In order to know the learning beliefs and behaviours of Chinese students, it is perhaps useful to look from a longer perspective; namely, from the historical development of education in China from the imperial days, to early republican years because men are following the customs of the cultural environment rather than creating the new rules out of nothing. To a certain extent, the change of Chinese educational system reflects the vicissitude of Chinese society at large of the 20th century.

I. Introduction to the traditional Chinese education system

Traditional education in China had been closely associated with the recruitment of officials through examinations, which required extensive knowledge of the Confucian classics. Until its final abolishment in 1905 the time-honoured Civil Service Examination had largely determined the scope and content of Chinese education for over one thousand years.

Content

Most people in the pre-modern days China had a dream, to be an official, that means a scholar-official one day. Once coming of age if men wanted to climb the social hierarchy, regardless of one’s family background, the only way is to study the Classics to prepare for the Imperial Civil Service Examinations. For classics it pertains to the so-called Four Books and the Five Classics (四書五經 Si-shū Wǔ-jīng), which were the mandatory texts for the exam.¹ The Four Books (四書 Si shū) are:

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1. *Great Learning* (大學 Dà Xué), the name of a chapter in the *Classic of Rites*;

2. *Doctrine of the Golden Mean* (中庸 Zhōng Yóng), the name of another chapter in the *Classic of Rites*;

3. *Analects* (論語 Lùn Yǔ), a book of concise sayings attributed to Confucius and recorded by his disciples, and


The Five Classics (五經 Wǔ jīng) includes:

1. *Classic of Changes* or *I Ching* (易經 Yì Jīng),

2. *Classic of Poetry* or The Book of Odes (詩經 Shī Jīng),

3. *Classic of Rites* (禮記 Lǐ Jì), social forms and ceremonies describing ancient rites and court ceremonies,

4. *Classic of History* (書經 Shū Jīng), a collection of documents and speeches written by rulers and officials of the Zhou Dynasty and before, and

5. *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋 Chūn Qiū, a historical record written by Confucius from 722 B.C. to 479 B.C.

*Four Books* were the works of Confucius’ days, while *Five Classics* were the works that predated Confucius (551-479 BC). By Biblical comparison, *Four Books* are similar to New Testament and Five Classics are like Old Testament. Everyday communications and political discussions among the scholar-officials in the pre-modern days was full of references to this background of knowledge and one couldn't be regarded as a literati without knowing and quoting from these texts adequately.

**Structure**

At the heart of traditional education was the civil service examination (科舉 ke-ju),
which was first implemented in Tang Dynasty (618-896AD) and had continued and changed little over centuries until its final days. The exam provided the perfect opportunity for defining the Confucian classics as the standard curriculum within the mechanism of examination, through which the best and brightest examinees were discovered and selected as state officials. The civil service exam had remained the exclusive way to government positions until the final years of Qing Dynasty.

About the exam itself, there were three levels of exams taken place at the county, provincial and national levels. The lowest level, county exams tested the candidates on their knowledge of the classics. Scholars, who passed the county level, were granted the title of *xiucai* (秀才), *budding talent*. At the provincial level examinations candidates were tested on the breadth of their studies in the Classics, and these examinations often last up to seventy-two hours. A candidate who passed the provincial level exam was rendered the title *juren* (舉人) meaning *recommended man*. Those who had attained the *juren* status were eligible for the national level exams held every three years in the capital. Passing that level of exams then raised an individual to the highest possible level -- that of *jinshi* (進士) or the *presented scholar*. In the national level exams, candidates were examined on the ability to analyse contemporary political problems in addition to the usual examinations based on the Classics.

By a modern comparison it would be that the county level “*xiucai*” was equivalent to a BA degree, a provincial level “*juren*” was equal to a MA degree, and at the national level “*jinshi*” was tantamount to a PhD nowadays, though the older degrees were much more precious and harder to obtain. The success rates of these exams were extremely low, about two percent. All papers written by the candidates were anonymous to avoid favouritism of the examiners.

**Social Impact**

The best characteristics of traditional education are examination, conformity and competition, which probably reflect the educational situation of today. Since education was largely conditioned by the civil service examination, in which Confucian classics formed the standard curriculum as well as the official knowledge of the state, men were more inclined to conform to the social reality if they wanted to be successful and prosperous in their career (having a right answer is mostly important).
Personal suffering the individuals, who underwent the exams, both in the preparation and in the taking of these exams has become part of Chinese intellectual history. Candidates were known to be repeatedly failed in the exams. Some committed suicide because of the disgrace that these failures brought to themselves and their families, who supported the candidate both financially and spiritually. Others continued taking exams even as very old, grey-haired men. However, for those who rose through the ranks by passing these exams and being selected for administrative positions, it meant that their clans or families also rose in social prestige and wealth. By the civil service exam, Confucianism was largely institutionalised as an official ideology.

