

Credentialism in East Asian Education: How it was Shaped and Current Effects

Yena Lee

Jul/24/2025

Abstract

East Asian students are currently achieving great educational success. East Asians are regarded as having a natural talent for studying. This paper explores deeper on the history of credentialism in East Asia and its current effect on East Asian students. Credentialism in East Asia usually involves a strong focus on educational credentials. The roots of credentialism in East Asia can be traced back to ancient history. The Confucian values emphasize the significance of education, which began structuring a hierarchy of following the parents' educational beliefs. Changing access to education over the 1900s in East Asia motivated the development of modern educational credentials. However, this credentialism results in current challenges that the younger generation faces. The result is the dependent characteristics and mental health of the students, such as depression. This research guides us to our historical beliefs that affect East Asian society and includes a survey on how East Asian students think about current education and credentialism. This study suggests that East Asian education could change more, improve itself, and figure out students' true goals, not by their choice. This would allow students to pursue what they really want to, and they can enjoy their futures more.

Introduction

Most people have stereotypes about other countries. People can not fully understand another country if they do not live in that country. In the United States, East Asian students usually hear stereotypes that they are good at studying. One U.S.-born woman of Korean descent said, “As an Asian person, I feel like there’s a stereotype that Asian students are high achievers academically. They’re good at math and science.” (Ruiz et al., 2023). These stereotypes are built based on experience. In 2022, 9 white students achieved high scores at the Advanced level in math, but 25 AAPI students, which stands for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, also achieved high scores (Petrilli & Northern, 2023). East Asian education development has increased significantly, especially in mathematics and science. East Asians are called the Model Minority, which means achieving high educational success or having innate talent based on stereotypes (Blackburn, 2019). Then why do they study so hard?

Students are usually motivated by their parents. Some students felt guilty and strived to meet their parents’ expectations by studying hard. Some students agree with their parents and understand why they need to study hard, as well as share their parents' educational passions. Students prioritized family members’ expectations and their standards. Therefore, students felt difficulties compared to personal standards and perceptions of family members (Saw et al., 2012). Additionally, they need to compete with other students to achieve their academic goals. East Asian education fevers are evolving; parents use more money to support children’s education, and students find it hard to keep up, grow, and succeed.

Other people knew that East Asia’s education credentialism started recently, but it started when they were ancient. Traditions created in ancient times continue to the current, and there are many roots in East Asian parents, and why they are so focused on their education. This paper writes about common characteristics of educational beliefs of East

Asian parents, the deep historical roots of why East Asian parents are so focused on education, and how this issue affects the young generations.

Common educational beliefs in East Asian families

Achieve to best

Currently, East Asian's focus on education is widely known globally. The average reputation toward East Asian students is not simply "good at studying." Their academic goals and achievements are part of their life success and family honors (Jin & Kim, 2024). Kinds of academic goals are emphasis on grades, a competitive approach, and a college focus.

Education fever, called credentialism, commonly occurs in East Asian society. Students study hard to prove themselves and to keep family honors (Fei-ing et al., 2017). However, that's not all students' decisions.

East Asian parents' common attitude toward education is focused on grade letters and college ranking. East Asian parents usually want students to get good grades, believing their child's grades and college determine their future (Teon, 2017). Families want their children to maintain good grades and learn in good colleges. However, even if students want to, they find it hard to reach their goals because East Asia's education system is based on competition.

To represent the competitive approach of East Asia's education, in the capital, especially near the metropolitan area, each country has a school and an academy. In Japan, honor students who are called Elites are selected by their kindergarten admission. Japan has a strong competitive admission to elite kindergartens, to admit good colleges, they keep track of elite elementary, middle, and high schools (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). They took admission examinations to get into elite schools for kindergarten, elementary, middle, high school, and college. According to a 2015 survey by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, only 4.9% of children are admitted and learned in elite schools (Live Japan Perfect Guide, 2019).

Daechi-dong is a well-known area with an academy and numerous off-campus activities. 60% of Daechi-1-dong contains an academy and off-campus activity (Gu, 2025). South Korean students, after they finish school at 3 or 4 pm, go to Daechi-dong right away and spend time until 10 to 11 pm. They spend their dinner near convenience stores and do not have enough time to sleep. Kids prepare for medical school, start attending academies all day, even when they are elementary school students. Huh In-young, a high school student who attends a few academies in Daechi-Dong, said, “My friends have gone to various hagwon from a young age. They spent their entire youth in this town doing pre-studies.” (Lee, 2017). Because of the increasing number of similar kids, students who attend academies when they are young are called Daechi kids, and their parents are called Daechi-mom.

