic life needs into an "instrument" for obtaining fame and wealth. The driving force behind scholars' extreme efforts—such as "tying their hair to a beam and stabbing their thigh with an awl" to stay awake—was often no longer the pure pursuit of morality but rather the existential anxiety of "a farmer at dawn, a minister at dusk" and an intense desire for wealth and status. The entire educational endeavor thus became a prolonged game of tug-of-war between ideals and reality.

3. The realistic landscape of contemporary exam-oriented education: the alienated "instrument for self-interest"

3.1. Instrumentalization in reality

However, against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, the diversification of parenting philosophies, and regional resource imbalances, a significant disconnection persists between the theory and practice of education [6]. This observation precisely corresponds to the widespread theory-practice misalignment in China's current educational field. If the ancient imperial examination was a single-plank bridge for the scholar-official class to change their destiny, then contemporary exam-oriented education, within the complex context of modern society, has evolved into a more extensive and more sophisticated "instrument for self-interest." Within this system, the value of education is highly compressed into visible scores and rankings. Schools, teachers, students, and even the parents behind them are all swept into a rathercruel)" symbolic competition." From the scramble for scarce "key school" resources to the increasingly solidified "elite school hierarchy," education has in fact become a key operating mechanism for social resource allocation and class reproduction. Learning no longer resembles a journey of exploring the external world and discovering the inner self; it is more like an "arms race" to stand out in intense selection. Students are progressively alienated into mere test-taking machines; knowledge acquisition increasingly gives way to repetitive drilling in problem-solving techniques; critical thinking and creativity wither away in the shadow of standardized answers; and education's "instrumental rationality" has thereby fully eclipsed its "value rationality."

3.2. The psychological cost of "involution": learning motivation degrading from "curiosity" to "fear"

In the context of "educational involution," the highly instrumentalized educational model defined by text-focused attitudes, score-driven behaviors, and certificate-oriented mindsets does its deepest harm by continuously eroding individual learning motivation and mental health [7]. Recent national survey data clearly corroborate this trend: according to the China National Mental Health Development Report published by the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, which surveyed more than 50,000 students from Grade 4 primary to Grade 12 senior high school, the depression-risk detection rate among adolescents stands at roughly 15%-25% [8]. Another empirical study covering 1,096 junior high school students shows a depression prevalence rate of 28.5% and an anxiety prevalence rate of 42.75%, with the competitive pressure dimension of academic stress showing a continuous increasing trend [9]. As "involution" intensifies, the original driving force of learning—curiosity about the unknown and the desire for knowledge—has been unconsciously replaced by a pervasive existential fear. The students' frantic test-taking and late-night studying are no longer driven by a love for knowledge itself but by an anxiety about being eliminated, a trepidation of failing parental expectations, and a deep unease about falling behind in future competition. This fear-driven learning state leads adolescents to sink collectively into the mire of anxiety, depression, and a sense of meaninglessness. Learning thus gradually becomes a heavy burden and a significant source of pain, while education's function of "nurturing persons" appears particularly pale and powerless in the face of the powerful inertia of "scoring."

4. The deep connections between the two: historical continuities and contemporary entanglements

4.1. Formal similarities: the temporal inertia of examination selection and standard answers

After the abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905, the seemingly millennia-old path of "study—examination—officialdom" was formally severed, but the cultural inertia of examinations as a core mechanism of social selection did not disappear. New-style schools and the modern school system quickly inherited this historical legacy: from the school examinations of the late Qing and early Republic, to the university entrance examinations of the Republican period, and then to the nationally unified college entrance examination (Gaokao) system established in 1952. Although the examination form shifted from "policy essays" to "subject knowledge tests," its functional positioning as the primary channel for social stratification and talent mobility essentially continued the deep logic of the imperial examination era. Qian Mu once pointed out that although the imperial examination system was abolished, the "examination mentality" has been deeply embedded in Chinese social psychology, becoming the core yardstick for measuring personal worth and social status. The continuation of this deep-seated cultural psychology means that every examination reform finds it difficult to shake the social expectation of "one examination determines one's life." Although the ancient imperial examination and contemporary exam-oriented education are separated by a millennium, they exhibit striking historical similarities in some aspects of operational form. On the one hand, both rely heavily on standardized examination selection as the primary means of talent differentiation; on the other hand, this reliance on examinations further fosters a certain reverence for "standard answers." The eight-legged essay (bagu wen) style prevalent in the imperial examination era and the "point-by-point scoring" method in today's high school and college entrance examinations both essentially constitute a (formatting) constraint on ways of thinking and

expression. This constraint's powerful historical inertia has deeply embedded the seemingly singular "study-examination-success" path into the nation's cultural-psychological structure. Teachers are constrained by and emphasize standard answers in instruction, students are troubled by and fixate on them in learning, and examinations strictly follow them without the slightest deviation [8]. Even though the overarching theme of the era has shifted from the past "governing the state and pacifying the world" to a more pluralistic modern life, society's dependence on the "one examination determines life" path remains quite tenacious, transforming into a deep cultural inertia that hinders the advancement of educational reform.