II. Beginning of modern education in China

Things changed at the beginning of 20th century after the arrival of Western civilization. Though China has since 16th century constant contact with the West, it was not until the mid-19th century that China had felt its tradition and civilization being seriously challenged. It was during this period of time when China was confronted with the most acute challenge from the West in military, political and economic terms to test its cultural viability.

After numerous military humiliations inflicted by the West powers ever since the mid-19th century, from Opium War (1842) to Boxer Rebellions (1901), some Chinese intellectuals began to suspect the superiority of the Chinese culture that it was once taken for granted. Soon reform-minded intellectuals advocated that Chinese people must open up to the outside world in order to revitalize China itself.

Gradually many modern Western ideas were being accepted by the Chinese public. And at the same time China was, in one way or another, to abandon some of its own values and practices that had been hold dear for centuries, for instance, the foot-binding on women, inhumane criminal penalty, and even the institution of imperial monarchy.

Among the changes education was seen by many as the means to overturn this adversity. Educational reform comprised plans to create a national hierarchical system of schools and the abolition of the traditional civil service examinations. The latter was argued by some historians as one of the most revolutionary acts of the 20th century for China, on par with the overthrow of the dynasty; that is the abolishment of the Civil Service Examination in 1905, which marked the end of traditional education and the
beginning of modern education.

Since the aim of modern education was to spread literacy and learn new scientific knowledge, therefore it advocated the use of vernacular language instead of the classical idiom (wenyan 文言). The classical language had prevented the emergence of masses of knowledgeable population, which could not have been accomplished through the traditional education system, which was only aimed to educate a small minority of literati to run the country. Indeed, the wider change in attitudes towards education spanned the last years of the Qing Dynasty and early years of the Republic as the modern form of the school system and curricula had spread across China since the first decade of 20th century.

The national drive for the new education resulted in a drastic change at the turn of the 20th century signified not only a drastic change of education in its form, but also it pertains to the position of Confucian classics which was no longer the only source of standard and valid knowledge. It was during this time that much modern natural and social scientific knowledge was brought into China, such as social theories and modern technology. Henceforward, new education has become the norm of education setting in China.

The new education is in many ways different from the traditional education. Unlike traditional education where children studied together regardless of age, the modern system required students grouped together separately in line with their ages with children of seven years old and older being obliged to enter schools. The education system was, like the other countries, divided into three levels; elementary, secondary and high education levels. New school system adopted largely Westernised subject division of curriculum plus Chinese literature and language, mostly in vernacular form.

The zest for the Western-style school and knowledge can be illustrated by the instance of overseas study. It was during this period of time that saw an increasing number of Chinese going studying abroad mainly to Japan, Europe, and the United States. The first generation of Chinese studying overseas began from the late 19th century. Students, who went abroad mainly to receive higher education for a number of years before returning to China. They had increased sharply during the first decade of 20th century. For instance, in 1899 Chinese overseas students in Japan numbered only 200, in 1903 it had 1000 and in 1906, the year right after the abolishment of civil service
exams, the number had reached 13,000.

Like nowadays, Chinese students abroad in the early 20th century enrolled at many different kinds of schools normal, military and law schools. Those students in overseas were highly expected, once finished their studies and returned home country, to save the nation through their new acquired knowledge ranging from engineering to law and arts.

Nationalism and Education

Education in modern time China has never been considered as merely an individual enterprise of knowledge pursuing. In the early years of the Republic, Chinese officials, inspired by the examples of Britain, Germany, Japan, emphasized the importance of an extensive educational system producing a patriotic, hard-working and united citizenry as a cause of national strengthening. Thus education was unequivocally afforded with the overarching mission of national rejuvenation ranging from the issues of public hygiene to democracy to educate and re-educate the people en mass.

After the founding of the Republic in 1911, the goal of searching for modern nationhood had become even more urgent. The First Conference on National Education under the Republic was convened in Beijing in July 1912 (under the Ministry of Education, headed by Cai Yuan-pei.) The conference declared that development and reform of education was the precondition for the nation’s revival and the first step toward creating a new citizenry. In general the new education would cover five fields: military training, practical skills, moral cultivation, aesthetic education and world outlook.