Haidian District is one of the famous educational places. They provided various off-campus activities. On average, Chinese students study 17 hours per week (Li, 2023). Chinese parents want to make sure their children do not lose. However, in 2021, China published a law, “Double Reduction,” which intended to reduce homework and after-school tutoring. Students' anxiety decreased, but some parents' anxiety increased. Among these parents, 73.2% do not know how to instruct their child to study appropriately, and 48.2% of parents are concerned children may not be able to go to university (Liu, 2024).

This comparative education, a common phenomenon, is conformity and herd mentality. In previous places like Japan, South Korea, and China, their parents usually gathered and talked about their children’s education. Some parents feel pressured or falling behind because their students do not attend the same academy that elite students do. It is called conformity. In general, conformity is when people are gathered, someone starts to lead, and then all people gather and follow the leader. It is a common phenomenon in central education places (Jiang et al., 2015). They followed the same tracks as others. It is positive to get information and take children to many experiences. However, it would be negative when

they did not have initiative or certainty for their children's education. When parents believe other people's advice not to seeing what things are lacking in their children, then it will be a waste of money and time.

One main goal of this credentialism is just to go to a good college. Then, what factor decides the importance of one similarity in deciding good colleges in different East Asian countries? The most famous and so-called "good colleges" are located in the capital or developed cities. In South Korea, 7 out of 10 high-class colleges are located in Seoul, which is the central city of South Korea. (US News Education) In China, 6 out of 10 high-class colleges are located in developed cities, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (US News Education). Lastly, 5 out of 10 high-class colleges are located in developing cities, Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nagoya (US News Education). In China, "' Double first-class construction' universities are highly concentrated in megacities and urban agglomerations." (Han et al., 2023). Because of this reason, students set their goal to go to the capital city colleges.

Each family has different incomes, but families try to support their children's education even if the parents are low-income. East Asian parents have a basic belief that education determines children's future wealth and reputation. Low-income parents do not want their children to follow their footsteps and live wealthier than they do. High-income families want to maintain their family pride (Jin & Kim, 2024). Therefore, parents do their best to make students' futures better.

One Right Answer

One of the differences between East Asia and Western countries is what they teach. Like in the United States' AP or hard level classes, most classes have free-response questions. They were required to prove their thoughts about the topics they studied. However, East Asia education is commonly maintained with questions asked in textbooks. For example, in history classes, teach facts in history. However, they taught why these were impacts and

what these represented. On tests, have document-based questions, free response questions, and long essay questions. Questions lead students to think and pursue students's own arguments. In East Asian history, tests only contain multiple-choice questions. They just gave choices. Some historical events might have different effects on what students feel, but the East Asian history class just teaches what the textbook writes. For this reason, students usually rely on memorization statements made by teachers, not their logical thinking (Matsuyama et al., 2016).

All multiple-choice questions benefit from checking answers quickly and easily. However, this choice blocked students' imagination and their thoughts. Even the college entrance exam contains multiple-choice questions. "It qualifies and disqualifies a child's future developmental opportunities in an unforgiving way" (Shi, 2024). All their grades are determined by multiple choice, not their thoughts.

Historical Roots of Common Educational Views in East Asian Families

Confucianism

Looking back into the past, passions toward education in East Asia were spread by Confucianism. Confucianism is one of the philosophies in East Asian cultures. Confucianism was the official national ideology of early and pre-modern centuries of East Asia (Liu et al., 2024). Even though it is not a current official ideology, East Asians are still influenced their thoughts, attitudes, and values by Confucianism. One Chinese philosopher Wei-ming said that "Before the arrival of the Western Powers in East Asia in the mid nineteenth century the confucian persuasion was so predominant in the art of governance, the form and conduct of elite education, and the moral discourse of the populace that China, South Korea, and Japan were all distinctively 'confucian' states." (Otsuka, 1996). Confucianism emphasizes the significance of family and harmonious relationships. They teach alliances to the country,

respect for elders, and responsibility for their work. Education is one of the parts that Confucianism emphasizes.