4.2. Paradoxical coexistence

In contemporary society, the moral discourse of "learning for the self" and the survival logic behind the "instrument for self-interest" are not simply diametrically opposed. Rather, they coexist paradoxically and may even collude. In educational practice, for the sake of improving enrollment rates and employment rates, schools generally place extraordinary emphasis on intellectual education, which is easily assessed through quantifiable methods like examinations, while neglecting other aspects of development. This causes students to bury their heads in studies, oblivious to the world outside, and to set college admission and employment as their learning goals [9]. In daily life, one can observe parents who, in public, criticize the various ills of exam-oriented education and emphasize the importance of giving their children a happy childhood—this clearly represents a typical "for the self" discourse—yet privately enroll their children in various tutoring classes or go to great lengths to purchase school-district housing, racing headlong on the "involution" track—a clear embodiment of the "self-interest" logic. This contradiction stems from a sharp tension between macro-level moral ideals and micro-level existential anxieties. Ultimately, individuals in weaker positions are often swept up by the powerful momentum of structural social forces. The moral discourse is thereby quietly co-opted by survival logic, exposing the tragic and inescapable dimension of educational alienation.

5. Critical transformation of educational values

5.1. Conceptual renewal: distinguishing "success" from "self-fulfillment"

To achieve a critical transformation of educational values, the first task lies in the disenchantment and reconstruction of the conceptual domain. The mutual integration of teaching and learning, self-realization and the realization of others, vividly captures the educational wisdom and diligent ethos of ancient Chinese educators. The spiritual connotations of "enlightening wisdom, nourishing the heart, and teaching in accordance with aptitude" and "diligent study, earnest practice, seeking truth, and embracing innovation" reflect educators' wisdom and attitude of conscientious practice and the unity of the Way and methods [10]. This requires the concerted efforts of society, schools, and families to clearly distinguish the essential difference between "success" and "self-fulfillment." "Success" is largely externally defined through social comparison and tied to status, wealth, and fame. "Self-fulfillment," in contrast, is inwardly oriented and biased toward self-actualization, focusing on the realization of individual potential, the perfection of personality, and the enrichment of the spiritual world. Young people should be guided to understand that life's value is not confined merely to the single dimension of "surpassing others". To be an "ordinary person among ordinary people"—to realize self-worth in ordinary positions while possessing the capability for a happy life and a sound personality as a citizen—is equally worthy of pursuit. Only when society affords due

dignity and sufficient developmental space to diverse paths of "self-fulfillment" can the value of "learning for the self" in the contemporary era be truly manifested.

5.2. Institutional fine-tuning

Institutions, on the one hand, can be seen as a solidified form of concepts; on the other hand, they can also serve as levers for driving change. Under the realistic constraint that standardized examinations cannot be completely abolished in the short term, educational reform can attempt to focus on fine-tuning the evaluation system to mitigate the destructive effects of single-instance ranking. This involves exploring and promoting a "comprehensive quality evaluation" covering multiple dimensions such as classroom performance, project research, social practice, arts and sports, and psychological growth. This reform path has already shown initial results in pilot projects in various regions. Since 2023, Wuhan City has promoted comprehensive student evaluation reform across the entire region, covering dimensions such as morality, academics, arts and sports, and practice, utilizing an intelligent evaluation app to collect and accumulate daily process data. This allows the evaluation horizon to extend from the final result of a one-time examination to the growth trajectory covering the entire educational process. By weighting process-oriented evaluation more heavily, we can soften the tyranny of 'one exam decides everything,' ease the anxiety of cutthroat competition, and shift educational practice from 'sorting people' to 'cultivating people.'"

5.3. Cultural construction

To fundamentally unravel the knot of educational involution, constructing a new learning culture across society is key. Reforms in the educational field are committed to building a new educational model that emphasizes cultivating students' abilities in problem-solving, teamwork, and practical operation [11]. The cultural transformation from "lifelong competition" to "lifelong learning" requires leveraging various media resources and social forces to vigorously advocate the core idea that the authentic value of learning lies in acquiring wisdom, nourishing the soul, and enhancing the quality of life. By establishing diversified role models for learning and promoting resources such as nationwide reading, community education, and online learning platforms, learning can break through the confines of school walls and integrate into every stage of the individual life course. Only when public discourse stops fixating on gaokao and zhongkao top scorers and instead celebrates lifelong learners who continually explore and transcend themselves across diverse fields will competitive anxiety ease and education regain its vitality [12, 13].

6. Conclusion

The study finds that the two are not simply in opposition, but rather exhibit a deep paradox of "formal approximation but purposive divergence": the imperial examination and the Gaokao are highly similar in their evaluation mechanisms, yet they replace "self-perfection" with "competitive success" in their spiritual orientation. However, some teaching practices have begun to reveal a subtle reconciliation of "using examinations to promote learning," indicating that Confucian resources have not entirely lost their efficacy but are embedded in fragmentary forms within the interstices of the system. The transformation of educational values requires not only distinguishing "success" from "self-fulfillment" at the conceptual level, but also strengthening process-oriented evaluation at the institutional level, and constructing a new orientation of lifelong learning at the cultural level. This study has two main limitations. First, its reading of Confucian classics draws

primarily on the Four Books and leaves underexplored the more elaborate self-cultivation discourses of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, such as 'perfecting one's nature' (cheng xing) and 'restoring one's nature' (fu xing). Second, its analysis of contemporary educational practice leans toward macro-level institutional description rather than systematic empirical evidence. Future research could be extended in the following directions: first, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the implementation effects of process-oriented evaluation reforms in actual teaching; second, delving deeper into the diverse interpretive resources of "learning for the self" within the Confucian tradition, analyzing their alignment and misalignment with contemporary educational concepts.

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