Cai Yuan-pei, (蔡元培 1868 - 1940) was formerly a jinshi degree holder. In the last years of the Qing, he had served as an educational official. After studying philosophy in the University of Leipzig in Germany, he became the provisional Republic’s Minister of Education in January 1912. He was later appointed the president of Peking University in 1917. In April 1928, he became the first president of the Academia Sinica. Throughout the years he remained a staunch defender of freedom of intellectual inquiry. Cai proposed the equal importance of five ways of education and life – i.e. moral, epistemic, physical, social, and aesthetic” (德、智、體、群、美) -- which are still seen as the ultimate objectives of education today in mainland China and Taiwan.
After the Nationalist Party (KMT) had ascended to power and reunite China and subsequently relocated the capital to Nanjing in 1928, Sun Yat-sen’s thought had become the main source of ideology, where education was thought to enrich the people’s social life, to improve the standards of living, and thus achieve the nation’s salvation. It will ultimately serve the cause of national independence, democracy and economy prosperity and striving for world peace. Shortly after its inauguration, the KMT government implemented a compulsory education program with centralized educational administration and standardized curricula in elementary and secondary schools. In short for Chinese government the focus on public education was the unshakable obligation of the government to popularize learning in order to create educated citizenry.

At this stage of history, education is highly related to the idea of nationalism. The aims of education as promulgated by the government at various time implied a nationalistic meanings (national power, national unity, national culture and national sovereignty). Since the establishment of People’s Republic of China, education had been undergone bold moves. But some of the goals achieved under CCP were also the goals that the late Qing Dynasty and Republican Government had wanted to achieve. Namely, the substantial gain in literary of the masses of people, the large expansion of education system and nurturing of some world-class scientists and engineers.

III. Cultural legacy and characteristics of Chinese learners

Since history only ended at yesterday, what happened yesterday for sure has a bearing on today. So what has changed and unchanged since yesterday? The general attitude toward education that has transcended over time is that it pertains to pragmatism, equality, national salvation and ultimately moral perfection.

a) Pragmatism

One of the characteristics of education in China is that it carries a strong sense of pragmatism. Although the content of education has changed considerably before and after the founding of republic, what has remained intact with Chinese mentality on education is that they have had a sheer pragmatic view on education and knowledge. During the old days in the country where poverty and hardship had hit millions of lives, education by means of civil service exams had turned out to be the means for social upward mobility.

Since the modern days, when the new education has replaced the traditional classical
education, education was still to be considered instrumental, however in a different manner. One of the aims of modern education is to thrive for the wealth and strength of China as a nation.

Pragmatism seems to have re-emerged after the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiao-ping’s famous maxim “No matter it is a black or white cat, the one which can catch mice is a good cat” is the latest testimony to this philosophy of pragmatism. The instrumentalist view that studying is not for the knowledge sake but to transform one’s own or nation’s destiny, is still a living motto in contemporary China. Even today in China people are being told that “knowledge can change one’s destiny” (zhishi gai bian mingyun 知識改變命運).

b) Equality
Equality is a very important aspect in traditional education insofar the examination system is concerned. One of the legacies of Imperial Examination System that has a bearing on today’s view on education is that it makes the people believe that individuals, even from the most humble backgrounds, could rise to great highs through education if they could survive the rigors of study and examinations. That’s why exam is still a very important part of and integral to whole system of education.

One of the most well-known Confucian maxim on education is, “in teaching there should be no distinction of classes” (you jiao wu lei 有教無類), has a truly equalitarian spirit. There are two particular meanings to this maxim. First it means that everybody is entitled to education and thus it advocates of making education available to all. The second meaning is that education can make people classless. Since Confucius believes men were born the same, only practice makes people apart. Hence inherently no one is smarter or dumber than any other. Education can only diminish and ultimately eradicate the difference among human beings of different classes. This was also the belief in Maoist China, where they wanted to make the educated labourer and labourer be educated.

c) National salvation
One apparent change of view before and after the Republic is that the connotation of education has changed. Rather than seeing education as a means of allowing personal prosperity and social upward mobility, it has taken up another dimension. The dominant view on education since modern days is that many saw education as the
most important, if not the only, means to build a strong nation-state resting upon military power and capable of existing in the world of nations. At least, many believed a modern system of education was conceived as the most effective means of saving and strengthening the nation.

d) Moral perfection
The perennial Confucian ideal on education is to guide people to pursue moral perfection in realizing the life that performs goodness and benevolence. Such a Confucian ideal still holds valid nowadays.

Confucian also supposes that moral perfection through self-discipline (xiushen 修身) is that first step toward a series of bigger causes. It stands as the primary step of virtue making followed by family management (qijia 齊家), good governance of the country (zhiguo 治國), and finally pacify the world (pingtianxia 平天下), which would amount to the accomplishment of human being as a moral agent in the Confucian ideal. In this sense moral perfection is not only intrinsically desirable, but also carries a strong propensity as means to an end.

Education does matter in Chinese belief. Education has never been an individual business. Parents often have high expectation of their children’s education. Education in China has always accompanied a high expectation from the family and parents. Take education seriously.