Confucian values

Confucianism believes education can change an individual's fate and social reputation (Li, 2023). Confucianism believes education changes our society to help individuals seek their true nature and cultivate virtues. The most famous Chinese Confucianist Kong Qiu mentioned about education that “Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace.” In that ancient period, Confucianism started to spread country of East Asia. For this reason, reverence for academic achievements and credentials shaped East Asian countries (Yan, 2023).

Kong Qiu’s effect on current education systems was broad. Firstly, he established a private educational institution so that people could learn Confucianism. Secondly, he emphasizes the significance of education and helps to cultivate capable people. He studied and taught music, history, and rites, but he also emphasized the importance of moral education. He taught his students to separate according to their aptitude. He taught moral virtue, speech, politics, and literature similar to current philosophy, politics, history, literature, and art. Current East Asia students learned similar subjects in school (Enyiazu & Nwigwe, 2021). This represents how much East Asian culture affects Kong Qui’s education system, and it is preserved for current generations.

Kong Qiu’s and Confucian teachings were passed down to descendants. Through generations, East Asians still keep Confucian values. Education is one of them, and another value is filial piety, which is respect and following parents. Most countries learned that respecting their parents is important. Confucianism strongly emphasizes the significance of filial piety. It is called xiào(孝). Xiào is one reason that students follow their parents’ passion for education. According to a study in 2015 of 282 South Korean participants, 142 girls and

140 boys participated in experiments on the relationship of students' achievements with classroom affect and social support. As a result, students who take private English education put in the effort to higher their English grade, because they want to prove themselves, because they feel guilty about economic sacrifice (Jiang et al., 2015). Like these examples, East Asian children can not betray their parents' expectations or sacrifice and keep filial piety to their parents.

Confucian competitive exam

The shaping of the competitive system began when Confucianism spread to East Asia. Not only China, other East Asian countries such as South Korea and Vietnam declared Confucianism. China was the most famous and powerful country in East Asia. China started to select government officers to take exams on governance with Confucianism; other East Asia countries also started civil service exams (Cheng, 2009, p. 405).

The start of civil service exams, which were called imperial examinations, also marked the start of a comparative education system. In the civil service exams, they wrote answers to questions that the king had made. These questions were abstract and short, but people needed to answer references to lots of Confucian books specifically. For this reason, there were not many people who passed the exam who stood out. During the Tang Dynasty of China, approximately 2% of people passed (Scribd, n.d). In South Korea, the competition rate during the Chosun dynasty was less than 2%, a maximum of ten thousand versus one. (Lee, 2019). Even though they passed the exam, it was separated by ranking. Applicants who got the best grades worked near the king and got more profits. South Korea's pre-modern era name "Joseon-era scholars regarded passing the Gwageo, which was the South Korean name of imperial examination, as their greatest mission in life" (Cha, n.d.).

The average man studied imperial examinations for at least 10 years, but passing exams was extremely hard. Some candidates took it repeatedly throughout their whole life, so

Liang Hao, who lived during the Song dynasty, passed the exams at the age of 84. In 1889, there were 53 candidates over 80 years old (Chinasage). So the country established schools for education. A representative example is Sungkyunkwan, which was a famous school in South Korea during their Joseon era. Sungkyunkwan taught works of Confucian and classical Chinese literature. 200 top students competed with other students for admission to Sungkyunkwan and were selected as government officers (Song, 2020). Not only in South Korea, but China also had private academies, which were called Shuyan. During the Song dynasty, 714 shuyuans existed in China. In Shyuan, students prepared and studied for the imperial examination (Ko, 2017). To get admission to schools or pass the examination, people were clustered, but there were not many seats provided to all people, so confusion values and imperial examinations are historically rooted in this competitive and emphasized grades and colleges.

Changing Access to Education

Up until the late 1900s, the majority of people did not have guaranteed access to education. East Asia society was based on agriculture. Therefore, even if they had talent, they participated in farming or selling. Only the high estate or rich men can get access to education. In 1949, China, illiteracy rate was 80% (Wang, 2019). According to a 2021 survey, China's literacy rate is 99.83% (GlobalData). Between these years, events in East Asia changed their focus and passion for education.

Between 1950 and the 1990s, East Asia faced drastic economic changes. This is because they faced financial crises with each other. East Asia has similar goals that reconstruct their countries. Most of the countries were ruined after World War II. They started industrialization, explored and developed education to reconstruct their countries. Until the 1960s-1980s, East Asia's economies grew fast. Japan's GDP significantly increased, similar to the United States (WORLD BANK GROUP). Other countries also started industrialization

and manufacturing. South Korea started to explore, and China transitioned to a market economy. At the same time, investment in education also increased (Jin, 2009).

However, from 1980 to 1990, Japan suffered an economic bubble in which people invested too much in real estate and stocks, which rose quickly (Encyclopaedia Britannica). This bubble burst in the early 1990s. Japan's economy rapidly declined. Other countries of East Asia suffer from the Asian Financial Crisis because of their excessive dependence on foreign capital and assimilation of corporate debt. This crisis started in Thailand and spread to Asian countries. Many companies closed, and lots of people were unemployed (Hewison, 2002).

After this crisis, the significance of education increased. Especially, current South Koreans believe education is one way to live a safe and suitable life, so competitive education and focus on colleges have increased (Anderson & Kohler, 2013). Also, China set the goal to grow advanced technology talents, so as to increase national competitiveness. China's political scientist Quinghua Wang argued, "1997 Asian Financial Crisis, when China's top leaders calculated that a dramatic rise in higher education enrollment would help preserve social stability and their power." (Fish, 2017). Current Asian students' parents' age corresponds to this crisis, so they are more passionate about their children's education to live a suitable life, even though the economy is declining.

After the economy stabilizes and emphasizes the significance of education, even poor people and women can get an education, too. In particular, barriers to education and employment of girls decreased, and parents' education was emphasized, especially mothers', increased. Within family contexts, mothers are much more involved in education than their fathers (Araki, 2025).

Most reasons to move their mother to education are vicariously satisfying. According to 2016 research, mothers' educational achievement emphasis is caused by discrimination, and the expectation of education promotes increased mobility (Ng et al., 2017).

Historically, East Asian females have not had access to education. Confucianism constructed a man-dominated society, so their works are to bear children and support their husbands. One South Korean mother said, "I had to take care of household chores from a young age. I hated that. I had no choice, though-but I did not want my child to have to do the same things...She will learn to do it herself one day anyway." (Koo, 2019). They do not want to follow their tracks and want to give a chance to everything they can not. For this reason, they expect a brighter future and focus on children's education.

Impact on the young generation today

Negative impact on mental health

One of the parents said about their educational passion to "All things will be good for you," but students can have different beliefs. Students feel pressure, depression, and anxiety because of credentialism. Parents did their best to support their children, but students feel psychological pressure because of their parents' passions. Because of Confucian values, children had to obey beliefs; even if they rebelled against them, they might resort to physical punishment (Yang, 2009). For this reason, their educational pressure and stress accumulate continuously.

Academic pressure appears with psychological symptoms that are common in East Asia. Of 5,109 students who live in Heilongjiang province, most high school students have depression and sleep disturbance because of their academic stress (Zhang et al, 2022). Students in Korea Daechi-dong interviewed, "tests are pressuring me", and other students also "lots of studying gets me stressed," and "afraid my grades would not come out as I want."(Gu, 2025). Students mostly feel scared about their academic life. They need to study

most of the day. Even if they were talking with friends, they can not remove thoughts that friends are also rivals, and their parents just pressured them to achieve academic goals, so students' mental health is getting weaker. It causes depression and anxiety. In serious cases, it leads them to suicide. According to a 2018 survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, a total of 332 Japanese students died by suicide. Among these students, 12.3% of children died because of family disagreements, 9% were reprimanded by parents, and 5.1% were academic underachievers ([Nippon.com](https://www.nippon.com/en/feature/feature-00117), 2023). This result indicates that students commonly suffer conflicts with family and education problems.

Excessive pressure on their parents can lead to rebellion or discouragement, too. "Parental hostility increases the risk of delinquency by lowering inhibition and fostering anger, irritability, and belligerence." (Wang & Kenny, 2014).

Based on this information, I asked 17 Asian students who are currently attending high school how they feel about their parents' passions and students' thoughts. Questions are

1. What is your family's perspective toward grades and colleges?
2. How does perspective affect you?
3. How are your perspectives on grades or colleges?
4. How many hours do you study and do homework each weekday?

12 out of 17 students' parents are empathetic and concerned with their children's grades and college ranking. They commonly reply, "Grades will determine your future," and "College is mandatory."

For all 17 students, 9 students felt negatively about grade systems and colleges, and 6 students' parents focused on grades and colleges.

Among these 12 students, 11 students spend more than 3 hours studying and doing homework each weekday. Most students completed homework, study, or work extracurricular activities after finishing school. Students usually finish homework or study before they go to bed.

Also, among those 12 students, 10 students felt pressure, anxiety, and discouragement because of their parents' perspective. Students said “it pushes me to work harder, also feels draining,” and “it gives a lot of anxiety”. Some students said, “motivates me and discourages me at the same time.”

Most of the parents gave pressure and psychological abuse, even though they did not know. They think they do all the support for their children, but it might be gaslighting for the children. Psychological trauma continues after they grow up. Childhood adversity and trauma increased the risk of depression by approximately 20% (Lee et al, 2023).

A Future Not Self-Chosen

Most East Asian students tracked and followed their parents' academic pressure, but some of the students were raising questions about this credentialism. According to a survey, one student whose parents thought grades and school determined future success mentioned, “I believe grades should not be the determining factor of the future. Going to good colleges is important, but it is too diabolical.” Also, other students who have similar parents said, “Agree on the importance, but still do not understand why it is so stressful.” One of the students who lives in South Korea said, “I hope the stereotype that all students should go to college will disappear.” Most students feel about the injustice of this education system.

Some jobs are preferred by parents, such as doctors, lawyers, or engineers. These jobs have similarities that offer suitable fees and have social pride. Some parents suppressed their children's opinions. Asian college students and scholars usually consider their parents' interest in their career decisions (Hui & Lent, 2018). According to a GTI Media survey, 69%

over 300 students choose their university major and courses. For this reason, 20% of university students regret their choices (Hunter, 2018). For this reason, even after students graduate from college and get a job, they do not have a passion for their jobs. In a real case, one doctor in China did not uphold ethics, which caused controversy. She left the patient in the surgery room for 40 minutes and credits on research papers even though she did not contribute a lot. Her family also attended a prestigious university, so she tracked her parents, but she did not work with medical ethics (Carter, 2025). Like this example, parents' pressure on job suggestions leads children to live not self-chosen futures.

Parents who overprotect also prevent children from being completely independent from their parents. Parents have good intentions, but excessive involvement and interventions are not good for children's long-term development (Wen, 2023). This is also called helicopter parenting. Students who were raised under helicopter parenting found it hard to adapt to college and had high levels of fear of intimacy (Yilmaz et al., 2025). Helicopter parents also lead students to evade risks (Quratulain & Munawar, 2022). In this case, parents overcame the distribution of children's independence.

Conclusion

The significance of education was well-known in the past and still continues. The stereotype of East Asia that usually prioritizes high educational achievement in the Model Minority is based on East Asia society's educational fever. This paper introduced a deeper analysis of East Asia's education. It introduced East Asian beliefs, historical roots, and how it affected them.

East Asian parents are focused on their children's grades and the colleges they attend. In East Asia, children's grades, colleges, and jobs are a family's honor. Good grades and good colleges give many choices for the future. Therefore, even though they have low and high

incomes, they still support their children's education. In this academy, they learned the teacher's statement and used it in exams. Parents do not want their children to fall behind, so parents start to put pressure on students. These passions come from big historical roots. Ancient East Asian belief, Confucianism. Traces of Confucianism still influence current and some national crises, leading parents to learn that education is the only way to success. However, credentialism became a serious social problem; young generations felt pressured and got emotionally hurt. That hurt continued even when they grew up; they still suffered from mental illness or were overdependent on their parents.

East Asians can not separate education easily because they learned the importance of education when they were in the ancient period, and it helped to reconstruct their countries. Changing this education system will need lots of time. Systems continued for a long time with the basic belief that it is hard.

However, textual and competitive education needs to be reduced. To solve the psychological problems of students, East Asian education needs to change not only to emphasize grades and colleges, prioritize students' social activity and provide a chance to find what they really want. People who live a future not self-chosen can not be happy. People who do not have passion and pride in their job, people can not be trusted. This is the reason why one should not prioritize family honor and money when choosing their major or job. Therefore, East Asian education needs to change, not simply doing good, to enable meaningful learning and self-realization. Parents' generations believe education is the only way to survive, but currently, it is not. Today, many ways are open for students, not only professional jobs. Education needs to change to improve students' talents and lead to a diverse society.

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